The Warcrafter

by RHJunior
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He floated, inert, aware but without any measurable sensation. No sight, sound, scent, texture. He couldn’t even feel his own anatomy; his proprioception was completely gone. He couldn’t even tell if he had arms or legs anymore. He was an amorphous shape, if that, housing a spark of consciousness.

Hello, Adrian.

“What? Who’s there?” he said in alarm. Even as he spoke he felt a surge of satisfaction that he could speak.

Allow me to introduce myself. I am…. The voice paused, as if searching for words. I suppose an approximation of my name is necessary, your language sort of lacks the nuances for my full name. Call me.. hmm… call me Agent.

“Agent… right.” That wasn’t a comforting nomenclature, all things considered. “Where am I? Why can’t I see?”

To answer the latter first, you are in a semi-amorphous state which has, er, left you without sensory apparatus for your environment. You sense nothing because you have nothing at the moment to sense it with. Agent sounded a little embarrassed at this. I apologize, I’m sure it’s not comfortable. But you really don’t have any sensory approximates for the environment you are currently in; you wouldn’t understand what you were “seeing” if you could…

Here, let me adjust a few things. The ‘nothingness’ faded… or rather Something faded in: a misty, featureless plain under a twilit sky. Adrian found himself looking at/addressing/facing a soft misty cloud of light hovering over that plain; he realized in the next moment that he himself was an identical cloud of light—though how he could tell he couldn’t say; he certainly couldn’t crane his neck to look himself over. There, I hope that’s better. It’s all illusory but at least it gives you an avatar of sorts to communicate with.

“Yeah, great.” Why wasn’t he panicking? Wait. No adrenal glands, no fight-or-flight response. Of course. Interestingly enough he was still capable of getting agitated at his situation. “Okay. So my first question? Where the heck AM I? And let me throw in “WHY” while I’m at it?”

You are in my native environment. An existential plane. Call it the Between.

“Between what?”

Everything.

That gave him pause, for sure.

As to what or who I am, I am an extradimensional hyper-advanced… though “advanced” isn’t quite the right term… well, you’d call me a “cosmic entity.” And I have brought you here because I wish to make a deal.

“A… deal?”

An agreement, yes, an exchange of services.
And that kicked Adrian’s bump of skepticism right in. Cosmic beings snapping up random individuals and offering them deals… superhuman powers, or magic green rings, for example… it was a cliche’ in ninety percent of the fanfics he’d read. And more than a couple he’d written.

Yes, you are familiar with the concept.

Adrian squinted suspiciously, or at least thought really hard about squinting suspiciously at the amorphous cloud of light before him. “Okay, why me?”

Why not you? Agent pointed out reasonably. You are well within acceptable averages for the necessary attributes. At the very least, you are familiar with the concept, and seemed agreeably inclined to the idea. Missing fight-or-flight glands or no, you would be surprised at the percentage of three-dimensional entities such as yourself who would go into either screaming hysterics or a catatonic fugue by this point.

Adrian gave a mental snort. At least it wasn’t trying to pass him off as “the Chosen One” or the like. If this was a dream or a hallucination it wasn’t offending his literary sensibilities yet, at least. Of course if he was lying in a hospital drugged to the hairline then all this was coming from his own mind, so it wouldn’t seem excessively ridiculous then either would it? “SO… this deal?”

Let me begin at the beginning. As you can guess I am not the only one of my kind. We live in the interstices between the universes and planes of reality. We’re timeless, eternal, immortal, vastly powerful… and rather BORED.

Ah, here it comes, Adrian thought. The old Bored Cosmic Entity Wants to Play routine. Poker Night of the Gods. Oh well, there were worse cliches.

To alleviate our ennui, we organized a series of contests and games. Each round, every participant--each Agent-- chooses an Avatar from the more finite races, such as yourself, from one of the three dimensional universes. We spend… I’m picking up the word “quatloos” from your mind?… ah, no, a better word there off to the side in your vocabulary, “chips.” Yes, a limited pool of points or “chips” on empowering and equipping the Avatar. Then we place them in a different universe, with a stated mission. If they succeed, they are rewarded, and their Agent moves up in the next round and chooses a new Avatar.

“And if they fail?”

Then the Agent is moved down in ranking.

“And the Avatar?”

Agent seemed reticent. There is no punishment for failure. We do not work like that. But the missions assigned are often… hazardous. The consequences for failure are... self-explanatory.

“Uh… huh.” So it was pass or fail, with a probably lethal “fail” option.

You must understand something, Adrian. Our “game” is about creating and endowing HEROES. The quests they are set on are consequent… to save a person, a family, a tribe, a nation, a world, from some imminent catastrophe. To battle an evil empire, or an overlord, or an alien horde… or just to fight for a humble cause. Any and all of those are dangerous pursuits in places of crisis, even for those endowed with extraordinary gifts they are dangerous. Failure is often fatal.

“Kind of high stakes for a GAME,” Adrian said.

We wish to make the universes a better place, Agent replied. You can’t do that playing tiddly winks.
“Well, why don’t you go into these, these places in crisis and intervene yourself?”

Agent gave what had to be the approximation of a heaving sigh. Adrian, we are a race of super-advanced cosmic entities. We number in the trillions. Does it not follow that we have powers, governances, authorities, laws, codes of conduct that restrain us as well? Our civilization is so complex and intricate it makes the operation of your own world’s governments look like the internal politicking of an aboriginal tribe over who gets the biggest share of animal pelts. It would take years to explain the codes of conduct that restrict our behavior interacting with the baryonic, euclidean universes, and most of it still wouldn’t make sense to you. He grumbled a bit. They often don’t make sense to us.

The Game is, for reasons too complex for you to fathom, one of the few legal, safe, legitimate ways in which we can intervene with the fates of other worlds, even for their own good. Because in part it places the power in the hands of mere mortals to determine their fates themselves. It’s THE RULES.

There’s a world out there where somebody’s in trouble. I am asking you to help me, to help them, and to help yourself. Will you accept?

“My reward?” he asked.

Your primary choice of reward will be: You will be returned home… or allowed to make your home in your new universe… or even pick a third… in any regard, with all your powers intact. There are other, lesser options, but those are the prime rate ones.

Adrian thought it over. Great power. Be a hero. But risking it all… maybe even his life. No guarantee of success, and who knows how much suffering and hardship.

But wasn’t that what made the effort worthwhile.

“I accept.”

He could feel Agent practically beaming with satisfaction. Excellent. The contract is sealed, let us begin. The planescape swirled dizzyingly, and Adrian found himself hovering before a massive, and very familiar opening screen.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Begin Character Creation

“I’m going to AZEROTH?” He yelped. No way in hell… it was his favorite online game ever, but that world and its lore were messed up three ways from Sunday, and it had at least a dozen Doomsday scenarios waiting in the wings to do it in at any given moment, with Lovecraftian Old Gods being the LOWEST ranked world-ending threats. If the literal armies of superhuman wizards, warriors, paladins and whatnot couldn’t handle it, adding one more dink with a plus-one sword to the mess would do nothing. Agent would just end up with his Avatar a greasy stain on an ogre’s foot.

No, absolutely not.

Adrian sighed in relief.

You’re getting your power set from there.

“What?” Okay, that was better. A guy with a World of Warcraft character’s powers and skills could hold up fairly well in most “fictional” universes he could think of…. “Wait. Where AM I going? That’s sort of an important question before I pick my powers.”
There was a sound of shuffling papers. *I’m not really supposed to tell you your destination, if at all, until AFTER you have selected your powerset.*

Of all the… "But that’s not remotely fair!" Adrian sputtered.

*This is really not how we normally proceed,* Agent said.

"Oh, don’t try that. That’s a load and you know it! A choice made without any information isn’t a choice at all. It might as well be made with a flip of a coin!"

Agent’s body language— it really was adapting quickly to having a humanoid form— was hesitant, so Adrian pressed his argument. "Look, you talked about your society having law, and an entertainment industry, and, and mediums of exchange. That implies a marketplace of some sort. And one of the fundamentals of a marketplace is that there are certain ethical principles that have to be observed for it to function. The real biggie is that all exchanges have to be voluntary and informed to be legitimate. Making me make an irrevocable choice while denying me the information needed to make that choice? Not what I would call ‘super-advanced,’ or even moral."

Agent said nothing; he simply contracted into a ball of swirling, pulsing motes. Adrian somehow got the impression that he’d been put on hold while Agent argued with someone else over his metaphorical shoulder. After a moment Agent reformed into a human-shaped cloud and addressed him. *You argue persuasively,* he said. *It’s been agreed that it would be unethical to not give you SOME information about your destination. I’ve been informed that I may disclose a BIT more than I have."

"Like my destination?" Adrian said.

...Um.... *I can at least let you know beforehand that the Earth we are sending you to is a Superhero world.*

"A superhero world?" Adrian repeated. "Anything else?"

Agent mumbled a bit and shrugged expressively. *Sorry.*

There was an awkward silence. “Not your fault I suppose,” Adrian finally muttered. “Better than nothing I suppose... ” Superhero world. Adrian chewed his lip nervously. That was still a lot of variability. It could mean anything from Justice League to Watchmen.

Agent made a staticky noise that might have passed for a sigh. *For the record, we are not in the habit of forcing people to make utterly blind choices. It’s just that most of the entities we negotiate with are normally brought here in the midst of... a cataclysmic moment of some sort. Usually something that would or should have resulted in their deaths. They tend to arrive here... disoriented. In a fugue, or dreamlike state, or other state of not-quite-compos-mentis. It’s often rather like trying to get someone in an ER after a gruesome traffic accident to fill out hospital paperwork. Some form of assent is needed, so we resort to broad brushstrokes and vague entreaties and explanations... and our procedures have evolved accordingly.*

Adrian nodded. He could understand, somewhat. He had a mental image of the scene in Disney’s Aladdin where the Genie was desperately trying to get an official wish from Aladdin even as Aladdin was drowning. The Entity gave a Gallic shrug. *I apologize for my earlier reticence. I’m not some Jerkass Genie, Adrian. I’m not going to trick you into becoming a woman, or turning into a black man and drop you into the middle of a Nazi rally. I want to win this as badly as you do, so I’m going to do everything to make sure you get the best deal possible. I will try to... be more forthcoming from here on out. Forgive an old Being his bad habits.*
“...Right. Sorry,” Adrian apologized. "I do get that there has to be some element of chance or risk. I just want to know what lotto ticket I was writing the numbers on.” He looked the Entity over. “You know, you’re sounding a lot more human than when this conversation started.”

A cosmic entity with nigh infinite resources and control over time and space, learning things quickly. Imagine that.

“Touche’.” Chastened, Adrian turned back to the screen and proceeded with his dicey choice. He flipped through the options-- he had hands!--- and watched as the screen flickered between races, classes, appearances…

If it helps, Agent hinted, most of the… limitations, I’d suppose you’d call them… on the various races, classes and such you recall from the game are not in effect. Those are the products of gameplay-- programmers putting in things for the sake of design and balance, not the actuality of how such powers work in Azeroth.

“Yes. Think, do you think in real life that a gnome would run as fast as human? Or a human would be as physically strong as an orc? Or that a worgen, after the cutscreen, is suddenly unable to claw or bite anymore? Many of the limitations found in gameplay, you can disregard.

Well you’d better baby-walk me through it then. I don’t want to miss an advantage I overlooked because some programming doink in Blizzard thought it wouldn’t make for good ‘game balance.’ “

Very well. Oh, and you’ll be starting out at maximum level, so to speak. So don’t worry about learning curves for skills or talents. Thanks to the implanted memories, though you may need to practice a bit with your skills and abilities, your knowledge base will be fully updated from the start, so it will be more akin to brushing the dust off old skills than struggling to learn new ones. Also, you will be in peak physical condition, akin to your species’ version of an Olympiad. And you’ll find that maintaining that state will be nearly effortless.

 Seems overly generous...”

Fair’s fair. You’re getting dumped into a superhero ‘verse, where a ridiculous percentage of the natives have the physique of Greek gods.

Adrian mulled over the screen. He hemmed and hawed, but the choice was inevitable. “Species: Worgen.” he clicked.

May I ask your reasoning why? Agent was looking more and more humanoid; he tipped his ersatz eyeglasses in Adrian’s direction.

Innate abilities. Stronger than human, faster, presumably accelerated recuperation and healing from the metamorphic ability, both bipedal and quadrupedal locomotion, natural weapons, and going by the cut scenes, incredible leaping and climbing ability. The ability to change back and forth to a human form means an instant disguise option, too. Even a baseline worgen will be pretty kickass.” Adrian shrugged his ghostly shoulders. “Plus werewolves are cool.”

A good choice, and good reasoning. Two notes: contrary to game lore, your worgen “curse” is not contagious. It is innately genetic. As if the night elves would be so foolish as to leave INTELLIGENT werewolves with a contagious curse, he muttered in an aside. All it would take is one contagious sociopath and Azeroth would end up like the final reel of the Omega Man...

Anyhow, this does however mean that your Worgen form is your default form, the human one is
essentially a shapeshifted disguise. If you violently lose consciousness -- say you are drugged or concussed-- you will revert to your 'natural,' that is your Worgen, form. Try to avoid such circumstances when among hostile entities.

“Yeah, important safety note. Thanks.”

Agent waved his hand. The screen filled with a side-by-side image: to the left, a young, dark haired, athletic man, caucasian with some hints of something exotic, about sixteen or so if Adrian judged correctly. To the right, a black-furred wolf-man, powerfully built, sleek and deadly. “So that’s me?” Adrian asked.

Yes. Acceptable?

“Better believe it. I haven’t had abs like that since never.”

And now… class?

Adrian browsed the options. "No warlocks or Demonhunters, I see."

Certainly not. Agent's voice had a shudder of profound revulsion in it. One of the differences between the gameplay version of Azeroth and the real one is that you will find no collaborators with demons or demonic powers among those of the Good. Warlocks are hunted like the vile traitors they are, and absolutely none outside of the most desperate or depraved is mad enough to think they can use a Demon's powers against him... those that were fool enough to try did not become some dark charismatic antihero with diabolic powers-- instead they almost instantly ended up as some Demon's lickspittle. Trying to use a Demon's power for anything other than what the DEMON wants is the equivalent of trying to beat mice to death with a live cobra. It's not going to end well.

Adrian shuddered. "Kind of glad to hear that, actually. I get kind of sick of the 'evil is kewl' kiddies." Adrian looked over the screen. “Druid.” He clicked. The two figures were now carrying staves and wearing Celtic-looking robes… an odd change from the original game’s raven-wing-shoulder “druid look,” but he could roll with it.

Ah. And again, why this and not any of the others?

Adrian had the strangest suspicion that Agent already knew why, and that it pleased him. “Flexibility. Dunno where I’m going or how I’m going to arrive, so I’d better pick the powerset with the most options. Azeroth druids have that in spades. Multiple forms for land, sea and air, and they can opt for melee, ranged attack, defensive, stealth or support. I figure whatever you hit me with, a Warcraft druid will have an option that can cope with it.”

Agent nodded. Definitely pleased. Coincidentally, you get full access to your classes' specializations, including all the druid forms. Another little plus I spent chips on.

“Even the owl and the treant?”

Even the owl and the treant. And now for skills-- or crafts, professions, however you might call it. Coincidentally, you get all the gathering skills as a freebie, regardless. Along with fishing, cooking, first aid, and archaeology. He peered at the screen, seeming to squint. What an odd amalgamation of skills, he noted.

“Engineer,” Adrian said without hesitation, clicking the appropriate box. “And Enchanting.”

Be warned, the skills won’t work like they do in the game, Agent said. You won’t be able to take a handful of copper bolts and some sheepskin and make a helicopter. And some of the materials
needed, while they do exist-- you will find creating or finding the more exotic ones to be difficult.

“I didn’t figure they’d have bars of Adamantine down at the corner drugstore,” Adrian said. “But I figure that at the very worst most of the skills and knowledge in Engineering would apply in the real world-- er, my real world-- as to be useful anyway.”

And enchanting?

Adrian grinned. “You basically admitted that it worked just fine on Azeroth. I figure wherever I’m going has to be similar enough to both Azeroth and my own reality to make it work and for me to be functional.”

Agent cocked an eyebrow. Yes, his appearance was coming right along. Clever boy. It is true: all three universes operate under the same thirteen cosmic forces as every other. Still, you may find it difficult to obtain ingredients like Strange Dust and Astral Essence, even with your Disenchanting ability.

“And ain’t it interesting how many Engineering projects can be ‘disenchanted’ for ingredients?” Adrian grinned even wider. He paused. “Thirteen forces? I thought there were only four.”

Agent’s head was still only a blank white shape, but Adrian got the distinct impression of a knowing smirk. So young and so much to learn.

Adrian shrugged that off. “Anyway, Alchemy would be even dicier about ingredients… I mean, when the nearest source for peacebloom is Azeroth, it’s a bad idea to take Alchemy as a profession. Besides which people are antsy about taking “home remedies” someone whipped up with back yard plants. Tailoring is too limited, as is leatherworking… even the toughest armor you can make from those is like tissue paper next to chain or plate. Blacksmithing? You could make a Venn diagram of the “mining” skill-- which includes smelting, making ores and other metallurgy-- and engineering, and the overlap would be Blacksmithing.

“Plus Enchanting and Engineering come with their own salvaging skills, in addition to the three basics.”

Agent smiled--- the mouth suddenly appearing on that blank bespectacled face was a touch alarming. Very good. Very very good. You might just stand a chance. He gestured to the screen. And now a name? The blank box blinked, waiting for an answer.

Adrian only hesitated a moment. “Bayleaf.” He looked at Agent. “My old World of Warcraft handle.” he shrugged. “It’s also a healing herb. I considered “WarCrafter,” but that sounded too… aggressive. I want people to know I’m not just there to run around getting in fights-- I’m there to help.”

Agent nodded. Done and done. The choices on the giant screen vanished, leaving the worgen character standing in a battle ready pose. Below him blinked a single option: ENTER WORLD

Adrian looked over at Agent. “Well?” he said, a little nervous. “So where’s my big debut gonna be?”

A world almost exactly like your own… within 99.9999 percent actually. He grimaced, obviously unhappy to disclose the rest. But that ten thousandth of a percent difference is a doozy. Agent waved. The image on the screen faded, to be replaced by an aerial view of a coastal city. An American one to judge by the flags waving on some of the buildings. This is Brockton Bay.

Adrian felt the nonexistent blood drain from his face. “Worm? You’re sending me into Worm??” he floated there, listless with shock. Had he been truly solid he would have hit the ground with a thump.
Yes. Or rather, it is one of a multiplicity of universes in this local brane where this timeline is, has, or will play out. So you are familiar with this particular panverse. Agent cleared his throat nervously.

“Oh yeah, you might say that,” Adrian laughed bleakly. “Worm? The Wildbow-verse? One of the most famous superhero genre online fiction worlds, and one of the most notorious? Oh yeah, I know about it. It’s a superhero deconstruction-- if you can call someone violently smashing a basket full of puppies with a sledgehammer “deconstruction.” The storyline is like a cross between a demolition derby and a head-on train collision stuck on instant repeat, with someone standing off to the side pushing toddlers into the middle. It starts with a teenage girl being tortured into a psychotic breakdown and ends with an APOCALYPSE by a MAD OMNIPOTENT COSMIC SPACE WHALE DEMIGOD. It’s so grimdark it shits BATS!

“I’m supposed to fix THIS? Stop SCION from destroying a couple dozen parallel worlds? With nothing but some werewolf druid powers? The entire Justice league backed by the Avengers, Optimus Prime and Chuck Norris couldn’t hack this!”

*Godlike powers are not what is needed here, Adrian, Agent said gently. You know that in the original timeline, that--*

“That Taylor Hebert ends up saving the world? Or what’s left of it, anyway?” Adrian said. He scowled in anger and suspicion. “So why not let her do it again?”

*Because the price paid, even if she wins—by countless billions of innocents, including one poor innocent girl-- is too terrible.*

“If she wins?”

*As the unaltered ‘verse plays out, the margins between victory and defeat are far narrower even than they look. Agent looked away, his white eyes staring at the endless plain around them. Far more often than not, when the original events are allowed to play out in yet another universe… Taylor Hebert loses.*

“Well ain’t that just a ray of sunshine,” Adrian muttered, his veins ice cold.

*Adrian, I am, in Agent terms, normally a “low roller.” These are the highest stakes I have ever played for. But every universe in this particular panverse of this particular brane has been labeled as being at high risk. The need is so great that I was able to barter for more intervention-chips than all my previous rounds of the Game combined-- and I have spent nearly all of them just to find a champion, prepare them, and inform them in such great and terrible detail. He hesitated, then placed a spectral hand on a spectral shoulder. Even so, if you wish to withdraw, you can--*

Adrian shook his hand off. “No,” he muttered. “No, I’m not gonna quit. How can I? If it was one person I was saving, I wouldn’t. But with a whole world? A whole multi-world of people in danger? I can’t back out… I’d never be able to sleep again.

“It’s just… what can I do? Taylor had… has… will have insane-level powers that will put her BARELY on toe-to-toe basis with one of the Space Whales. What can I contribute in the face of that?”

*Often the fate of worlds hinges not on the most powerful, but on the least, Adrian said gently. Throwing overwhelming power into the mix won’t save the day here. I didn’t pick you to save the whole world in one swoop; I picked you because I wanted someone to go there and do the right thing. The little things. Maybe you won’t even be in the final battle--- but even the smallest good deed in the right place can change everything.*
Adrian sniffed. “Save the girl, save the world?”

*Something like that.*

He got to his feet. “So let’s do this then.”

Agent gestured to the screen. “Bayleaf” had reappeared, floating in the foreground over the skyline of Brockton Bay. *Just walk through the screen.*

“When and where~?”

*Somedewhere in the Brockton Bay area, I cannot be more precise. And late September, several months before—*

“Well months before the locker incident,” Adrian—Bayleaf—said grimly. He was already imagining what he’d do if he got his hands around Sophia’s neck.

*I was unable to secure you identity papers,* he said regretfully. *I did not have sufficient chips for that level of direct involvement. It would have involved either mass memory editing, time travel, or somehow creating a false identity and paper trail sufficient to fool the resident tinkerers, hackers, and Dragon herself. I recommend you pass yourself as a refugee from one of the cities destroyed by Endbringer activity or the like. Secure yourself some finances, obtain a residence and submit yourself to the authorities as an emancipated youth to be enrolled in Winslow High… they have streamlined that process due to the number of young people rendered orphaned and homeless by superhuman catastrophe.*

“urgh. Not even a driver’s license, maybe?”

*I spent all those points on concealing you from more important threats,* Agent said drily. *While your powers are in no way derived from the Entities or their Shards, you will be imbued with a false Gemma and Corona Pollenta that will trick most medical scans, and even most psions.*

“I can see why that’s important. A cape without a Gemma or Pollenta? That’ll attract attention nobody wants. What about Contessa? Or the Simurgh?”

Agent gave him an evil smile. *Due to the combination of your alien powers, your nature as a being from outside their timespace continuity, and the… well think of it as a “holographic” Shard projected by your false Gemma and Pollenta… you will be a rather large blind spot for the lot of them. In the truest sense of the word; much as your brain ‘paints over’ the blind spot in your own vision, you will be a blind spot they aren’t even aware they have.*

“Ohoho. I can see why that cost a lot of chips.”

*Worth every one. Especially for Contessa and her Cheat Code Mary Sue ‘path to victory’ power. She’s in for a hell of a surprise if your paths cross. If you see her, punch her smug head up into that stupid little hat, would you?*

“I sense a backstory.”

*No, I just despise her existence on principle. Her overriding influence makes things WORSE, by ERASING potential options from the board before they can even be considered. And considering the shitty nature of the ‘victory’ her Path leads to…*

“Not a friend of the Agents, yeah.”
Or anyone. Nothing causes more Hells on Earth than people like Contessa or Doctor Mother, who think Mother Knows Best. He closed the folder with a snap, it disappeared in a cloud of sparkles. And that is it for pre-flight checkup, he said with a hint of amusement. Ready?

Adrian nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Just step forward into the screen, Agent said. Be warned, you’re going to get one hell of a download of knowledge and neural information, in addition to having your body dramatically metamorphosed. You’re going to get knocked out... and your recollection of your “time” here may be a bit fuzzy for a while. Just remember: your first step is to get into Winslow and help Taylor Hebert. Beyond that... you’ll have to improvise.

Adrian nodded and straightened his shoulders. Maybe he couldn’t save this world. Or any world. But on the other side of that screen there was a little girl who was going to be kidnapped and enslaved by a supervillain. There was a group of teenagers who were going to be railroaded into villainy. There was a miracle healer who was going to utterly destroy her own life with one terrible mistake. There were countless innocent people who were going to be destroyed in the crossfire between gangsters, drug dealers, and Nazi lunatics. There was one young woman on whom the entire world’s fate hinged, who was going to be put through utter Hell on Earth for no good reason.

Maybe he couldn’t save them all, but if he could save one, he was going to damned well do it.

Remember, Adrian: you are not as limited as you think.

He stepped through the screen and the world went dark.

In the realm he just left behind, the screen winked out. The endless twilit plain disappeared, and all detail faded away till there was nothing but a vaguely humanoid figure of glowing smoke floating in the void. Agent clung to the shape for a little while longer; he found it—appealing for some reason.

Another glowing amorphous shape appeared. That seemed to go well.

Indeed it did, Agent agreed. Hello, Oversight.

—for a given value of well. Your stratagem in this round... eludes me, ‘Agent.’ Most would regard it as incredibly unwise to reveal so much to their Avatar beforehand. Especially of our own inner workings.

Revealing the Game?

Revealing— or at least hinting— at just how far you have gone, Oversight said. He knows that you are gambling on his future. What will it do to his chances, I speculate, when he realizes just how reckless a gambler you are?

To win big, one must risk big. Agent retorted. As risky as my past stakes have been, have I not produced victories like any other Agent? Innocents spared, lives rescued, worlds saved, futures changed for the better?

And each time, you have spent more...”chips”.... Than you have gained, Oversight said, his voice heavy with chastisement. You have been running at a loss for cycle after cycle. One more “victory” like that and you will be destitute. And now you spend your last few Quatloos on a desperate gamble— on not one world, but multiple parallel worlds in peril, and a single lone Avatar to try and stem the tide?
And if he achieves one small good deed, I will weigh it as worth the cost, Agent retorted. You and I have different value judgments on what constitutes a profit, Oversight.

How did a spendthrift like you persuade the Exchequer to even loan you as little as he did?
Oversight said scomflly.

Agent indulged himself and let a slow, genuine, visible smirk spread across his illusion of a face. Because I illustrated to him that I am playing a longer game than it looks, he said. I do not intend to save one panverse world... but two.

Oversight’s regard-- what a material being would have called a puzzled look-- passed over Agent. Then came a moment of comprehension. Azeroth, he said. You have somehow incorporated Azeroth into your gamble. He “glared” suspiciously. How?

Consider the fate of Azeroth, Agent said. Their technology, their thaumaturgic sciences, have been barely sufficient to save them from catastrophe over and over again. And each cataclysm has been worse than the last...while their sciences have barely progressed a few short, halting steps in thousands of years. Do you know why?

He didn’t wait for Oversight to reply. Because they have continually failed to unify their theories. Paladin powers, arcanist abilities, druidic “nature” magic, gnomish and goblin technology--- all of it operates under the same scientific laws; it’s all a continuum. Yet their various ‘schools’ remain divided-- in part by the conspiracy of outside forces but also by politics, by ideology, by terminology, by symbology-- they even use different maths for each; one works in base eight while another works in base ten!

The closest any of them have come in tens of thousands of years to a grand unification theory have been the druids. Their world philosophy is about both diversity and balance, and they subsequently have hodgepoded bits and pieces from all the separate disciplines and have, miraculously, made them work together, discovered which ones were all but identical under the trappings...

And you have just sent out a Druid, Oversight said suddenly.

A druid, and an engineer, and an enchanter, Agent said. From a world whose scholastic philosophy is entirely about unification and finding a single grand underlying theory for Everything and More. Into a world full of artifactors and devisors and ur-scientists. When he starts trying out his new powers, flexing his new skills, if he starts digging deeper, if he begins cooperating with the natives of similar mind-- he will begin discovering parallels and synergies that will be staggering in their implications. Staggering enough to trigger discovery of the true Grand Unification Theory... and a new model of the universe that will give both Earth Bet and Azeroth--- which he shall surely be drawn to visit next-- the tools to overcome.

IF. The single word from Oversight was enough to weigh like mountains.

That is where the risk comes in, Agent agreed. But it is the risk that makes it all worthwhile.

Adrian woke with a start, the icy wind rushing past him snapping him to consciousness. He rattled
his head, utterly disoriented. Weird images, some strange dream-- a glowing man, an Agent of some
great cause, or … a game contestant/host… offering him the deal of a lifetime… what?

He raised his hand to rub his eyes-- and a massive clawed paw groped at his face. He yelped before
he realized the clawed, hairy hand was his own. As was the hairy, muscular arm it was attached to…

“HOLY--!” He felt himself over (not like that, you freaks.) In a mere second he had stock of himself:
massive hands with semi-retractable claws; seriously hairy chest rippling with muscle, arms like fur
stockings stuffed with footballs, powerful digitigrade legs with padded clawed pawed feet, wolfen
skull and muzzle, pointed ears, wet nose-- no tail though-- coal-black fur over everything-- He was
clothed in a loose cotton tunic and trousers that hung loose on even his massive form and flapped
madly in the upward rushing wind.

“Holy crap, it was real,” he said to himself. “Then that means...” He looked up.

Spread out below him was a city-- a city that HAD to be Brockton Bay. It hugged the coastline and
curled around an enormous harbor. He could see-- that had to be the PRT building. Or maybe it was
Medhall? He couldn’t remember a description. But there, that over there had to be the Protectorate
base, floating out in the water, oh wow, he could see the glittering dome of the forcefield, wow a real
forcefield… He could see everything up here, he was out over the middle of the bay--

He was over the bay--

Over-- the bay--

Slowly, the rusted gears of cognition clunked into alignment.

“HOLY CRAAaaaAAAAaaAAP!!!” he began flailing wildly, which only started him tumbling, as
he suddenly realized he was thousands of feet in the air without a plane. “AGENT, YOU
RETARD!”

He indulged in a couple seconds panic (he was really high up) before he realized he’d better get a
grip or he was going to say hello to Earth Bet in a really sudden and final way. He gasped for air as
he lay out spreadeagled, slowing his plummet. “Okay, breathe breathe breathe, remember, you’re a
worgen—Worgen can’t fly!!- no, but worgen druids can, come on, change into your flight form, bird
bird birdbirdbird come on OWL OWL OWL--!!”

He felt a massive, sort of internal twisting and folding, and suddenly where there had been a
plummeting, panicking Worgen, there was now a plummeting, panicking, giant owl. It was several
long eternities before he managed to right himself and began turning his demented flailing into at
least an effort at flapping. Finally, his long dive began to turn into a swooping glide. He leveled out
mere feet above the waves and flew, wings spread wide, hooting in victory…

“hooo Hooo HOOOO..”

And plowed into a whitecap a few yards from shore.

A wheezing, waterlogged Worgen sloshed his way to shore a few moments later. Once the waves
were no longer lapping at his ankles, he bent over and shook. What had to be a gallon of water
sprayed over the sand. He stood up, relieved and feeling a good bit lighter, if not precisely drier. He
shook the last of the water out of his ears in time to pick up the high pitched whine of… was that an
electric turbine?

Around the end of one of the derelict ships came a low-, sleek motorcycle. It looked, Adrian thought,
rather like someone had crossbred a lightcycle from Tron with a particularly old school Harley. The
rider looked to be wearing a full suit of futuristic armor, with only his bearded chin showing from underneath the visor on his helmet.

Of course, Adrian thought. With disgust. Armsmaster. It would be the egotistical wannabe Iron Man who’d find him first. What were the odds? Of course they probably had all sorts of futuristic radar out on that floating base looking for incoming flying threats. He wondered what radar profile a wolfman plummeting from 10,000 feet left behind…

The armored hero pulled to a halt in a spray of sand a few yards away. He dismounted quickly, pulling out a collapsing rod that folded out into a six foot staff, a shimmering blade snapping into existence at the end. He planted one end in the sand and struck a commanding pose. “Stand where you are, don’t-- WHOAAH!”

Apparantly whatever Armsmaster had been expecting to see, it hadn’t been a sodden, bedraggled, seven foot tall wolf-man. He actually staggered back a step in surprise at the sight of him. Then, obviously miffed at his faux pas, he whipped his halberd down into the ‘armed and ready’ pose, the blade pointed at Adrian’s chest, his thumb on some button or other on the haft.

“Uh, Hi,” Bayleaf said, grinning sheepishly and waving.

In retrospect, smiling at an armed and armored man with a mouthful of fangs was probably a bad idea. But really, the taser dart had been a bit much...

Chapter End Notes

Note: changed his entry from November, to September-- he was after all seen running around on Halloween.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“--Bipedal, anthropoid with canine or lupine characteristics, digitigrade, seven to eight feet tall-- no, it’s hard to say exactly due to his stance-- yes, it’s definitely him. The radar and cameras on the Rig tracked his trajectory from that airburst--”

Bayleaf came to. He was lying on his back in the sand, tingling and aching in a most extraordinary fashion from… what was it?-- oh yeah, Armsmaster had TAZED him. What a great guy. Wait. An airburst? Explosion? He must have made one hell of an entrance. And over the airspace of a superhero base, no less. That explained a little of why Armsmaster was so quick on the trigger.

Bayleaf lay very still. He had no intention of acting in any fashion that got him zapped like that again. He carefully thought out his next course of action…

Suddenly it dawned on him. He had an “in,” now. He had Armsmaster, the Protectorate’s walking recruitment poster, right here. Give him five minutes-- assuming the tinker cape didn’t have an itchy trigger finger and tased him again-- Armsmaster would be hardselling him to enlist. From there it would be smooth sailing, right through the PRT doors. Hi there, I’m a new Cape, golly gee I always wanted to be in the Wards...

“--the suspect made aggressive moves...” Armsmaster was saying, his finger pressed to the corner of his visor. Bayleaf could hear a faint, but clearly agitated voice arguing with him. “--He bared his claws and fangs at me!” Armsmaster protested.

Bayleaf considered the pros and cons. Pros: immediate legitimacy. Food, clothing, shelter, and funding. Access to materials for his “tinker powers” as an enchanter and engineer. Close proximity to several of the important individuals in his little quest… not the least of which was being within throttling distance of Shadow Stalker aka Sophia Hess. he could potentially intimidate the girl into leaving Taylor Hebert alone. Failing that, put her in a hammerlock and force her to behave herself. Or straight up outing her to the PRT for her criminal actions.

“Regardless of what it looked like to YOU, Dragon--”

Downsides: some real biggies. The PRT was secretly run by Cauldron. It was also currently infiltrated by Coil. Its Director in Chief was a Cauldron cape named Alexandria who was a borderline sociopath who would snap an innocent’s neck in an eyelink to keep Cauldron’s secrets; The regional director was a bigot who’d rather slowly die of kidney disease than let a Cape heal her. Her potential replacement was a xenophobic warhawk that made her look reasonable just by contrast.

“--I’m requesting permission to use Tinker tranquilizers on this one-- Because it will be more efficient to let him regain consciousness in an environment under our control--” Bayleaf heard teeth grinding. “On what grounds?”

Then there was the petty bureaucracy. The administrators, lawyers, and bureaucrats would be watching his every move and dictating when and where he could work, sleep, or take a pee. It would be impossible to perform his mission with all that breathing down his hairy neck.

And he wasn’t sure he could put up with Glenn Chambers for five minutes without killing him. If he
was anything like in canon, the PR idiot would tie a ribbon around his neck or something ‘to make him more approachable by the kiddies.’

“---send out prisoner transport, along with containment foam. Tell them to send the news crews out here too--” more chatter. “It’s not about taking credit,” Armsmaster said stiffly. “I just want them to assure the public that the cause of the disruption has been dealt with--”

And he’d be working with this doink. He growled silently to himself; that did it, no sale. He’d go full Indy and stay that way.

He must have growled a little less than silently because he heard Armsmaster jump. There was a whir of micromotors from his armor. “Freeze!” Armsmaster barked. “Do not move, do not attempt to come any closer.”

Bayleaf raised himself up on his elbows and glared at the man. “You TAZED me,” he said in disbelief. His new voice, surprisingly, was not a raspy growl like he suspected, but a low, smokey bass, almost like James Earl Jones.

“That dart should have had you out for at least another 10.25 minutes,” Armsmaster said, clearly displeased. His grip tightened on the haft of his weapon.

“Guess it wasn’t as efficient as you thought,” Bayleaf couldn’t resist needling him. Thanks to his wolf ears he could literally hear the egotistical tinker’s teeth grinding together. One thing canon got correct: Armstmaster's Tinker ability had a specialization in making things more efficient. Anything with overlap, lag, leftovers, or superfluity grated on his power's nerves. He would, canonically, burn weeks on end for a tenth of a percent improvement in weight or battery life. And Armsmaster's ego was practically flammable if you suggested his work was inefficient in any way.

“You’re being detained,” Armsmaster grated out, “For invading the restricted airspace over the Protectorate base in the Brockton Bay harbor--”

“Invading the-- I was plummeting to my doom from umpty thousand feet up!” The hero’s officious, authoritative attitude was getting on Bayleaf’s nerves.

“You will be interrogated,” Armsmaster said impassively, “and if your story clears than you will be released without incident. If you resist arrest it will go poorly for-- do NOT move!” In the middle of his little speech, Bayleaf had casually flipped to his feet and taken a step towards him. “I SAID FREEZE!”

“Yeah, I heard you,” Bayleaf said, holding up his hands, palms out. “Freeze.” His palms swirled with forest green light. The ground around Armsmaster’s feet erupted, and in a twinkling he was cocooned in the coils of thorny green vines as thick as his armored thigh.

In World of Warcraft, Entangling Vines was a low-level power, so badly nerfed by timid designers obsessed with “game balance” as to be literally worthless. Here though, it was pretty darned effective. The thick, woody vines were so rigid and tough that the armored hero was completely immobilized. Not that it kept him from trying though; he grunted and strained with all his might, barely making the leaves adorning him rustle. “Computer! Emergency Escape Code--”

Bayleaf darted his hand in and crushed the microphone embedded in Armsmaster’s chin strap with his claws. He hooked his fingers around and stabbed out what he suspected were the eye motion tracking sensors in the visor for good measure. “Ah ah ah,” he said. “You’re in time out, Mister.” With those out of commission, Armsmaster would be unable to use voice commands or eye motion to activate any of his surely countless nasty little gizmos. Hal-beard was going to stay put until the
cops showed up to free him and Bayleaf was long gone.

“That was Protectorate property you just destroyed!” Armsmaster yelled.

“Really… Don’t… Care.” Bayleaf turned to go. “Later, Hal-beard.”

“Wait!” the voice was tinny and clearly feminine. Surprised, Bayleaf stopped. One of the lenses on Armsmaster’s helmet was swiveling to track him. “Please, don’t go.”

Bayleaf bent over and squinted into the lens. There was only one person that he could think of that it could be. “Dragon, I assume?” he said. Dragon was another individual from canon: an artificial intelligence built by a very paranoid Canadian Tinker, who incredibly became a Tinker herself when her creator died in the Endbringer attack on Nova Scotia (at least, that was what happened to him as Bayleaf recalled it.) Unfortunately, the Tinker in question had apparently spent too much time reading bad sci fi about robots overthrowing their masters, and had put countless poorly thought out "safeguards" into her programming that effectively crippled her, and even threatened her life. Finding a way to free her was on Bayleaf’s rather extensive to-do list.

As it so happened, she was also close friends with one Colin Wallis, aka Armsmaster. She collaborated with him often via internet, and actually dreamed of moving their friendship into a more romantic arena... possibly because she was the only sapient being on the planet who could tolerate his presence for more than five minutes.

“Indeed,” the A.I. said. “I am Dragon, an associate of the Protectorate and PRT.”

“You hacked my gear?” Armsmaster looked utterly offended.

“Needs must as the Devil drives,” she said to him. “Now hush. Please, sir, allow me to apologize for Armsmaster’s…. precipitous actions. Your arrival caused a bit of alarm, and it put him a bit on edge. You do understand.”

“He fired on an unarmed man,” Bayleaf growled grumpily. “And then got on the phone to call the five o’clock News to brag about it.” Armsmaster stiffened-- well, as much as he could stiffen, wrapped in wooden vines.

“Again, I apologize,” Dragon said. “I’m sure this is all a misunderstanding. You are apparently a new Trigger, a Case 53, and out of your element. Please reconsider. I know this is a poor first impression, but the Protectorate and the PRT can be a real boon for new capes such as yourself. If you cooperate with the Protectorate they can help you out.”

Bayleaf realized that this was another golden opportunity: a chance to drop a few important bugs in a very important pair of digital ears. He decided to seize it with both hands. He let an expression of disgust cross his face. “Your local director is a bigot. Your PR office is run by idiots. You have a bullying psychopath in the local Wards --” (Armsmaster’s bearded chin twitched; ding ding, he obviously already had his suspicions who was being referred to)--” and word is on the street that you’re riddled with Coil’s spies.”

“Spies?” she said faintly. Hook, line, and sinker, Bayleaf thought smugly. That ought to set the super-intelligent AI to sniffing around for Coil’s fingerprints months ahead of schedule.

“--and even without that, you’re so tied up with red tape you can barely move, much less DO anything,” he snorted. “So no thanks.” Once again he turned to go.

Of course, Armsmaster couldn’t let that go. The Man With No Personality had to stick his oar in. “I don’t know where you came from,” Halbeard yelled at his retreating back. “But things will go a lot
Bayleaf stopped, turned back and got up in Armsmaster’s face, looming over him. “Get one thing straight, you tin-plated, cereal-box-top Judge Dredd wannabe,” he rumbled, his muzzle threatening to curl into a snarl. “You’re no hero. You’re a grand-standing, glory-hogging, rent-seeking Prima Donna, and I’d rather be shot with a taser again in the DICK than work with you.”

Someone behind him spoke. “Holy--!” He spun around. Standing there on the beach were a couple of teenagers in heavy coats and hoodies and carrying backpacks. Bayleaf had no idea what a couple of kids would be doing out in the Ship’s Graveyard on a freezing cold day like this. Worshipping crack and smoking Satan, for all he knew or cared. But they had obviously just stumbled on their little tableau and were staring in astonishment at the sight of the lead hero of Brockton Bay being held at the mercy of a bedraggled seven-plus foot tall wolfman. “Hey!” Bayleaf barked. They jumped. “Either of you got a cell phone with a camera?” The one on the left nodded.

Bayleaf loped over with his hand out. The kid pulled out a smartphone and very nervously handed it to the worgen. “Thanks.” Bayleaf loped back to where Armsmaster still stood wrapped in vines, fiddling with the buttons. “Camera, camera-- how do you—ah!” He threw one beefy arm over Armsmaster’s shoulders, held up the camera, pulled the goofiest expression he could think of, and clicked. The armored hero made a sound suspiciously like ‘arrgh.’

“Congratulations, pal,” Bayleaf said, tossing the camera back to the kid-- who barely caught it; he and his friend were now laughing fit to split a gut. “Enjoy your instant million-hit blog post.” He heard sirens faintly in the distance. “Later.” He turned, started to run, and in between one step and the next transformed from an enormous black wolf-man into an enormous black sabertooth tiger. To shouts of ”cool” and ”awesome,” he hit all fours still running-- and then faded away, vanishing into thin air.

“That camera is now legal evidence in an ongoing criminal investigation,” Armsmaster shouted at the teenagers in a warning tone. They ignored him, the phone’s owner gleefully working the keyboard.

“Too late, Colin,” Dragon murmured in his ear. “They’ve already posted it to Facebook.”

“Arrrrghgggh.”

Chapter End Notes

It is only fairly recently that I realized: A story about a world being savaged by giant indestructible monsters who are only vulnerable at their cores; a defense force that is nothing but a false front for a malevolent, all encompassing world conspiracy led by amoral masterminds; and the only ones who can save the world from annihilation are a bunch of horribly traumatized teenagers---Worm is just Evangelion with capes!
Chapter 3

Bayleaf stuck to his stealth mode form till he was fairly sure he was out of range. He found himself in an area filled with boarded up factories, decaying warehouses and run down tenements…. The Docks, if he remembered the layout of Brockton Bay canon correctly. He slipped between two buildings and changed to his human form-- then reconsidered as gravel and broken glass cut into his bare feet. Swearing, he pulled the bits of glass loose and hastily shifted to his worgen form; the shifting seemed to heal the minor cuts, and the leathery pads on his wolfen feet were far tougher than his tender human skin.

It was time for a quick assessment. He was stranded in a strange unfamiliar territory with no money, no ID, no shelter, no… well it would be easier to list what he DID have, he decided. He looked down at himself. He had a shirt made of what seemed to be homespun linen, and dark brown breeches of the same with a rope belt. Not even shoes. Apparently Agent had traded in even the basic druid starting gear for more points to spend in the point-buy system.

So he had two pieces of clothes that might have won a medal at a renfaire for authenticity, and his own carcass. Oh, and a butt-load of talents and powers, but at this point that and two bucks would buy him a cup of coffee. So… what did he need first?

He needed clothing. That was a quick and easy fix, though. It was already close to sunset; he could wait. For now he contented himself with finding a back door into the abandoned factory he was hiding behind. The doorknob and lock snapped off easily. He slipped inside and looked around: it was dark, dusty, and there were no signs of anyone else, not even the junkies or homeless had gotten into this place yet--- probably too recently abandoned. Perfect. He had shelter now, at least temporarily.

Once the sun went down he turned back into the black sabertooth, went into stealth, and went on the hunt.

Calling the Docks a poor neighborhood was being generous. It was impoverished, run down, covered in graffiti and trash and there seemed to be a homeless junkie in every alleyway or at every other street corner. But struggling neighborhoods did have certain commonalities, no matter where you were, so it didn’t take him long to find what he was looking for: A Goodwill store, complete with one of their ubiquitous clothes-drop bins out front. Once he was sure the coast was clear, he shifted into worgen form and snapped the security chains off the bin. He grabbed as many bags of donated clothing as he could carry (which was a considerable number, considering his strength) and ran for it. A quick leap from alleyway to rooftop and he soon returned to the abandoned factory, his loot in tow.

He felt very little guilt about robbing a Goodwill; people dumped their old clothing and possessions there under the delusion that they were donating to a charity. They weren’t; even though Goodwill was listed as a nonprofit, the owners of had made themselves millionaires re-selling free stuff-- almost pure profit. They paid their workers a pittance, too, sometimes as little as a quarter an hour, while bragging about “employing the unfortunate and disabled.” Meanwhile their CEOs took home six figure salaries at a minimum.

No, he didn’t feel guilty at all stealing some of their free stock.

It was a mishmash, but he managed to find a few hoodies and tees that hung baggy on his human form. He even found a couple pairs of tennis shoes. He made extra sure to hit everything with his “purify” spell; it was meant for cleansing people of toxins, diseases and poisons but it doubled
surprisingly well as a cleaning and sanitation spell. It wasn’t as good as a trip to the laundromat but it would have to do for now.

He Purified and hung up his homespun on a peg in the wall. Waste not want not.

The moon was high now; time for step two in his brilliant plan.

There were beaches all along the Bay; some more popular than others. The ones nearest to his location on the North side of the harbor probably weren’t very popular with the beachgoing set, due to the proximity of the Ship Graveyard, but it would do for a start.

It was a short run in Worgen form from the abandoned factory to the beach. He brought along nothing but a backpack he’d found in the Goodwill loot and, because he was feeling optimistic, the now-empty garbage bags. He wouldn’t need anything else.

On Azeroth, there are certain abilities used by nearly everyone that, were anyone to examine them with an objective eye, would become obvious as being “arcane” in nature. Those trained in mining could use their thaumatic senses to locate nodes and pockets of ore, precious metals and gems, even from the air. Those trained in herbalism could detect plants by species, at considerable range. Hunters (and druids, when in one of their more feral forms) were known for their ability to detect any animal life form and differentiate by type and species.

Thanks to Agent’s min-maxing, Bayleaf had been brain-crammed with the training and talent for all three. It was how he had managed to avoid running into any of the residents of Brockton Bay while out on his little junket; he could sense someone coming from blocks away.

Here and now though it made him possibly the king of all beach combers.

He knelt down to dig his claws in the sand, closed his eyes, and Searched.

When he opened them, hundreds of glowing ghostly stars speckled the beach as far as the eye could see. Some of them seemed to shine up through several feet of sand like lights underwater. Copper, silver, gold (and not a small amount of nickel and zinc...)

He grinned a wolfish grin and started digging.

By the time he called it quits for the night, the beach looked like it had been attacked by an army of gophers. (Heck with it, let ‘em wonder.) His Alexandria backpack was so full and heavy the seams were stretching. It was small change, mostly, but there were still quite a few watches, rings, bracelets, necklaces and earrings, ready to be rinsed free of sand and pawned. There were also a couple of raggedy wallets-- he had only sensed them because of a few coins in them or a key stuck in a side pocket-- and a couple of them were stuffed with bills and credit cards. After a terrible struggle with himself he regretfully dropped the wallets, contents untouched, into the first convenient mailbox. More than likely some crooked postal service worker would steal the cash themselves, but he wasn’t going to start out life here with that on his conscience.

He returned to his temporary lair, made a campfire with his Vine Entangle, and crashed out on the bags of clothing he had stolen from a charity bin.

The next day started, cold and clear, with a quick trip to a pawn shop to unload his boodle. The man running the place had raised an eyebrow at the sheer quantity, but had said nothing. He’d probably noted the sand still flecked on some of the items and took beachcombing as an acceptable
explanation. Adrian left with about two hundred dollars in his pocket—highway robbery, but he was in no place to quibble at the moment. Between that and the coins he had just under four hundred in cash on him.

The next stop was the public library for a little research. Joy of joys, they had internet. His objective was to do a quick research of the Endbringer attacks, then failing that, the Slaughterhouse Nine, the Teeth, then maybe metahuman rampages in general, to find a likely destroyed city he could claim as his birthplace when he applied for status as a refugee.

It was morbid work. There were a depressing number of them; way more than had been listed in canon. Most of them though weren’t major cities. Major cities could generally bounce back from even a Hulk-style rampage; It was usually the small towns that had gotten the hard end of a cape triggering and going off the rails. Apparently unlike in the comics, where the villains always started their little rampages in places like New York where there were more capes per square mile than there were Starbucks’, the super powered villains in Earth Bet did occasionally have the brainstorm to start their campaigns of terror in some little podunk town with no heroes (see the Slaughterhouse Nine, who had obliterated several small towns in their travels already.)

Adrian eventually found a villain rampage that was practically custom made. Some doink chemo Tinker calling himself Memento had gone on a prolonged terror campaign out in the Midwest. He’d apparently go out on a junket till he found some podunk one-stoplight town that offended his inexplicable sensibilities, proclaim it a blight upon the face of the earth, then spray it down with his amnesia-inducing gas. Once the bewildered and panicking populace had run off, he’d hit it with fuel-air bombs and blast it off the face of the earth. He’d obliterated five dinky communities before the local heroes showed up and bagged him.

It had been less than a year, and Memento victims were still turning up dozens of states away with most of their previous lives a permanent scrambled blur. Society had pretty much shrugged in exhaustion, chalked them up as yet another categories of S-class or A-class refugee, and told the civil service sector to streamline putting them back in the system— and the system had readily obliged. It seemed governments didn’t like it very much when people dropped off the grid and would go out of their way to get a nice shiny paper trail stapled to them again.

So a Memento victim it was. It was the right nationality, the right accent, the right background (he would have had a hell of a time convincing people he was a Nova Scotian or Japanese after all) and people would know better than to ask silly or inconvenient questions about his past.

He rented a room, little more than a closet really, at a decrepit building owned by a grungy fellow who asked no questions and who happily backdated him as living there for several months for an extra hundred up front. Then he stopped at the post office and snagged a PO box. From there he made a beeline for the Brockton Bay Human Services offices. He walked in as Adrian, a man without a country. Three hours after that he walked out as Adrian Smith, an official native of Brockton Bay, sixteen year old emancipated minor, complete with a fresh shiny ID card and a registered sophomore at Winslow Academy. From there it was a beeline to the local bank where he used his shiny new ID card and a chunk of his cash to open a bank account. Then for a final touch, it was over to city hall to open a business license: A tiny little pushcart business called “World of Crafts.”

He had a legal ID, a permanent address, a bank account, a legitimate revenue source, and a decoy paper trail that, thanks to the ridiculous circumstances of this world, looked totally legitimate despite existing for less than a day. That was as close to being a respectable citizen as anyone could get in Brockton Bay.
Then it was a quick shopping run. A cheap burner cell phone, some canned and packaged foods, a proper military backpack from an army-navy surplus (the Alexandria backpack had its charms, but really...) along with a few bits of camping gear, a box of tools, a sleeping bag and a few other oddments.

He also managed to find Fugly Bob’s. In the original web novelization, Fugly Bob's was a Brockton Bay fixture famous for three things: its name, its head shef and owner who sported a horrendous burn scar across half his face and for whom the restaurant was name, and its menu of burgers that could probably kill a vegan at twenty paces. It's most legendary burger was the Fugly Bob Challenger, a monstrosity of a sandwich made from a full pound of hamburger, a mountain of cheese, onions, pickles, lettuce, and condiments and enough fries on the side for six people. If you could finish the entire thing in an hour you got it for free, and your photo mounted on the wall next to the other rare heroic souls who had done the same.

He had originally planned to order something less ambitious, but the smell of sizzling seared meat and grease seduced him. He used the last of his pocket cash and ordered a Challenger. Alas, in his human form he could not finish it, and had to pay for it. He doggy-bagged it for later. Alas, he didn't get the coveted photograph, but doggone if he didn’t feel like a proper Brocktonian now with a proper belly full of Fugly burger...

That would have been it for his day, except for a moment's inspiration. He had lugged along some of his clothes, including the homespun he’d arrived in, and put them through a quick wash and dry at a coin laundromat. It was as he was folding and stashing the clothes that he realized something very important about his first outfit: it hadn’t been made in Brockton Bay. It had been made in Azeroth-- or at least with Azeroth methods. Which had some VERY interesting implications.

The bell on the door jingled as he meekly entered the shop. It was a beautiful dress shop, but surprisingly small and crowded considering the reputation of the owner and manager. Every spare inch of space was crowded with manikins swathed in silk and satin, cotton and crinoline. Fortunately the showroom floor opened a little bit past the entryway.

He was still standing in the middle of the room gawping like a tourist at the sartorial splendor when the shoppe owner came in from the back rooms. “I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “But our boutique is by appointment only--”

She was a tiny thing, five feet if that, and dainty. She was wearing what appeared to be an antique dress with more ruffles and frills and furbelows than Adrian had ever seen, and her hair-- or possibly her wig-- was a veritable mass of golden Shirley Temple curls. Most disturbingly she wore a doll-like porcelain mask that completely concealed her face and made dark hollow holes of her eyes.

Adrian held up a hand. “I know, I apologize for intruding,” he said. “But I’m not here to shop-- or to snap photos like a tourist. It’s just that… um, how do I put this? I discovered something that might be of interest to you.”

“Oh really?” Parian (for that was who she was) said warily. Out of the corner of his eye Adrian saw the dresses around him rustle. Ribbons hiding unobtrusively among the manikins floated on nonexistent breezes, coiled like cobras ready to strike. The cloth-kinetic cape had little to fear from the likes of him.

“Yes. Please, I mean you no harm.” The rustling stilled. He carefully set his backpack on the ground and gestured to it. “If I may?” After a moment she nodded. He unfastened a large side pocket and pulled out the homespun tunic and breeches. He held the folded cloth out to her. “What do you make of these?”
Parian took the clothes carefully in her hands and ran her gloved fingertips over them. “Let’s see. Linen obviously. Oh, and hand made linen, you can tell by the irregularities. You don’t see that often.” she unfolded the tunic and shook it out. “All hand stitched, with hand made thread--! The cut, the design, everything down to the buttons is authentic. Well,” she said, giving Adrian a look, “this could hang in a museum display on medieval clothes-making. Where did you find this?” she sounded intrigued.

“Would you believe along with a load of donated clothing?” he said with a crooked grin. It was technically true, if not precisely so. “But that’s not the really interesting thing. Take a look at those breeches and tunic, then take a look at me. Think they’d fit me?”

Parian looked at the clothing in her hands, then gave Adrian the once-over. She took in his six-foot height and broad shoulders. “Not likely,” she said, amused.

“Well that’s the thing...” He looked around. “Let me show you. Do you have a couple of manikins to spare? One adult male, one child.” At her gesture two cloth-covered manikins tottered out from the workroom in the back and set themselves up in the middle of the floor. “Now, try the tunic on the adult.”

The manikin raised its arms and the tunic slid down over its head. It settled on its shoulders, hanging in a loose yet comfortable fit. “Okay,” Adrian said, “Now try it on the child.” Obediently, Parian sent the tunic over to dress the smaller manikin. It slid down over the child doll’s raised arms… and settled in place, once again a perfect fit.

“What?” Parian stammered. ‘How…?’

Adrian knew. The clothes were of Azeroth make. And in Azeroth, tailoring incorporated so much of the arcane that enchanter’s would salvage old clothing for the exotic dusts, motes, and energies they used in their own craft. Among other things it made the clothes more durable to the point that they were often used as a substitute for armor. But the most common feature added was to make the clothing naturally self-resizing. This was how an Orc could shop for clothing (or for that matter, real armor, which incorporated the same techniques) at the same place as a gnome.

Parian shot a look at Adrian. “Oh no,” he half-laughed, holding up his hands in protest. “I didn’t make them. They were just donated.” Which was the truth, more or less. “when I noticed their, er, odd behavior, I naturally thought of you.”

Parian pulled off one of her elbow-length gloves and ran her fingers over the cloth. “it… I can’t describe it,” she said. “There’s something… strange beyond explaining in this cloth. Yet... Don’t ask me how I know but I’m sure that with the right materials, I could duplicate this!”

Adrian smiled to himself. He’d figured as much. He suspected that Parian was as much a cloth tinker as she was a telekinetic. “Some tinker somewhere?”

“None that I know of,” Parian murmured, still stroking the cloth in a perturbing fashion. “And I know literally every tinker with a cloth-related specialty on the planet.”

“So,” Parian said. “How much, then?”

“Well, seeing as I only FOUND the things, maybe a small finder’s fee; I wouldn’t feel right--” before he’d finished the sentence she’d scribbled out a number on a scrap of paper and stuck it under his nose. His eyes went round in spite of himself. “And it was nice doing business with you,” he squeaked.
When he walked out the door, she had his tunic and breeches. He had her private cell phone number in case he made any more “discoveries”-- and as one might expect of a rogue who had to regularly do business with capes of every stripe, six figures in small unmarked nonsequential bills stuffed in his army backpack.

The weekend (it was apparently Wednesday when he made splashdown) arrived. Plans were progressing fast; he had a new identity… or would that be a false identity or a secret identity?… courtesy of the state and federal government, a sizeable bankroll (he had been in near hysterics before he’d finally gotten back to his rented room and hid it all under his mattress), and he was enrolled in the appropriate school… now for phase two.

Bank account or no, it was going to be a tricky process depositing most of that cash. A homeless teenager who suddenly dropped six figures in cash into his bank account was the sort of thing that had people pressing alarm buttons. He’d probably have to disguise it as cash profits from his business.

Speaking of which, he needed to start getting together a stockpile of merchandise to sell. He was an Engineer, with the full category of gnome and goblin inventions, plus the entire catalogue from the Warlords of Draenor garrison engineer and the gnomish gearworks AND the goblin workshop. He had blueprints in his head and knowhow in his hands to make everything from toys to tanks. But, he needed a workshop to build this stuff… and to build all the cape gear, weapons and more that he’d need in the field.

He also needed a place to stash all the stuff he didn’t want people to know about just yet (like tens of thousands of dollars in small nonsequential bills, ahem), a place where he could rest, mend his own wounds, and keep his head down for a while when things (as per the original timeline) started getting more desperate and dark…

He needed a lair.

Thus began a long weekend at the library web-browsing for a certain category of abandoned construction and/or public works. He was sure there were plenty of old smuggler’s tunnels around the harbor; port cities tended to have those in multitude. But considering the forecast in the next two years or so called for cloudy with a chance of Endbringer, he didn’t particularly want anything too close to the waterline. Captain’s Hill, as he recalled, was going to remain well above the floodline and out of the combat zone when Leviathan came by to say howdy-doo. Unfortunately it didn’t have quite as much construction and none of the sort that he was looking for.

No, he needed to shift his search further North. Brockton Bay had been a shipping nexus even back in the days of the horse and cart. That meant a lot of on-site machine work. What he needed would probably be someplace between the Docks and the Trainyard… someplace where, back in the city’s heyday, a lot of cargo got shifted and a lot of steelwork needed done. He hunched over the library computer and clicked on the interactive map he’d found of Brockton Bay. There. He tapped a finger on the screen. There was a little patch of real estate, a little row of buildings right on the line where the Docks ended and the Trainyards began. It was deep in gang territory-- he grimaced to himself at the thought; in Brockton Bay the only place that wasn’t in gang territory was under a force field bubble out in the Bay.

He cross-referenced the buildings in question with the city records… bingo. Five of the buildings were listed as completely abandoned. Three were of the type he was looking for. One was available to anyone who was willing to pay the back taxes on it…. But none had even benched an offer
because of its utterly untenable location.

Fifty minutes later, the ghostly silhouette of a jungle cat could be seen slipping through the alleyways of the Trainyard. The building in question was just off the actual railyard by about half a block; he could hear the deafening clank and roar of the diesel trains as he scouted out the location. He squeezed through a narrow gap between yet another warehouse and an all-but-shuttered factory of some sort that took a sixty degree bend about fifty feet in, went twenty feet more, then opened into a little cobblestone courtyard. It was walled in on three sides with ancient brick and stone, and had exactly one door. There was part of an old fashioned slate shingle roof visible above it, with two or three stone chimneys poking up into the sky behind the factory’s more modern smokestack. Bayleaf switched back to his worgen form and forced the door, the ancient lock cracking like peanut brittle under his grip. He took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The place was one of those odd little forgotten corners. Back in the day it had been a repair and work shop, built right next to the railyard for convenience. Over the years it had been used to provide the railroads with everything from shoeing draft horses to ironwork to brasswork to glasswork to… well, just about any work that required strong hands, solid tools and a hot furnace. But times had changed, the tracks had been re-laid, and the workshop had fallen into disuse as better facilities were built on the OTHER side of the tracks. Other buildings had cropped up around the workshop, building over it, overlapping it, till it was hidden from site and all but forgotten to the world.

Bayleaf looked around. It was perfect.

The dust was inches thick. It was undisturbed even by the footprints of mice and probably had geologic strata to it. Cobwebs were everywhere, long abandoned by the spiders that wove them for the lack of flies. But the walls were solid stone— not brick, but stone, the bones of a world; huge raw-cut blocks that made his druidic senses hum with satisfaction. There were two furnaces, long cold. Stout worktables made of heavy oak beams and still scarred black. Even the tools were there, abandoned where they lay— hammers, tongs, anvils, tools for iron and brass and glass and leather. There were even a couple of anvils. It was actually a two story building as well, with sleeping quarters up in the rafters.

There was a washroom in the back corner with an antiquated showerhead and a toilet...

To his surprise there was no wood rot, no mildew, surprisingly little rust as well. For a place near a seaside harbor that was a bit unusual. He could only guess that the place had been corked up so tight when it was closed that nothing of moisture or humidity could get in.

The only question that remained was how to get his equipment, materials, and the like in and out of the place. The answer came when he found the double doors in back. He ripped off the boards blocking it and opened it to find his back door directly faced a solid brick wall. Disgruntled, he began ripping out bricks with his bare clawed hands.

...To find himself in yet another abandoned warehouse. “Town oughta start trading in abandoned warehouses, they’d make a fortune,” he muttered to himself. He climbed through and found it spacious if empty. There were a few flickering lights— perhaps not so abandoned?— and a bathroom with running water, so whoever owned it was still paying upkeep for some reason. As he recalled, building owners tended to keep even empty buildings hooked up to utilities in order to keep the heat on, so as to prevent freezing and moisture damage…

Either way, bonus for him. Since they were so rude as to build over his back door like that, he would avail himself of the facilities and splice into the electric and water lines in here. Assuming he even needed them, considering his plans. But the real bonus was that the place had a front door and a delivery ramp and thus an address to have things delivered to. Whenever something he ordered
arrived here, he would be on hand to open the door and roll it on in… and right through to the back, out the hole in the back wall, and into his workshop.

He found a loose sheet of plyboard large enough to cover the “secret entrance” (aka Huge Frickin Hole in the Wall) and set about cleaning the antedeluvian dust out of his lair.

Saturday was spent on shopping.

Not just any shopping, though. Porch sales. Yard sales. Garage sales. Flea Markets. Even Brockton Bay had such things, especially in a mild indian summer. He was treasure hunting, and he was stretching his Searching power to the absolute limit. The treasures he wanted were scattered far and wide… but it was amazing the amount of territory you could cover when you could turn into a bird.

Added bonus? No receipts, which meant no paper trail.

He bought a few things for his comfort-- some bits of furniture including a bed, a little winter clothing, a propane heater-- but the main items on his shopping list were:

1. clockwork, engine, motor and electronic components.
2. certain gems, crystals, and rare earths and metals.
3. scrap metal in bulk.
4. tools.
5. Fuel.
6. anything his Searching power “pinged” on.

His approach was as methodical as his beach-combing. He first scoped out the local papers for any listed yard sales. Then he overflew those areas in his raven form, scanning. If he pinged on anything he dropped down into a secluded spot, turned human, and quickly bought whatever he’d pinged on, then followed up by going over everything else with a fine toothed comb. If the people running the yard sale were amenable to it, he’d pay them a little extra to box up and set aside what he’d found, with the promise he’d be back for it later.

He made some surprising finds; enough that he started wondering what treasures he’d completely overlooked in his past life when he went yard sale trolling. He found countless pieces of real silverware, including a serving platter and cover. He found more than a few bits of gold too. Gems were a rare find but he found plenty of crystals and semiprecious stones that would have been worth ten times their weight back on Azeroth. The hippie lady at the flea market with the new-age crystal stand must have thought her ship had come in when he came along and basically bought her out. He even bought the push cart.

He snapped up clocks of every size, wind up toys, old electric countertop appliances, pocket watches, and any number of items that noone watching could have guessed the reason… but he’d spot them amongst countless other debris, his eyes would get a funny gleam and he’d snatch them up. At one point on impulse he’d bought a stack of flowerpots, some potting soil, and an assortment of seedlings...

He’d realized even before he’d started that he’d have a touch of trouble dragging his haul back to his
lair. Not for the first time since splashdown he groused to himself bitterly about Agent not equipping him with the standard Azeroth “bottomless” handy haversack (or more likely trading it in for more points.) He’d gotten around that problem by scouting around till he found a guy in one of the lower-rent neighborhoods lounging around who had a pickup truck, and offering to pay him a couple hundred to haul him and his crap around for the day. His name was “Efe,” so far as Bayleaf could figure; a balding, potbellied old guy with a ballcap, a wife-beater shirt and a fringe of shoulder length stringy hair and a disturbing resemblance to Cheech Marin. But he was mellow, and cool with doing a little driving for a few bucks. They drove around and picked up all Adrian’s purchases. By the time they got to the false front warehouse, it was loaded to overflowing. “Efe” helped him unload, wished him luck, told him they should go out for a few beers sometime and drove off…. Never even having asked Bayleaf his name. No fuss, no muss and once again, no paper trail.

One might have thought it strange that, in a world and a city where tinkers scavenged like cockroaches, that Bayleaf pulled in such a load. Of course, the usual behavior of tinkers was to either scrounge dumpsters and junkyards, or try to pull off a not-so-daring heist and rip off a factory or a warehouse full of high-end technology. The few who even thought of money tried to order from horrendously overpriced underground companies like the Toybox, or even (in cases of extreme stupidity) tried to have stuff delivered to them in bulk from companies, thereby putting an enormous bullsye on themselves with a big fat blinking neon arrow above it that said “Please kidnap this Tinker now.”

Almost none of them thought to buy things directly from ordinary people with plain old cash. And those who spoke of tracking Tinkers by their “unusual purchasing habits” never considered the millions of people at flea markets, Salvation Army stores, and yard sales whose purchasing and selling habits would probably make the most demented Tinker look banal.

Sunday he would have taken rest-- but must needs, as the saying went. He threw his furniture in place, started up his propane heater to keep warm, sat down next to his stacks of salvage, and got to work.

There were over five hundred “toys” listed in World of Warcraft. He could craft a shocking number of them, just with what he had. In one hour his first trinket was clicking, buzzing and whirring around the Foundry floor. By the end of three he had a small platoon chattering along… including one very special one, for a special purpose.

Monday morning, he was ready.

Principal Blackwell sat back in her chair with a self-satisfied air. “Well, Mister… Smith…”

“Sorry,” Adrian said with a shrug and a half-smile. “I guess government offices aren’t exactly creative with names.”

“...Yes,” Blackwell said with pursed lips. “Well, according to the standardized test they gave you, you place in the sophomore or junior year. We will be observing your actual performance in class over the year to determine your actual placement…”

Yyyeah, that would be the purpose of the tests they regularly hand out to ALL students, Adrian thought to himself with a mental raised eyebrow. In other news grass is green, water is wet, film at
eleven. Her point?

“But I trust that your future performance will... compensate for your checkered educational past.”

At this he did raise an actual eyebrow. Checkered past? According to the file she was handed, I’m an amnesia victim. I don’t even have a past to checker!

“I will warn you right now, we have low tolerance for troublemakers here…”

I just may barf. I walked past three skinheads swapping sandwich baggies just on my way to the office. Who is she kidding? He considered his appearance. Jeans, sneakers, t-shirt, and a leather jacket. Was she picking up her cues on “troublemaker on sight” from old James Dean films?

“I will say I had some misgivings about your enrollment here, Mr. Smith. Your past is due cause for concern.”

The penny dropped. Ah, I get it. Should’ve thought of that first. With things like the Simurgh, or Bonesaw, or Nilbog running around, there’s probably a certain amount of prejudice against survivors of metahuman attacks. She’s probably afraid that nutcase Memento might have turned me into some sort of teenage tyke-bomb. He huffed and curled his lip. Or that I might have a bad day and trigger all over her nice clean school. Irony ahoy.

She saw the tiny lip curl and predictably, misinterpreted. She stiffened a bit, and her already less than warm tone turned frosty. “You had best watch your attitude, young man. I run a tight ship here--”

hrmrrnk.

“--and I will be keeping a close eye on you for any irregularities. So don’t give me any crap.”

He looked at the scowling woman in her bowl-cut and only barely suppressed the urge to say You got it, Moe. “Understood, ma’am,” he said. “May I go find my locker now? I think lunch is starting soon.”

She glared at him for a moment. “Dismissed,” she said. He beat a hasty retreat.

He found his locker in short order, and started unloading his backpack into it. He looked over the inside. “Cripes,” he muttered. “This thing is enormous. I didn’t think anyone made lockers this size for real.” He shook his head. He needed to focus on his next objective: finding Taylor. Her description was pretty straightforward, so that shouldn’t be a problem, he decided. There was a good chance he’d spot her at lunch-- but then again, maybe not. Didn’t she take up eating her lunch in various hidey-holes to try and escape the gruesome threesome? Or was that something she started after the locker incident…?

“Hey Taylor!”

Adrian’s head whipped around. He looked just in time to see a petite redheaded girl in an ungodly amount of makeup stick her foot out and trip another girl in a hoodie and backpack. The hoodie girl stumbled and nearly fell. The other girl went so far as to slap her in the back, to try and get her to stumble further. The girl in the hoodie managed to keep her balance though. “Better watch your step, Taylor,” the redhead taunted. “You’re just so terribly clumsy.”

Taylor didn’t even look back. She just righted herself and kept walking, her head down and shoulders hunched. Adrian felt like someone had taken a bite out of his heart. His conviction only
firmed; even if he didn’t fix anything else, he was going to make this right. She kept walking down the hall right towards him…

And stopped at the locker next to his and began working the combination.

Holy carp. Luck of all the Irish. “Uhhh, hi,” he said. “How ya doin?” She jumped, then looked up at him, brushing stray curls of her dark hair out of her face. With her glasses she looked like a frightened owl…

Taylor flinched and looked up at the boy next to her warily. She blinked a little when she realized she didn’t recognize him. She was fairly sure she would have remembered being in the locker next door to a tall, dark, broad shouldered—she pushed that thought away, blushing. He was handsome though, with chiseled looks and dark gray eyes. He gave her a crooked smile.

Had he said something?

“Oh! Uh. Hi….?”

“You must be Taylor,” he said. “I’m Adrian.”

Taylor’s paranoia sprang to the fore. “How do you know my name?” she said warily.

Adrian jerked his thumb down the hall, indicating the departed Emma. “I overheard Princess Maybelline back there shouting it,” he said wryly.

“Princess Maybelline?” she said with a half smile of her own.

“Yeah.” He looked down the hall thoughtfully. “Dang, how many layers of makeup does she have to slather on to get that perfect Resting Bitch Face, d’you suppose?” Talyor did let out a hiccup of a laugh at that one.

“I don’t recognize you,” she said, immediately feeling stupid. Of course not, he was obviously a new student--

“Yeah, well. Funny thing is, if we had known each other, we probably wouldn’t now,” he said. He tapped his head. “Memento refugee.”

Taylor’s mouth made a silent “o.” “I’m sorry,” she said.

“Hey, not your fault. At least all I got was a clean slate; I could’ve ended up like those guys who can’t remember anything past the last half-hour, or whatever.” He looked a bit uncomfortable with the topic, and made an obvious move to change it. “So…basically means I’m totally new here. As new as you can get actually. Any more like Resting Bitch Face I should look out for around here?”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “You mean besides the neonazis, the asian gang members, and the junkies?” she said sarcastically.

“Well I know about those guys. At least they’re courteous enough to wear identifying colors,” Adrian said, amused. “But what about the rest?”

Taylor’s smile disappeared. “That’s Emma,” she said. “You’ll get to know her soon enough. “Her, Madison and Sophia are the Queen Bees in this school and everybody knows it.” She pulled a trapper-keeper out of her locker and flipped through it. Then flipped through it again. “Dammit!” She threw her head back and stamped her feet in frustration.
“What?” Adrian asked.

“Those-- they stole my homework. Again!!” She threw the trapper-keeper down in the bottom of her locker and let her head fall against the doorframe with a thunk. “I can’t stand it. I even changed my lock...”

Adrian knew exactly why changing her lock made no difference, but he could hardly tell Taylor that at this point. He had to take a different approach. “What kind of lock did you get? Can I see it?”

Taylor looked up at him. “Just a regular combination lock,” she said. She pulled it off the door latch and gave it to him. He rolled it over in his hands and made a knowing sound.

“How?” Taylor scowled.

Wordlessly, Adrian took out his wallet and pulled a metal strip-- it looked like it had been cut out of a soda can-- out of one of the pockets. He closed the lock. Then he wrapped the strip of metal around the shackle and worked it down inside the body of the lock. There was a click, and the lock popped open. “Easy peasy,” he said. “They’ve got how-to videos online.”

Taylor groaned. “Well that’s ten bucks wasted,” she grumbled.

A noise came out of Adrian’s backpack. “Vweep. Whirrwhirrwhiirr. Ebbeebbeebbp. PTING.”

Taylor backed up a step. “The heck was that?”

“Oh. Darn, must’ve turned him on by accident...” Adrian reached down in his oversized pack and pulled something out. It was a little toy robot about a foot tall, made out of copper and brass. It had a rotating red beacon light for a head, two headlight “eyes,” a short squat body, short little limbs with large bell-shaped hands and platform feet. “Oh, this is just one of the toys I make,” Adrian said, holding it up. “I call it the alarm-o-bot.”

“You’re a TINKER?” Taylor blurted out. Adrian laughed.

“Oh no no no,” he said. “This is all just off-the-shelf electronics, and a little handicraftyness.” He shrugged and laughed. “it’s sort of a gag gift. You place it where you want-- like on your desk, or in your car, or whatever, press the button to set it, and if anybody sets off its motion detectors it sounds an alarm. Look--” he poked something on it.

The red light lit up and began rotating. “WARNING, FART DETECTED! FART DETECTED! CLEAR THE AREA! DO NOT LIGHT A MATCH!--”

“All clear, all clear!” Adrian shouted at it frantically. The alarm shut down. “um, wrong setting,” he said weakly, palming his face. He looked around; several students had stopped in alarm at the ruckus and were now staring at the two of them silently. Adrian leaned out and stuck his face into the face of the nearest one.

"Yeah. It was MEEEEEEEEEE!" He sneered. He held out a hand to the kid. "Come on, pull my finger!"

The kid, wisely, beat a hasty retreat; the other kids rapidly dispersed before they could become the next target of the weird new guy's attention. He turned back to Taylor like nothing had happened. "Anyway, like I was saying..."
Taylor was trying not to laugh and failing. “That’s awesome! And you make these little guys?”

Adrian nodded, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment. “Yeah. I make little windup or battery powered toys, sell ‘em from a push cart...” he gave her a card. It said “World of Crafts” on it and listed a website and cellphone number. “Its how I pay the bills.”

“Neat.” she smiled and tucked the card away.

Adrian hefted the Alarm-o-bot and looked at Taylor’s locker thoughtfully. He could see a flute case in the upper compartment… they hadn’t stolen her flute yet… “Say, wanna have a little fun with whoever’s rifling your locker?” He held up the toy and waved it meaningfully.

It took a moment for the penny to drop. “Oh, that would be brilliant--” she hesitated. “Oh but we can’t. They’d break your little robot just to get even--”

His grin grew strangely feral. “Meh, I ain’t worried about that,” he said. “I make these things by the dozen, remember? Out of old cell phones and crap. Be worth it to scare the crap out of Resting Bitch Face, wouldn’t it?” He held the Alarm-o-bot up to her face. “Go ahead; say ‘All clear.’” he pressed a button on the toy’s back.

“All clear.”

“There, that’s the shutoff code.” He stuck the little robot in the upper compartment, clamping its magnetic feet so it stood in front of the flute case. “Back to your duty, soldier,” he said, giving the toy a mock salute. Taylor laughed as he closed the door.

She never saw the toy return the salute…

“Wow, what other stuff do you make?”

“All sorts of things,” he said, stuffing his bag into the locker. “Most aren’t nearly as complicated as Obie, there.” He nodded at the locker.

“Obie?”

“Short for Alarm-o-Bot. AOB.” He picked out the books for his next few classes, and slammed the locker shut. “Anyway, most of my stuff is just windup stuff or battery powered trinkets. Stuff like this.” He held his hand up. Perched on his finger was a butterfly made out of wire and glass. As she watched it slowly opened and closed its shiny black wings. Even its antennae moved.

“Oh wow.” She reached out a finger and petted it on the head. “How--?”

“The wings are broken bits of solar cell,” he said. “and there’s a really simple electric motor-- more like a little solenoid-- that turns a little wire camshaft that moves the wings and antennae. The movement changes speed depending on how much light is shining on the wings. It’s not much more complicated than one of those bobbing bird toys, but it looks really lifelike, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. Pretty, too,” she said.

He smiled. “Here.” He reached up and fastened it to one of the stray locks of hair sneaking out from under her hood. It clung there, fanning its wings slowly. She immediately started to protest.

“Oh no, I couldn’t--”

“Hey, free advertising,” he said with a smile and a shrug. “Besides you looked like you could use a
smile."

The school bell blatted. “Come on, we’d better get to the cafeteria before they give away all the *good* slop,” he joked. “Come with me?”

He watched her chew on her lip, undecided. She had to be half-broken at this point; convinced that no one would willingly associate with her; terrified her three tormentors would use it as a justification to turn their ire on her-- or him-- but by this point so desperate for someone, anyone to just be with…

“It-- it might be a bad idea for you to be seen with me,” she managed to say.

“Great! I’m all about doing what’s bad for me. C’mon.” She hesitated again. Then, for a miracle, she gave him a smile.

“Okay… okay, sure.” After all, what did she have to lose, right?

“Mmmm, slop ahoy…”

Behind them in the locker, the Alarm-o-Bot sentry blinked its eyes and settled in for a long shift on duty.
Chapter 4

Adrian, aka Bayleaf, was a metahuman. He could change at will into a half dozen different forms. In his baseline worgen form he could leap a city street or deadlift a truck by the bumper. He could maneuver in land, sea, or air. He could summon extradimensional energy to smite his enemies or heal his allies, and control (with some limited success) both animals and plants. He could craft weapons that would make a platoon of marines crap their pants. It may not have shown but even in his most minimal form, that of a baseline human, he was beyond pinnacle baseline human ability.

And at lunch it became unsettlingly clear that his first, and biggest hurdle was one for which all his brute powers would be virtually useless: shutting down three epic level Mean Girls set on destroying Taylor Hebert’s life. That was something that was going to require intellect.

The first salvo was early on. They’d found some seats at a corner table; Taylor had packed her own lunch so he left her and his backpack to hold their seats while he waited in line for… he sniffed multiple times. Meatloaf, maybe? While he was standing in line waiting to get a tray, he saw the Gruesome Threesome make their first move out of the corner of his eye. It was a “drive-by” this time. Emma, or Resting Bitch Face as he now thought of her, and two other girls, one a tall athletic black girl with cornrows, the other a petite brown haired girl in a crop top and demin skirt with her hair up in a “cutesy” style, went sidling past Taylor’s table. The black girl made a point of clipping Taylor in the back of her head with her elbow; while Cutesie-Hair shoved his backpack into the floor in passing, obviously thinking it belonged to Taylor. Emma didn’t do anything physical, but he’d managed to learn how to keep his wolfen hearing in his human form, so he clearly heard her as she passed Taylor’s seat:

“Ew.”

Subtle and vicious, like a hat pin driven through your ribs. He gave it an eight out of ten.

He briefly contemplated doing something nasty in retaliation while he was still up, but beyond blasting them with a bolt of moonfire while their backs were turned (which really wouldn’t go over well) he was short on ideas at that second. Instead he took his tray, let the lunch ladies fill it up with whatever it was they were serving, and returned to their table. Already he could see Taylor pulling back inside her shell. That wouldn’t do.

He pretended to spot his bag in the floor, shoved it under the table with a foot and sat down. “The mighty hunter returns with his kill,” he said, dropping his tray on the table. Man, he knew it was a common joke about cafeteria food, but this stuff looked seriously nasty. Some macaroni and cheese of some sort on the side, wrinkled peas, and… he still wasn’t sure if it was meatloaf. “A mercy kill, from the look of it,” he added.

Taylor “snrked” a little, then glanced over at his tray in genuine puzzlement. “What is it?”

Adrian poked it with his fork. “I’m not sure,” he said, “But I think I know what happened to Jimmy Hoffa’s body now.” She’d been in mid-bite of her sandwich roll; her snort of laughter sprayed a few bits of cheese and meat across the table. Face red as a tomato, she swept it up with her hand; Adrian handed her a napkin without a word. “So what are you having?” he asked as if nothing happened.

“Um.” She wiped the corners of her mouth. “Chicken wrap, with lettuce, rice and some mixed shredded cheese. Oh and a little sauce.” She brushed her hood back; the butterfly in her hair fluttered in the cafeteria light.
“Sounds good,” he said earnestly. “...Trade?”

“Not a chance.”

“Come on. We’ll go halvsies. Half your tasty chicken roll for half my Jimmy Hoffa loaf.” She spluttered with laughter into her napkin. He pointed at his macaroni cheese sludge. “I’ll throw in some of this delicious Cream of Cootie, whaddya say?”

“Eww, you are awful--”

A dark-skinned hand slammed down on the table; Taylor jumped in her seat, the smile vanishing from her face. It was Sophia. Flanking her were Madison and Emma, in full Resting Bitch Face mode. She stood there, leaning over their table in a domineering, space-invading pose. “Hey, Hebert. ‘Sup?” Her smile was thin and toothy and about as warm as the ones he’d seen on a shark.

Adrian hadn’t been taken by surprise. He’d been tracking them with his peripheral vision since he’d sat down. They’d been at what he assumed was one of the ‘popular kids’ tables, Emma and Madison shmoozing it up with their social fu while Sophia lounged there like a cheetah on a rich jetsetter’s leash. All three of them had been keeping a spare eye on Taylor; when he’d sat down their look of surprise on their faces had been blatant. Emma’s mouth had even dropped open in surprise. (Really? It was that unusual and outrageous that someone had sat down with Taylor?) The three had begun whispering together-- too quiet for even him to hear-- and eventually gotten up and headed for where they were sitting, social murder clearly on their minds.

Adrian had faked ignorance till they were right at the table. When Hess slammed her hand down he looked up and cheerfully drawled “Well, what can I do you for?”

Sophia just gave him a look. That was right, she was the more physical of the three. It was Emma and Madison who handled the more verbal attacks. “Oh, and who is this?” Madison chirped, all bubbles and sunshine. “C’mon, introduce us, Taylor.”

Sophia, like a good little attack animal, took her handler’s cue. “Yeah Taylor,” she said with a smirk, eyeing him up and down. “Introduce us.”

Adrian felt his eyebrows go up. Now what was that all about? Did she just give him the once-over? He decided to go with a neutral approach first. “Adrian Smith,” he said. “New here. New everywhere, actually.”

“Why are you hanging around with Hebert?” Madison said, giving him a lookover as well. “Really honey, she’s not your type.” She gave Taylor a little sneer.

My social-fu is a little weak, here, Adrian thought. Duck and weave, duck and weave... “Hmm, I think I know you,” he said. “Heard your name somewhere... what was it?” he snapped his fingers, pretending to think. “Oh yeah, Massengil.” Taylor had been taking a sip from her water bottle to calm her nerves; she nearly choked on her own spit take. Madison’s face went wide with surprise then puckered up into a scowl.

Adrian decided to push it. “What’s the matter, dear?” he said sweetly. “Are you not feeling... spring time fresh today?”

Taylor went from coughing to choking. Madison’s eyes went wide and her mouth formed a perfect “o;” she looked like someone had slapped the pigtails off her. Emma and Sophia bridled up but Adrian wasn’t through. “Well, it seems Douche Princess has nothing to say,” he snarked. “How about you, Barnes?”
Give her points, she rallied. “We saw Hebert here hanging off of you,” she said, her nose tipped up. “Since you’re new we figured we’d come over here and warn you.”

“Oh really.”

“Yeah really.” Emma tossed her red hair. “Taylor here’s a headcase. She’ll be all friendly like at first, but then she’ll get upset about something-- just any little thing, the poor dear--” she simpered. “And then she’ll be in the Principal’s office, making up all sorts of wild accusations about you. She did it to us...” her smile was sweet as an arsenic-laced cookie. “Just a friendly warning.”

“Oh.” He smiled back just as sweetly. “You mean like, saying you knocked her bag in the floor?” He said, picking up his own backpack and holding it up. He let them see it before setting it down in the chair next to it. Her smile didn’t move, but her eyes glazed. “Or saying you tripped her in the hall and tried to knock her down with a push to the back? I caught your performance in the hallway, Resting Bitch Face. Eight out of ten for effort but a zero for execution. You should leave the physical stuff to your friends.”

Sophia shifted her stance so she was facing him. “You like to live dangerously, don’t ya, Adrian Smith?” Her eyes glittered dangerously.

“Well, kitten--” he slapped his much larger hand down over her relatively slender one where it rested on the table. Scowling she tried to yank her hand away; to her consternation she couldn’t. She tugged again, then harder. It was no use, he was pinning her hand to the table without any apparent effort. “You just may be right. But I’ll tell you one thing I don’t do.” His smile vanished, his face became an expressionless mask but his eyes smoldered.

“I don’t play little girly games. I don’t do this running around little ‘tee hee, he said she said let’s call them names out loud in the cafeteria’ crap. I don’t drop anonymous hate email or scribble crap on someone’s locker and then go running off giggling with my little school friends about how badass and edgy I am. And I don’t put up with useless skanks who do that kind of crap.

“So take Douche Girl, Resting Bitch Face and the rest of your little goldfish poop gang and go be worthless somewhere else.” He lifted his hand; she yanked hers back and glared at him like she wanted to burn holes through his head with her eyes. But the look in his eyes, eyes that a second ago she could have sworn were a cool blue grey but she now saw were flecked with gold, was a kind of dangerous that her cape hindbrain couldn’t ignore. She whirled around and marched off, hackles up and all but radiating vicious anger. Emma and Madison fell in behind her and marched off too, noses high but cheeks flaring red.

“Whoa” came from several nearby tables. There were laughs and catcalls and a few bits of applause, even...everyone loved a free show. Adrian turned his attention back to his alleged lunch. Taylor was hunched over her own meal, looking like a terrified rabbit. “Why did you do that?” she hissed.

He shrugged. “Why not? I was supposed to put up with that crap?” It was important he establish that this was for his own benefit, as well as for hers.

“She won’t let that go,” Taylor said. “None of them will. You don’t know how bad they can make things for you--”

Adrian snorted raucously. “Taylor, they’re a bunch of high school bitches,” he said. “They’ve got three and only three things: money, tits and popularity, and the first two is where they get the last one. And no matter how much of the first two they have, without the last one they’re like a Beverly Hills bimbette without her daddy’s credit card: useless.” He gestured around. “How popular are they really? Did you hear how many people applauded them getting ganked just now?” He stabbed his
meatloaf with a fork. Possibly to make sure it was dead. “All it takes for them to lose it all is for just one person to not take their crap.”

Taylor shook her head. “You’re a hopeless optimist, in that case.”

“Ehh, shuddup and eat your Jimmy Hoffa Loaf,” he said, pushing the tray at her.

She pushed it back, grinning and wrinkling her nose. “Ew no. You eat it!”

“No you!”

“You!”

“Okay, a compromise, maybe a respectful burial in an unmarked grave out back--”

The day proceeded; Taylor and Adrian shuffled from class to class, discovering they shared a handful of them; Gladly’s regrettable class, and Mrs. Knott’s for computers, just to name two. For a miracle, the Gruesome Threesome actually kept their heads down the rest of that day. Adrian was pleased.

Taylor was not. She knew it just meant they were planning.

Taylor was generous. For all their malice the Threesome would never be known for in depth strategy or, for that matter, an ability to think through long-term consequences. Emma was the closest thing they had to a tactician. After their fumble at lunch, she knew they had to act fast to re-balance the scales.

The three were in the bathroom together, skipping out on the last period of the day. “So why not go after this Adrian bitch’s locker?” Sophia was complaining. “He’s the one who talked back to us...”

“Because we’ll be the first suspects everyone thinks of if we do,” Emma said, carefully touching up her eyeliner. “We get dissed in the cafeteria, then two hours later he gets his locker trashed? Blackwell and the teachers may not care but even they wouldn’t be able to pretend they didn’t know, and I don’t know about you but I don’t wanna spend my afternoon sitting in Blackwell’s office sucking up to her, trying to get off the hook. Gimme your lip gloss, Madison.” The other girl obediently handed it over.

Sophia snorted and crossed her arms. “Look at it this way, Soph,” Emma said. “This Adrian guy, he obviously thinks he’s some sort of white knight or something. Taylor’s already starting to latch onto him, to hide behind him-- and that’s just after one day!

“But if, while he’s out there on bended knee, promising his lady fair he’ll defend her honor, you wreck her stuff right under his nose--”

“He’ll look like a chump,” Madison threw in, tucking her rouge in her handbag and blowing herself a kiss in the mirror.

“Better yet it’ll yank the rug out from under Taylor again. Big bad muscly macho man couldn’t even keep her safe for 24 hours...She’ll be heartbroken. She’ll probably never trust anyone again.” Emma
sighed, dropping the lip gloss into her own back and snapping it shut. “Such a tragedy.”

Sophia’s face split in a grin. “Damn, Emma,” she said. “You are one vicious little minx.”

“Don’t I know it. We’d better hustle. Maddie, you’ll stand at one end of the hall, just around the corner, and be lookout...”

Minutes later, they were in the hallway in question. Taylor’s locker was in a short dead-end hallway off to one side. There were no classroom doors in that hall, and none in the main hall that looked in on it. It was the perfect blind spot-- the main reason the three of them had gotten away with so many things they’d pulled on Taylor already.

Madison took up her lookout position just around the corner. Emma however stayed by Sophia’s side. Emma wasn’t on the lookout for teachers; she was busy watching Madison in one of the curved security mirrors at the end of the hall, making sure Maddie didn’t get it in her head to peek at an inopportune moment. It was a good thing Maddie wasn’t particularly bright. “Okay, Soph, she’s totally focused on the classroom doors,” she said. “Go ahead and do your thing.”

Sophia stepped up to Taylor’s locker, a smug smile on her face. “You said the flute, right? In the top compartment?” She said.

“Yeah, it was her Mom’s. She’ll be devastated.”

“Got it.” Sophia grabbed the lock. Her hand suddenly went smokey and transparent, like a shadow given form… the lock along with it. She yanked it off, dropping it to the floor. She opened up the door--

“BIMBO DETECTED! BIMBO DETECTED! THIEVING SKANK ON THE PREMISES!”

The locker lit up from within with a strobing red light and a klaxon, piercingly keen and loud enough to wake the dead, began blaring. Over top of the klaxon the voice continued shouting.

“CRIMINAL TRESSPASS! ATTEMPTED BURGLARY! BREAKING AND ENTERING! HALT WHERE YOU ARE CRIMINAL SCUM!”

Sophia yelled and tumbled backward, slapping her hands over her ears. “The HELL?” she screeched. It was some sort of damned toy-- a robot or something with a police light for a head. It was strobing the hallway with fire-engine lights and blasting out siren noises fit to wake the dead.

Madison hadn’t come running yet, she’d apparently been startled into confusion by the noise and the flashing red lights illuminating the hallway. Emma could see her in the mirror, spinning in a circle in panic. Emma mimicked Sophia, covering her own ears against the deafening noise. “Turn it off, turn it off!” Impulsively, Sophia reached in and grabbed for the toy planning to smash whatever-it-was with her bare fist, if she had to.

This might have gone badly for Obie. It went decidedly worse for Sophia. While Obie was built from Azeroth blueprints, the Agent’s gifts had made Adrian a gifted enough engineer to make certain improvements. The first of course being Obie’s rather attention getting voice. The second being a
much more potent power supply.

The third being the tasers implanted in Obie’s stumpy metal hands.

There was a flash of blue-white light and a sound like a tesla coil sparking, and Sophia Hess went flying across the hallway to smack into the lockers there with a bang and fall in a heap to the floor. She was shaking and jittering, and the rubber bands binding her hair braids had come undone, giving her the start of a rather impressive Afro. “Sophia!” Emma cried. She ran to the undercover cape’s side, panicking.

She looked around. She could hear doorways opening and people pouring out in the main hallway, teachers and students alike. Maddie, thank Scion, was still there running interference-- crying and yelling and freaking out and taking up everybody’s attention. The janitor’s closet-- it was open! She grabbed Sophia under the armpits and dragged her to the closet door. She pulled her inside and shut them both inside a split second before everyone began pouring around the corner to see what in hell all the noise was about.

Mr. Gladly was at the head of the pack. He stood there and stared at the sight: a wide open locker with what looked and sounded like a fire engine going berserk inside. “What in the world…?” he mouthed. Then somebody panicked-- or more likely took advantage of an opportunity-- and pulled the fire alarm. The mob of curious teenagers suddenly turned into a torrent as they began pouring for the exits, sweeping up the bewildered teachers and staff in their path.

A moment later Adrian and Taylor both, for similar but distinct reasons of their own, squeezed out of the herd and came running around the corner. Both stopped and stared for a moment at the tableau. “All clear, all clear!” Taylor shouted. Obie fell silent; the fire alarms unfortunately continued.

The toe of Taylor’s sneaker caught on something. She looked down and picked it up; it was her combination lock, still closed. “What…?”

Adrian sized the situation up. “Rrrright,” he said. He grabbed Obie and stuffed him in his sack. “I think we’re both taking an early day. I’ve got my stuff, you grab yours…”

Taylor nodded; as the saying went, her Momma didn’t raise no fool. She grabbed her flute case and her books, pocketed the lock, and followed Adrian as they hastily-- but in a quiet and orderly fashion, of course-- blended into the yelling mob of students flowing out into the street.

Eventually the fire alarm stopped, although the danger lights in the hallway kept flashing. The broom closet door rattled. “Ah @#$^!!!” Emma’s muffled voice said. “The door must’ve locked when we-- Soph, wake up, you gotta get us out of here. Sophia!”

“Nuh mummy, I duh wanna enter the junior beauty pageant….”

Emma groaned in disgust.

Then the sprinkler system-- including the heavy duty sprinklers in the Janitor’s closet-- kicked in.

“AAAHAHAHAHG!!”
The first week eased on by. Adrian got used to the drag of the daily grind of high school. Each day he went in, put in his six hours, then booked his way down to the Boardwalk, his little vending license in his hot sweaty hand, and set up his little push cart, selling trinkets and toys cribbed from Azeroth… paper zeppelins, little clockwork bugs, comical toy tanks that shot ping pong balls, Creeepy Crates, widgets that sparkled and spun and went PING and did absolutely nothing… the Sunshine Butterflies sold quite well. When night fell and the streets rolled up, he closed up his cart and trundled it on home-- then beelined to his workshop, where he put in an hour or two assembling gadgets of more serious use. Then to bed, up at six, lather, rinse, repeat.

Things were going well with Taylor as well. Considering all the hurt she’d been put through and the betrayal she’d suffered, he’d feared he would have to spend far too much time earning her trust. Apparently fleeing the authorities after triggering a building wide panic with the strobing, klaxon-voiced evidence in tow was a bonding moment, because she warmed to him rapidly. Already they were, if not fast friends, then at least kindred spirits and fellows-in-arms.

And according to Taylor, she hadn’t been bothered by anything more than a few hostile glares since then. The Threesome were currently laying low, it seemed. He would wager a guess that he was an unknown commodity. The usual routine with anyone attempting to befriend Taylor in the past was that they quickly knuckled under, or were such social dregs (like Greg Veder) that chasing them off wasn’t worth the bother.

Greg Veder. That was someone else he’d like to help, if he could. He’d have to think about that.

Either way, Adrian was outside their usual paradigm. Taylor figured they were regrouping, deciding how to attack next. Adrian figured they might be waiting until their hearing came back. Sophia was still sort of twitchy, days later…

Friday afternoon came and went. The tools were tucked away, the various trinkets and gadgets he was working on shut down and tucked away on their shelves. He lay back in his bed in the rafters of his Lost Workshop and snoozed away the waning day. At midnight though his alarm went off, a gentle chime from a domed clock he’d found during his yard sale frenzy. He woke up, stared at the roof a few inches from his nose, and smiled. His fangs gleamed in the dark. “Time to start cleaning up the neighborhood,” he said to himself, and chuckled.

Bayleaf’s lair wasn’t just in a poor and crime ridden neighborhood. It was located in the heart of the territory of the Archer’s Bridge Merchants. To anyone else with any mind for real estate, this would have been a calamity. To Bayleaf, it was a bonus.

The Archer’s Bridge Merchants were dealers and junkies. Their rank and file were junkies. Their capes were junkies. Their leader and his woman were both junkies. They dealt… and used… every known substance, licit and illicit, known to man, and quite a few more known only to metahumans. Oh, they dipped their rancid toes in everything else too: prostitution, protection, armed robbery, and the like. But it always came back to drugs. Most of them spent the majority of their day wasted, and what little was left either jonesing for their next hit or robbing someone to pay for it.

The utter bafflement was how in the name of all things holy that they functioned at all. Before coming to Brockton Bay, Bayleaf would have sworn that a group-- noone could call it an “organization”-- like the Merchants was simply functionally impossible. Back on the old home Earth,
there were drug lords and barons and gangs of dealers of course, but one of the cardinal rules of those organizations was that if you were in charge, you didn’t sample the merchandise. Pickling your own brain on a regular basis was a shortcut to your empire crumbling around you, that or one of your more temperate lieutenants putting a bullet in the back of your head and taking over the show. These guys on the other hand were running the candy store with both hands in the bins; they should have imploded long before now if for no other reason than that they swallowed, smoked, snorted or injected all the stock.

And yet, despite all this, they not only managed to stay in business, they managed to hold territory against three other gangs, and thwart the Protectorate as well, and still make enough money to keep Skidmark, Squealer and their lieutenants bombed out of their freaking minds.

Which led Bayleaf to one conclusion: Despite all appearances, Skidmark and Squealer were not the ones calling the shots. Someone-- someone with a still-functioning brain with all its original chemicals intact-- was running things, and they were just along for the ride. It would be interesting finding out who.

For now though, he was going to spend a few nights going after the low-hanging fruit. It was time to establish a presence.

Of all the skills downloaded to him, armor crafting had not been included. He could of course take hammer, tongs and anvil (or leather punch and knife, or cloth and thread) and handicraft something, but the Azerothian art of not only creating armor of cloth, leather, and metal but of infusing it on the anvil (or the rack, or the loom) with enhancing attributes was a complete enigma.

But he did have the skill of enchantment. And he could improvise.

The cloth given to Parian had yielded fruit. She had quickly figured out how to incorporate the arcane enhancements into other types of cloth-- (or rather, Bayleaf suspected, her SHARD had….) She had not only figured out how to make clothing that was self-resizing, but also how to make it stronger, tougher, more durable…

Bayleaf had been busy the past couple of weeks as well. His efforts at disenchantment had yielded a considerable amount of dusts, essences, and shards-- primarily from items of particular age or sentimental value, he noticed, though he suspected some few were the idle trinkets of tinkers; his own scrapped projects had ended up recycled in the same fashion. As an experiment he had crafted several low level enchantments-- plus-ones to armor and the like-- and given them to Parian to experiment with. Within a matter of hours she had begun producing clothing with armor ratings and attribute enhancements he could feel for himself.

It was something of an open secret between them that he was a cape, but she never spoke of it. To be a rogue in Brockton Bay was to have a code of customer confidentiality to rival that of a parish priest. She kept her customers’ secrets, and they kept hers... adamantly. She was sitting on her clothier discoveries for now, but already she was grateful enough to offer him commissioned work for free. He asked, and discovered to his gratification that she actually DID work with leather from time to time…

He, ahem. didn’t ask.

Then he’d dug out the Enchanted Leather recipe, and things had really gotten interesting.

He hadn’t gone with any Azeroth designs for his costume. They looked, quite frankly, ridiculous, and the pauldrons would have broken his neck the first time he raised his hands over his head. (he suspected the real Azerothians used shoulder pads a bit more subtle.) Instead he and she (very well,
Mostly she) had crouched over a drawing board and worked out something original.

A hooded leather jerkin, so dark brown as to be almost black. Bracers of the same material, thick as bootleather. Fingerless gloves. Breeches with kneepads to match the ones at his elbows. A wide belt, with stout buckles. A long hooded cloak. And footwear that, to Parian’s consternation, were somewhere between boots and sandals, with bared toes. It was stitched with a repeating pattern, a Celtic knotwork. Parian had thought it fitting.

Everything was lined inside with soft, sheer cloth for comfort… a futuristic fabric invented by a tinker that fit like silk yet breathed and wicked away moisture like Gore Tex. It had integrated with the “new weaving technique” so perfectly it was alarming, Parian had told him.

The final addition sort of scared the heck out of him. It was a belt pouch of thick cloth, not much larger than a fanny pack, designed to hang at his hip. Yet it held something like ten times its volume., there was only one compartment, and it only held so much before “burping” and spilling out whatever you put in it, but there it was.

A first generation handy haversack. In just a week’s time. What would she be crafting in two?

He had thanked her profusely, taken the costume home, and set to adding his own improvements.

The cloak had been quickly upgraded into a Parachute Cloak. The design was improved, though; closer to a modern parasail than the crude four-corner thing the design normally had. Enchantments for added armor, fireproofing (he KNEW about Lung), and boosts to his “arcane” powers went everywhere he could fit them.

The haversack got loaded out with a variety of explosives (gnomes and goblins, whaddya gonna do?)- flash bombs, fireworks, and the like; several automated decoys; a pile of high-level first aid bandages (he had BEGGED Parian for the scraps), and his favorite invention thus far- a Gnomish Universal Remote.

One last item was added. He had been working on it from the moment he’d found his workshop: his staff. He he’d bought it at the flea market from a woodcrafter, a bit of extra scrap he’d had no use for. Bayleaf had taken it, whittled it down and smoothed it, carved maze-like grooves into its entire length, hardened it in the fire, then hammered silver melted with moonfire into the grooves. A gem, fused together from the odd crystals and metals he’d collected and probably unidentifiable by any earth-born gemologist, had been put into the fitting carved at one end. Then he’d slathered it with every bottled enchantment he’d had left on his shelves, whether they were intended for a weapon or not.

To his astonishment, they’d stuck. The moonsilver had glowed, then sunk into the wood and vanished. The gemstone had been covered, engulfed in a knot of wood. To all outward appearance it was now just a plain, slightly crooked, gnarled piece of fire hardened driftwood. Yet he could feel the countless enhancements in it whenever he picked it up.

He didn’t know what had driven him to do something so recklessly wasteful, or even just plain reckless. But he had been driven, motivated by some muse. He’d taken notes, or at least tried to, as he proceeded… perhaps someday he’d make sense of them. All he knew now was that it was stout, it fit in his hands perfectly whether human or worgen, it also fit neatly in his haversack without trying, and he could whack it with all his strength across one of his anvils and it didn’t even crack.

He donned his costume piece by piece, almost reverently. When he’d dropped the last item-- his staff-- into his haversack and buckled it shut, he looked in the cracked mirror leaning against the wall. Man. He looked good.
“Showtime,” he said, his teeth gleaming.

There was a whirr-whirr-whirr, and Obie came trotting across the workfloor, his rotating strobe faintly glowing. Bayleaf patted him on the bubblegum machine. “Keep an eye on the place while I’m gone, Obie,” he said. Obie saluted.

A moment later a trapdoor opened on the rooftop of his workshop, and he leapt out. He raced out across the rooftop on all fours and disappeared into the night, looking for the one thing that Brockton Bay provided in surfeit:

Trouble.

“So,” Emily Piggot said, her hands folded across her desk, her expression (as always) sour. “Do you have ANYTHING to report on the unidentified cape that literally dropped out of the sky on us a little over a month ago?” She turned the screen on her desk around so that Armymaster could see it. “Besides this, I mean.”

Onscreen was a photograph, one that had become famous online and notorious around the Protectorate and PRT offices. It showed a rather interesting double selfie. On one side, his nose almost to the lens, was an enormous wolf-man, his eyes bugged out mouth hanging open and his tongue dangling out of the side of his mouth in a goofy canine grin. Next to him in a near headlock was Armymaster. What wasn’t half-wrapped in the werewolf’s arm was half-wrapped in woody vines. Armymaster himself was looking as utterly displeased with the situation as a human being possibly could. His goatee practically radiated anger. “I like the caption on this one,” Piggot said idly. “Hello. I M WulfMan. I hav just met yu and I luv yu.”

Assault let out a muffled snort, then a grunt as his wife Battery elbowed him. “Nothing to report on our side,” she said matter-of-factly. “Of course most of our patrols have been out near Captain’s Hill. Most of the sightings have been in the Docks or the Trainyard.”

“Any eyewitnesses?” Piggot said, not turning a single hair.

“A few,” Miss Militia said. “Most of the sources, though, are rather…”

“Pickled?” Assault ventured. "Ow!” He rubbed the back of his head where Battery had cuffed him.

Piggot refrained from rolling her eyes at Assault and Battery’s antics. Anyone who hadn't guessed those two were married in their secret identities would figure it out after watching them interact for five minutes. "I assume you mean drugged," she said.

“I would have gone with ‘embalmed,’”Miss Militia said dryly. She was idly flipping a glowing green butterfly knife in one hand while she talked. “This wolf-man seems to be concentrating his vigilant efforts in Merchant territory, picking off the drug dealers, pimps and other charming underlings Skidmark attracts. He’s also stopped a number of small time robberies and several assaults… but consequently the eyewitnesses are… less than reliable.”
“Need I point out that we have a speedster in the room?” Piggot said, annoyed. “You may not be able to affect him while at full speed, Velocity, but you could still cover the entirety of the Docks in a handful of minutes. Surely you could have spotted him.”

“Not necessarily,” Armsmaster said. “As I said in my report, the cape in question assumed a secondary form that promptly turned invisible-- or so close that I couldn’t tell the difference.”

“Couldn’t you spot him on infrared?” Velocity said, surprised.

“Infrared is still LIGHT, Velocity,” Armsmaster said, his lips pressed thin. “Whatever cloaking method or device he’s using is very effective.” He hesitated. “Either that or he is able to cool himself down to ambient temperature at will… hm.” His eyes unfocused and flickered in the manner that indicated he was taking down notes on his HUD.

“Still…” Piggot said.

“It doesn’t seem to matter,” Miss Militia said. “Somehow, when we’re still blocks away he knows we’re coming. According to the few… ah… chemically non-enhanced eyewitnesses we’ve found, he’ll suddenly bolt for the rooftops or the shadows without warning, just a minute or so before we or the police arrive on the scene.”

“So he somehow knows when we’re coming?”

“That would be indicated, yes.”

“Lovely.” Piggot’s expression was anything but.

“The longest he’s spoken to anyone was one incident last night…”

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Clara sprawled on the ground in the trash-strewn alley where the mugger had thrown her. She scrambled backward on her hands and heels, trying to keep her distance from him and from the knife gleaming in his hand. He was raggedy, dressed in clothes that reeked in only the way that could come from someone who never bothered or cared to clean themselves, and his eyes were glazed. “C’mon,” he said, all too confident of how this would go. “There’s nothing in that purse worth dying for.”

A shadow-- an enormous one-- seemed to detach itself from the wall behind him. Glowing red eyes looked down on him. “Funny,” it growled in a voice as deep as a well. “That’s what she ought to be saying to you.”

The mugger whipped around, knife out. Before he could even move a clawed hand the size of a small shovel whipped out and wrapped around his head. He was lifted off the ground, his screaming muffled by the palm covering his face. He kicked helplessly at the air and lashed out, stabbing blindly one, two, three times-- the other hand appeared and grabbed the mugger’s knife hand. There was a crack. The muffled screaming went up an octave, and the monster threw the broken knife away---
“So, some level of invulnerability?”

“Or just body armor.”

“True. Continue.”

The mugger-turned-prey clawed at the monster’s arm with his good hand, to no avail. “All the suffering in this world,” the monster said, his voice as much sorrowful as it was angry, “And you have to add to it. For what? For nothing but a few minute’s poison.” He turned and marched further up the alley. There was a muffled THUMP, and the mugger’s screams ceased. This was followed by a loud squelching crunch— and the monster returned; behind him the unlucky mugger was crammed, headfirst, into a can full of trash. He was alive, or at least still moving feebly.

“Head first in the trash, huh?” Assault was clearly amused.

“It… seems to be his trademark,” Armsmaster admitted reluctantly. “He doesn’t just beat up and secure his prisoners; it seems he has to humiliate them in some fashion as well.”

“I could like this guy,” Assault said.

Clara was scared stiff; too scared to move or even breathe too loud. The monster came closer; in the dim light she saw that he was an enormous wolf-man, dressed in a leather cloak and wielding a wooden staff. He was seven, eight feet tall if he was an inch, and his eyes glowed in the moonlight.

He knelt down and reached for her. She shrieked and cringed. He pulled back. “I’m not going to hurt you, I promise,” he said. “You’re hurt. Let me help.” He reached out again. This time she held still. He pulled out a patch of cloth and wiped at the cut and bruise on her face. It was cool and tingled as he wiped it across her skin. It stuck in place, covering the wound. “There, that should help.” He took her hands, carefully brushing the gravel out of the cuts, and wrapped them in more soothing cloth.

“Do you have a phone?”

“I-I yes, I do.”
“Call the police,” he said. His eyes seemed to squint in amusement. “And next time you go out, carry something a little higher caliber than speed dial.”

“So now he’s encouraging people to arm themselves,” Armsmaster said, in obvious disapproval. "Just what this city needs. A bunch of frightened women running around with firearms."

There was a loud SCHICK-CHACK. Miss Militia’s infinite weapon had changed from a butterfly knife to a pump action shotgun. “Gun control,” she said sourly, “is the proposition that a 98 pound woman should have to fight off a 200 pound rapist with her bare hands.”

Assault leaned over to Battery. “Awk-wrrrrrd,” he sing-songed sotto voce.

Piggot growled. “Table that. Back to the point.”

“Thank.. thank y--" But before Clara could finish saying it, the wolfman’s ears pricked up. Without a word he leapt… clear to the rooftop… and vanished.

Mere seconds later, the familiar thrumm of Miss Militia’s motorcycle echoed down the alleyway. She stopped with a jerk at the mouth of the alley and shone a spotlight down on Clara, making her squint. “What happened here, Ma’am?” She said over the engine roar.

“That incident is typical of all verified encounters with him,” Armsmaster concluded. “He drops out of nowhere, stops the perpetrator cold-- generally leaving him in a humiliating position-- dresses the wounds of the victim, and then vanishes moments before the authorities arrive. Sometimes he strikes so quickly that the eyewitness never actually sees him. There’s just a blur and suddenly the perp is down.” His beard bristled in irritation. “At least those are the cases we know he was involved in…”

Piggot raised an eyebrow. It was the most she’d moved since the start of the meeting. “Pardon?”

“There have been other incidents,” Velocity said. “Odd enough that we think he may be involved. Such as a pack of drug dealers we found, tied to a lamp post, surrounded by ruined baggies of their ‘product’ and in hysterics. They were all high as kites, but they gave the arresting officers what the officers THOUGHT was a cock-and-bull story about being attacked by an invisible tiger.”

“An invisible tiger...” Piggot said.

“Yes, they said they couldn’t see it, but they could hear it, and see its paw prints on the ground…
they were apparently doing some buying and selling out of an old storage facility when this thing attacked them. Smacked them around, scattered their product all over the place, shredded the tires on their car so they couldn’t get away-- Any of them pulled a gun or knife, a huge invisible paw would slap it out of their hands.

“It played cat and mouse with them for about an hour, chasing them up and down that old storage yard. Every now and then they’d think they lost it, then it would roar right in their ear… it finally threw a phone at their feet and said one word: “Call.” They couldn’t dial 911 fast enough. Then they say there was this gigantic flash of blue-white light, and when they woke up they were all tied to the lamppost with their merchandise spread out all over the place around them.”

“Vicious sense of humor, too,” Assault noted.

“Well that matches Armsmaster’s report of him turning into some sort of invisible creature,” Battery said. “This guy’s an interesting grab bag.”

“His avian form is accounted for too,” Velocity said. “Some perv tried to kidnap a little girl over on the boardwalk. He didn’t make fifty feet with her tucked under his arm before a giant owl dropped out of the sky--”

“A giant OWL?” Piggot’s eyebrows both raised at that one.

“A giant bleepin’ owl,” Velocity said. “It falcon punched the guy and knocked him out.”

“I feel like an excuse for plot exposition, but… “falcon punched?” Battery asked.

“Some birds kill their prey by literally punching them,” Assault told his wife. “They dive down at a hundred miles per, with their feet clenched up in fists like this--” he held his fists out in front of him. “When they hit, WHAM.” Everyone paused. “Hey, I watch Animal Planet, okay?”

“Eyewitnesses say the guy flipped completely over in the air before hitting the ground,” Velocity said. “He’s in the hospital with some nasty skull fractures and one hell of a case of whiplash.”

Assault started chuckling. “I really hope this is all one guy, because he gets better with every story,” he said.

“Please don’t tell me there’s more,” Piggot said.

“Please tell me there is!” Assault said.

It was another street, another mouth of another alley, and another mugging. This time it was a young couple on their way home from a movie. This time the mugger had a gun. “Wallet, watch, jewelry, phone. Come on!”

Bayleaf was on the rooftop. He had accidentally stumbled into a clothesline someone had stretched there, and was untangling himself from a beach blanket they had forgotten to take in. He looked over the edge of the roof, saw the mugging taking place, and had a terrible, awful, wonderful idea…

The young man hastily removed his watch and dug out his wallet. The guy snatched them from his
hands with nervous fingers. “Now you too, sister--”

It was then the alley rang with a mighty battle cry.

“BJORRRRRRK!!”

The mugger spun about, gun at the ready, but he wasn’t fast enough. He was flattened to the pavement by an enormous wall of blubber as a walrus, wearing a beach towel tied around its neck like a cape, lunged out of the alley and bore him to the ground.

The two lovebirds could only gawk in astonishment the one ton aquatic mammal reared up and “orrerked” in triumph. They could see the mugger’s head, arms, and feet sticking out from underneath their bizarre rescuer.

The mugger arggghled and tried to reach for his gun where it had fallen to the sidewalk. Bad mistake. The walrus saw him trying to reach the weapon and proceeded to bounce up and down on top of him.

“HuaghHuaghHuaghHuagh!”

The walrus barked, gave one last bounce, and slapped the gun away from the mugger’s limp hand with a flipper.

The couple stared.

The walrus stared back. It nudged one of the cellphones lying on the sidewalk in their direction. “Wha, what, who do we call??” The young man stammered, his common sense derailed.

“Call nine-one-one,” the mugger groaned flatly.

“Right right, we need the police,” the young man said, jabbing at the buttons.

“We need an ambulance,” the mugger moaned.

“Are you… some sort of hero?” The girl asked the walrus. By way of reply the walrus reared up, showing the “W” smeared on its chest in white paint.

Sirens started to draw close. The walrus turned and began belly-walking back into the alley. “Thank you...” the girl called out. It looked back, gave her a salute with one flipper, and belly-walked out of sight.

Moments later a squad car, lights going, pulled up to the alley. Back up on the rooftop, Bayleaf lay on his back, rocking back and forth and biting his own arm to keep from howling with laughter.

The footage on Piggot’s computer monitor, taken from the security cameras of the corner convenience store across the street, reached its end. Everyone in the meeting room watched Assault warily. He was rocking back and forth, face red as his costume. There was, everyone privately calculated, a good chance he would explode.

“There were further sightings,” Armsmaster went on, as if in pain. “A walrus saved a drowning man out in the bay. And a couple of smugglers in a fishing smack were boarded and routed by an angry
walrus in a cape.” He grimaced; the next words came out like he was passing a kidney stone. “He’s already become something of a local meme in the neighborhood; people in the Docks have begun referring to him-- it-- as Wonder Walrus--”

“WONDER WALRUS!!!!” Assault shrieked, toppling over backwards out of his chair. He rolled on the floor, howling and clutching his ribs.

Battery watched him and sighed. “He’ll need a minute,” she said.

Piggot slowly massaged her temples. “Good, because I’LL need a minute,” she said.

Later… MUCH later… after Assault had calmed down enough, they resumed. “So we’ve determined he’s a shapeshifter with at least four forms,” Piggot said. “A wolf-man or beast-man form, an aerial form, that of an owl, a stealth form, of an invisible great cat of some sort, and…. An aquatic form… of a walrus. Shut up, Assault.”

Assault let out a smothered giggle.

“We have one other possible,” Triumph said, speaking up for the first time. “Though… well, I’d include it only because it’s so strange.” His mouth curled up at the corner. “And strange seems to be this guy’s thing.”

Piggot sighed. “Continue.”

“It came in from Panacea, of all people…”

Amy Dallon, the legendary Panacea, slumped and groaned in relief as the door closed behind her. A moment’s privacy, finally. Some days it was just more than she could take, working hour after hour in the hospital, healing the same blasted problems over and over…

Thank whoever was responsible for this space. It was an enclosed courtyard in the middle of the building. Few people used it, especially this late in the fall, and there were few windows looking down on it. She’d taken to sneaking out here to sneak a smoke where nobody would bother, or worse, lecture her about it.

It was a shame noone else came out here though. It was a pretty little garden courtyard. Especially now with the flowers blooming and the green in the trees…

She stopped with the cigarette in her lips, lighter halfway to the tip, and reviewed that thought. Flowers. And green leaves. In early fall.

She looked around carefully. What was going on? For one thing, she did NOT remember that tree standing over there. And this pale, foxfire-green glow over everything. At first she thought it was just the light filtering down through the branches of the tree. Then she realized the light was coming FROM the branches of the tree.

Curiosity overcame common sense. She approached, stealthy as a cat, to see what was going on. Just as she was within arm’s reach, the “tree” lowered its head, looked at her and slowly smiled…
Piggot facepalmed. “A TREE?”

“A tree.”

She realized what she was seeing now. The part she had mistaken for a stump of a bough was actually a long-jawed head, with a craggy face like an old man and glowing green eyes. The two largest boughs were upraised arms. It lowered them. Then it reached out with one leafy hand and plucked the cigarette from where it dangled, forgotten and unlit, from her lower lip. The treant-- there was no other word for it-- flicked the cigarette over its shoulder and slowly shook a finger at her. “Baaaaad…. Forrrr …. Youuuuu.” It said, smiling at her gently.

Flummoxed beyond words, she fell back on her old standby: snark. “Oh fine, great,” she said, “now the trees are lecturing me on my personal habits. Look, whatever you are, that’s my business and not- - ugh. Huuk. HACCK!” While she had been speaking the Treant had laid one hand on her back. There was a strange second glow. The next thing she knew, a violent coughing fit hit her. She doubled over and a wad of phlegm and tar the size of the palm of her hand hit the path between her feet.

She breathed. She breathed again, deeper. Oh wow, that felt so much better.“Oh, yuck. That was in my lungs?” No wonder she’d felt so out of breath. She blinked. “Did you do that?”

The Treant winked at her.

Amy bridled. “All right, buster. What are you doing here??” She demanded.

“Giiiiift… of… Eluuuune.” The Treant raised its arms and looked at the sky. The foxfire glow grew brighter. And brighter.

Panacea suddenly realized something: she felt good. No, really good. Better than she had in days. Her exhaustion was gone, dozens of little aches and pains she’d had in her back, her feet, her legs, all became apparent by their absence. She checked her hand; the scratches she’d gotten from her neighbor’s pet cat the other day were gone completely. Was this what it felt like to be healed? No wonder so many people wanted a touch from her power so badly. She found herself doing something she rarely did; she smiled.

There was a commotion at one of the windows. A little girl was there, in a hospital gown, bouncing up and down waving excitedly.

Amy gawked like a fool. Wasn’t that the little girl on the third floor? The one who had an aneurysm and was in a coma??
“Holy crap,” Velocity said.

“Got that right.” Assault agreed.

“They did a quick survey and eval of everyone at the hospital,” Triumph went on. “There were no real "miracle cures--" noone grew back a lost limb, and most cancers were only diminished, not cured. But scars, burns and other wounds were healed, broken bones mended, infections vanished, poisoning cases cleared up instantly… everyone, staff included, experienced at least some uptick on their physical health.

"But an aneurysm?"

"Just a broken vein or artery in the brain," Assault said. "A tiny little wound. Which is what makes them so tragic."

“Did anyone attempt to capture, or at least speak to him?” Armsmaster asked.

Triumph shook his head. “After all the staff, and Panacea, were through running around figuring out what was up with their patients, they found out the Treant had disappeared. The closest thing we have to an eyewitness is a little girl who said 'the Magic Tree turned into a big bird and flew away.'”

“Which ties him back to our strange visitor from the sky,” Piggot concluded. “Okay, this cape has become priority one. He’s a brute, a changer with who knows how many forms, a stranger with invisibility that fools even infrared cameras, – his healing abilities alone make him absolutely priceless to the Protectorate. We can’t have him getting snatched up by some gang or supervillain team or worse. Recruit him. Offer him whatever it takes. Find him and get him on the team!”

Amy sat up in bed, staring at what lay in her palm by the light of her alarm clock face. She hadn’t told anyone about it; it seemed too important. Shortly before the Treant had flown off, while everyone in the hospital was running around like chickens with their heads cut off, she had gone back out to the little enclosed park to confront him, to try to speak to him.

Before she could say a word, he had taken her hands in his and pressed something into her palm. "Do… Sooomething…Newwww," he’d said. Then he winked again, and vanished in a flash of blue white light. The last she’d seen of him-- though she didn’t know it till later-- was an enormous owl, flying up into the sky.

She had sat up, examining the acorn with her power. To her relief, as well as her disappointment, it was just what it appeared: an ordinary acorn from an ordinary oak tree somewhere. For a while there she’d thought she’d been asked to raise the Treant’s offspring.

But that wasn’t what the treant had said. It had said for her to do something she had been terrified to do since she was a little girl.. to use her powers to do more than just heal. To try something new.

Wouldn’t that be something. She had so many ideas. So many she’d been so afraid to even THINK of. Her power seemed to leap about like a puppy at the very idea. Eager to try.
She looked at the acorn.

Could she? Did she dare?

Carefully, slowly, she opened her power into the acorn. It began to glow…
Chapter 6

It wasn’t long before the Goldfish Poop Girls turned up the heat on their social-fu.

Phase two came with indirect attacks. Apparently they’d been dropping bugs in people’s ears about the new kid. What they said was irrelevant; it changed from person to person, and all depended on what would get them the most agitated. Some, they dropped hints that he was aspiring e88. Others they played the ‘save the princess’ angle; flirting with various guys and then dropping a pouty lip about this mean ol’ new guy who was making things rough for them, and how they’d be ever so grateful (pop the top button on their shirt, tug their tube top down just so) to anyone who dealt with them…

Sophia, of course, would sooner deep throat a dead rat than resort to those tactics. Her poison pen of preference was to drop hints within earshot of the more excitable e88 members about his possible sexual preferences. Or to hint to the junkies that he was a narc; after all he was certainly tall and broad shouldered enough to pass for an undercover cop. Or tell the other black students how often he used the word “nigger” when he talked to her (one thing dear old Wildbow never mentioned was that while the e88 was the largest WHITE race gang in the city, and the ABB took up the ASIAN gangsters, there were more than enough BLACK gangbangers running around Brockton Bay… and Winslow… to at least put in a showing. In retrospect it made sense really; you could hardly make hay as a white supremacist group without a black gang or two floating around for you to point at and pitch a fit about.)

The first hint came at lunch on a Tuesday. Taylor had called in sick, so Adrian was sitting alone at their table, digging his way through a calzone (he’d learned his lesson after day one and always packed a lunch) when a skinny kid with a leather jacket and a spiky faux-hawk slid into the seat across from him. “Hey.”

Adrian looked him over. Even with a quick glance he could see a few signs of what gang the kid ran with; a couple of ambiguously aryan symbols on his jacket; a crude homemade tattoo of the SS symbol on the back of his middle finger. “Can I help you?” he asked coolly.

“Peaceful overture,” Adrian repeated.

“Yeah. Some of the guys I hang with--” He looked around furtively and shook his arm; a bracelet with the symbol of the E88 slid down out of his jacket sleeve. “We were impressed with how you put that uppity Sophia ni--- uh, girl in her place.” He stuffed the bracelet back up his sleeve out of sight. “She’s been a pain since the day she walked in the doors here. Some of the guys tried to teach her some manners, but they didn’t stick, so to speak.”

“You got handsy with her and she beat your backsides like a drum set,” Adrian corrected, taking a bite of calzone. “Hint for the future,” he said with a mouthful of food, “Don’t try to manhandle a chick with commando training.”

“Commando training?” the faux hawk kid said, his eyes going wide.

Adrian realized his mistake and bluffed. “Calluses on her hands, arms and legs,” he said blithely. “From pummeling the crap out of training dummies, breaking bricks, that kind of thing. Let’s just say she’s gotten a little more than just some time on the mat at the Y.”
Faux Hawk swore under his breath, eyebrows raised. “Anyway... we saw how you handled her, and we figured you might be looking for a crew to hang with. We think you got what it takes to be one of us...” He stopped in mid sentence when he saw Adrian shaking his head, smirking. He scowled. “What, you think you’re too good for us?”

Adrian swallowed. “Nope, I just think we’d be really bad for each other.” At the kid’s surly yet puzzled expression he started counting off on his fingers. “Okay, one: I don’t really agree with all that race crap. More importantly, I’m a Memento survivor.” he pulled a metal tag on a chain out from under his shirt and held it up for the kid to see. It looked like a med-alert tag, but the symbols were entirely different. “I got permanent amnesia. Everything before about a year ago is more or less gone.”

“Wow. That sucks.”

“Yeah. But point is, I don’t even know what race I am. Hell, I think there’s a good chance I’m Jewish.”

Faux Hawk looked puzzled. “How would-- oh yeah, right. Nevermind,” he said, as Adrian rolled his eyes and pulled several very expressive faces. He snorted and actually grinned. “Yeah, that’d be bad. Year down the road I find out I created the world’s first Nazi Jew.” He and Adrian snickered a bit at that.

Adrian counted off one more finger. “And the real big reason? Because the E88 has got all the wrong explanations for your problems, and all the wrong solutions.”

“So you think us white people don’t have any legitimate grievances? Is that it?” Faux Hawk snorted. “You can’t be oppressed because you’re WHITE, right?”

“No, I think white people have all sorts of genuine, legitimate grievances,” Adrian said. “The fact that people can tell you that you can’t be suffering oppression because of your skin color is one of them! When I see people get turned down for jobs because they don’t have the right skin color, or they can’t get into a decent school while another kid gets a free ride for having black skin, or some white kid gets guilt-tripped for things that happened before his granddaddy was even born, or some black guy gets tried for murder and gets a slap on the wrist because someone, somewhere, who might have been involved with his arrest said the “N” word, yeah, that’s a load of crap. No, it’s injustice.

“But none of those things are caused because of them being black. Or being an “inferior race.” You raise someone in a lousy environment, with a lousy bunch of values, you’ll get lousy results, no matter what color they are.” The kid’s face was getting stormy, so he switched tactics.

He picked up the plastic fork that came with his lunch and toyed with it. “Tell me, you ever heard of an old scam called ‘let’s you and him fight?’” Faux Hawk shook his head. “Well you can figure it out just by the name. Some guy gets two people mad at each other. Fighting mad. Then when they get together and start throwing fists, he’s there arranging things so that no matter who wins and who loses, he gets the benefit-- say with a rigged gambling pool, or selling tickets to the fight… or just by getting two people he doesn’t like arrested for disturbing the peace.

“Now maybe you didn’t notice it, but while you’ve got people like Kaiser over here, inflaming things, telling you that all the problems in your world are the fault of blacks, they’ve got a-holes over on their side, telling them the same thing. Now ask yourself; who benefits the most from having both of you at each other’s throats?”

A light seemed to go on in the skinny neonazi’s eyes. He leaned in. “Of course,” he said. “The
Adrian’s head hit the table so hard it bounced. “Just… just go, kid,” he said, face planted in the tabletop.

Faux Hawk got up and shoved off. “You’re gonna be sorry you didn’t make some friends when you could,” he said… a halfhearted threat at best. He walked off in a slouch. “Just when he was starting to make sense…” he muttered.

Adrian groaned. His head hurt and it was only partly the fault of the table.

It was well after dark. Armwmaster was standing at the intersection of 4th and Main, overlooking the remnants of the latest gang fracas. Gangbangers were scattered about the street, most unconscious, some groaning and nursing their injuries. Most were bound up in coils of thick thorny vines. One in particular, however, was bound to a light pole by the remains of a metal anti-theft grille that had apparently been ripped off a nearby store window. It was a teenager, female, dressed in a full-body red and black suit and a gas mask of some sort. The scorch marks on the walls, pavement, and on a few of the gangsters made identifying her a certainty. “Spitfire,” Armwmaster said. He sent his hovercam drifting over to get some footage of her. “What was her stake in this?”

He pushed the bobbing globe of the cambot to one side. It was a distraction at times, but he’d come to the conclusion with all the Youtube footage making the rounds of the internet, he was going to have to up his PR game and get some facetime online of his own, to bolster his flagging numbers. Hopefully a few selfies— that’s what the kids called these live videos, right?— a few selfies of himself in action would increase his popularity.

One of the city cops standing by scratched his head. “From what we gathered, this was a turf fight between a couple of two-bit gangs,” he said. “One side or the other saved up their milk money and hired Spitfire to give them some extra muscle.”

“Faultline’s crew doesn’t normally take contracts anywhere in the city,” he said as the cambot panned around them for a better profile.

The cop shrugged. “So Spitfire didn’t tell her or it’s too penny-ante for her to care,” he said. “Anyway, the balloon had just gone up-- we arrived, saw Spitfire slingin’ that napalm spit of hers everywhere, and called you--”

“And we thank you for that timely response,” Armwmaster said, reading off his teleprompter.

“Er, yeah. But just as we did that new guy dropped into the middle of it. Skinwalker, I think you called him?”

“Yes, that is the name the PRT chose for his file,” Armwmaster said dryly.

The cop laughed. “Yeah, that guy’s best of the best,” he said. “Kickin’ tail and takin’ names. You gotta get him on the Protectorate; he could be even bigger than Dauntless!”

Armwmaster could feel his teeth grinding against each other at the mention of his biggest rival.
an effort of will he unclenched his jaw. “That is our objective,” he managed to say. “What did he do?”

“Well, Spitfire there was just about to roast a bunch of gangers. He just drops down out of the air, right in between ‘em, and tanks it--- fire splashing all over him, the boys and I thought for sure he was cooked. But the instant Spitfire runs out of breath he stands up, shakes the last of it off his cloak, and takes her and all the others out.”

“How?” Armsmaster demanded. The cambot zoomed in.

“When Spitfire’s winding up for another round of flame, he sort of waved his staff at her,” the cop said. “And this torrent of blue white light falls down out of the sky on them. WHOOM.” He mimed with his hands something falling out of the sky like the fist of an angry god. “Dunno what it was, it fritzed out the radios and the streetlights something fierce and knocked everyone it hit unconscious.

“There were a few left standing, so he spins around and points at each of them, and more light comes down-- only little short bursts, on each of them. Whoom. Whoom. Whoom. Whoom. Some of ‘em were bright yellow, though-- could feel the heat all the way back here. The EMTs think it sort of flash heated them from the inside out… gave them instant heat stroke, basically, knocked ‘em flat. The ones hit by the blue light, the EMTs dunno, but they say they’re acting like they stuck their tongues in a light socket.”

“And then?”

“And then once they were all down, he wrapped ‘em up in those vines,” the cop said, pointing. “Like they came shooting up out of the pavement. ‘Cept for Spitty there. He tore down that grille and wrapped her up in it. Probably figured she’d just burn off any vines he tied her with.”

It was at this point Kid Win came gliding over. The Ward had managed to pull a late night patrol with Armsmaster, and was doing his best to play helpful sidekick. He was holding the remains of one of the vines, now brown and brittle. “More like down into the pavement, sir,” he said, pointing. “Not very deep at all, actually. See the roots? All said there’s surprisingly little damage.”

“He still vandalized a huge section of street and sidewalk,” Armsmaster said pedantically.

The cop snorted. “Well I’ll take a buncha holes in the pavement over a buncha holes in people-- or in my men-- any day of the week,” he said emphatically. “Anyway, once everyone’s down and vined up, he bandages up the ones that are most hurt, gives everything the once-over, turns into a big hoot-owl and flies away. All in the five minutes it took you guys to get here.”

Armsmaster’s lips pursed at the implied rebuke. “Be sure and get samples of those bandages he used,” he said to Kid Win. Kid Win nodded. They’d already gotten earlier samples and given them to the techs, who were having absolute fits over their properties. Armsmaster fully intended to get some of these miracle bandages back to his own lab and figure out their secrets for himself first. He was getting tired of working his armored backside off only to have someone else steal a march on him.

“He does healing too?” The cop said. “You gotta get this guy on the team…”

Kid Win grinned. “That’s kinda the plan, yeah,” he said.

Armsmaster grunted. “Unfortunately he’s not cooperating with our efforts to contact him,” he said with the air of someone complaining about a disobedient house pet. “He apparently prefers to run rogue, rather than work with the proper authorities--- throwing everything into disorder and engaging
in juvenile pranks, upsetting the balance of-- WAH!” While he was speaking something dark and winged dove out of the night, sweeping by mere inches past his head and striking the back of his helmet in passing. The cambot tracked it; It was a giant horned owl, already swooping down the street.

“HALT!” Armsmaster yelled fruitlessly. “Stop in the name of the law!” He turned to Kid Win, his cameras stuttering and his helmet feeling oddly lopsided. Had that blasted rogue damaged his helmet? “Kid Win, quick, tail him, I’ll try to follow you on-- what? What??”

Kid Win was staring at him with an expression of barely contained hilarity on his face, as if he desperately wanted to laugh but was too afraid to. No, he was staring at the top of his head? Some of the cops were starting to laugh. “WHAT?”

For lack of a mirror, he turned to his cambot and pulled up the outgoing feed on his visor. Stuck on the top of his helmet by a suction cup was a pair of huge, fluffy, pink bunny rabbit ears.

The cambot was working perfectly: it had the ears in completely in frame with his outraged, helmeted face.

“SKINWALKERRR!”

In the distance, a faint “Hoo hoo hoo hoo” could be heard.

“Hey, Fag.”

Adrian turned around, his eyebrows raised. They’d just finished a really pointless round of dodgeball (dodgeball, for crying out loud. What was this, gradeschool?) in Gym. It had been seriously tiring--not because it was difficult, in fact the opposite: he’d expended an incredible amount of effort to not do too well, to actually let a bunch of teenagers who looked like they were moving in slow motion to him occasionally pummel him with volleyballs. He’d showered, and was trying to get dressed and on his way without incident. Apparently it was not to be.

One of the bigger Juniors, a bruiser on the football team with a shaved head and a swastika blatantly tattooed on his shoulder was standing behind him, towel around his waist and shower water beading on his shaved head. He had two other thugs still in their gym gear standing at his shoulders, doing their best to block everyone else’s view. “Yeah, I was talking to you, fag,” he said. “We found out what you are, fruit. Come on, deny it.”

Adrian stared at him in silence. He drew it out for several seconds, making it awkward. Then, just as they were starting to twitch and shuffle self-consciously, he spoke up. “What the hell is anyone supposed to say to that?” he said, his voice redolent in genuine disbelief, projecting his voice so everyone could hear. “There is literally no way to--” he hopped to his feet; the three trying to intimidate him backed up a step. It was easy to forget just how BIG the new guy actually was.

He addressed the room, arms thrown wide and his projecting his voice. "I mean seriously, am I wrong? What am I supposed to do to prove I’m NOT gay? Pull a cheerleader in here, hump her in
front of you--” he grunted and made some crude hip thrusting motions-- “Spike her into the floor like a football and yell ‘TOUCHDOWWWWN!’ ?” He planted a foot on the bench and pretended to shoot the horns to an imaginary stadium audience.

Several of the guys in the room snickered, but stifled it when the skinheads glared at them. Lacking any clever answer, Skinhead #1 opted for the standard tactical approach of the domestic cretin: ignoring everything and plowing onward. “Yeah, we know what you are,” he said. “We don’t like your kind around here.” His his smirk was now a full on snarl. “Think you’re so clever... running around with that little Hebert lezzo beside you for a fag hag--”

The new kid's face suddenly darkened. Deep inside Adrian’s chest the wolf rumbled. Those standing nearby heard that faint sound and suddenly looked nervous. Adrian pushed the wolf back down and looked the lead E88 in the eye with a deliberate poker face. “Fella, I may not be clever, but I ain’t the one who came into a locker room, took off his pants, and came over with two of his boyfriends to ask if the new guy was gay.”

“Ohhhhhhh!!!”

It took a moment for the words to work their way through the strata of bone in the goon’s head. When they hit pay dirt, he swelled up and lunged.

Even as they started moving Adrian was already in motion. He grabbed the towel around Skinhead’s waist and whipped it away. One twist of his wrist and he had a rat-tail in his hand. Before Skinhead even had time to yell and cover himself, Adrian snapped the end of the rat-tail right in his fruit and veg.

Skinhead went down, shrieking and clutching himself. Before his two buddies could react the towel whipped out again, striking each of them right in the septum, underneath their noses. They tumbled backward clutching at their bleeding faces.

“Cover that up,” he said in disgust, throwing the towel over Skinhead where he was curled up on the floor. He reached down to pick up his shoes.

Unfortunately for Adrian, he’d forgotten that there were more members of the E88 in the room. The gym coach came thundering into the room just as the rest of them dogpiled him.

Blackwell, predictably, gave him in-school suspension while the other students got off fairly light. Of course, in spite of Bayleaf holding back, several of them were sporting black eyes, broken noses, missing teeth, and other injuries that would keep them out of classes for a few days at least, but still, it was the principle of the thing that bugged him. The bruises and welts stung--- he could not heal them immediately without giving the whole game away-- but not quite as much as the mocking, triumphant looks from the Trio as he passed them in the hallway.

They were going to go after Taylor next, now that they thought he was out of the way. She’d have to go it alone for a few days, but that was unacceptable. He was going to have to smarten up.
school suspension, and had to spend a portion of the school day sitting in one teacher or another’s office serving it out. The cutting remarks behind her back had started up again once everyone saw she was on her own, and Sophia and the others had taken a few passing shots at her— elbows in the side, papers knocked to the floor, that sort of thing. But she could endure, at least for a couple of days.

When she came inside she was surprised to find her father sitting in the living room. Danny Hebert was sitting on the couch, holding a Smartphone of all things and laughing till tears streamed down his face.

“Dad?” Taylor said, dropping her book bag.

“Oh hey, Taylor,” he chuckled, wiping his eyes. “I got something to show you.”

“A new phone?” she asked.

He glanced down, seemed to realize what he was holding and glanced up again. “I—Yeah,” he said. He deflated a little. “A, uh, friend gave me two Smartphones, one for each of us. Even paid up for a full year, internet, the works. He was insistent...” he coughed. “Taylor, sit down.” Taylor sat down on the overstuffed chair by the couch. Danny looked at his daughter earnestly. “Taylor, I owe you an apology,” he said. “First off for being so distant all this time after your mother...” he hesitated. “After we lost her. I’ve been just going through the motions, and I haven’t been here for you.”

He flipped the phone over in his hand. “And, more specifically, I’m sorry about this,” he said, with wry amusement. “It was foolish of me to pin the blame for your mother’s death on a piece of technology, of all things. And as dangerous as this city can be, having one of these things on hand could save your life!

“I’m not going to let that sort of foolishness affect my decision making ever again. Or at least I’ll try not to... Here.” He handed her a slim case. She opened it, inside was a slim, glossy black rectangle. “Here, turn it on,” he said, demonstrating. The screen lit up.

“Wow,” Taylor said. “Is this friend of yours rich? These things must’ve cost a fortune!”

“You’re right about that,” Danny said wryly. “I’ve been reading the manual, this thing has more computing power than my desktop at work.” He pointed. “All those little icons are something called ‘apps...’”

“Phone, email, calculator...what the heck is angry birds...internet? Holy crap, this thing has a camera??”

“The lens is on the other side. You can take stills or videos. Even post them on that Youpage thing.”

“This is unbelievable!” She moved over to the couch and hugged him. “Thank you...”

“Hey, don’t thank me. Okay, thank me, I’m happy to steal the credit.” He chuckled. He watched her handle the phone like it was a faberge’ egg.

“What were you looking at earlier?” Taylor said suddenly.

Danny began chuckling again. “We had a cape incident at the Dockyards today,” he said. “Why I’m home early.”

“Oh my gosh!” Taylor’s hand flew to her mouth. “Was anyone hurt??”
“No, no,” Danny waved his hand, shaking his head. He got a little more serious. “But it was a nasty bit of work. Armsmaster showed up at the offices; the Protectorate had intercepted some radio transmission-- one of the incoming ships was hauling human cargo.” His face soured, he looked as if he wanted to spit. “Slave traders.”

“Oh my--”

“Yeah. Armsmaster was there to do the bust, along with a couple others. Velocity and a couple of Wards, Shadow Stalker I think.” He started chuckling again. “But before anyone could move in on the ship, one of the local rogues got on board first...”

Taylor felt herself grinning in glee. “Oh no. It wasn’t...”

Danny turned his phone around so she could see the screen too and hit “replay.” Armsmaster was onscreen, standing on the end of the dock in his best heroic pose and making grandiose gestures. “Kid Win, get around the other side but keep your distance, we’ll try to-- what the--”

There was a commotion on the ship. Screams and shouts in what sounded like Chinese, the pop pop of some small gunfire, and the bellowing of something large and upset. As Danny and Taylor watched, several Chinese sailors made an appearance, running for their lives from the angriest looking walrus Taylor had ever seen. It was wearing a red beach blanket tied around its neck and had a big “W” across its chest in some sort of paint. One by one it chased, pushed or in some cases scooped the slavers up on his nose like a beach ball and tossed them over the rail. There were dozens of resounding splashes as criminal thugs hit the water of the harbor.

“OH my--”

“Yes,” Danny said, chuckling so hard tears were forming in his eyes again. “Wonder Walrus saves the day again.”

“WONDER WALRUS?”

“That’s... what... they call him...” Danny choked.

Taylor and Danny watched as, over the course of fifteen minutes, the redoubtable walrus ran amuck on the ship, hunting from deck to deck, chasing down every last member of the crew and tossing them into the drink for the police and the Protectorate to fish out and tie up. Some of them had handguns and opened fire on him; that only seemed to make the walrus angrier. Those crewmembers got tossed a little further than the others.

Finally, after the last crewman was secured, the walrus disappeared belowdecks, and returned escorting a line of people, some men, but mostly young women, down the gangplank and to the shore. Many of the women sobbed in relief as they made it down to the dock; more than a few stopped to give the walrus grateful hugs.

Armsmaster was waiting at the foot of the gangplank to greet the walrus, clearly looking like he wished to be anywhere else. “The Protectorate thanks you for your help,” Armsmaster gritted out. “We couldn’t have done it without you...” he choked a little. “...Wonder... Walrus.”

“Somebody didn’t get the bu-ust,” Taylor singsonged.

Armsmaster glared at the walrus.

The walrus stared at Armsmaster.
Without warning the walrus lunged forward. It wrapped its flipper around behind Armsmaster’s head, pulled him in close, and planted a gigantic, whiskery walrus kiss on the Protectorate leader’s face.

Taylor shrieked and fell over on the couch laughing. On the tiny screen, Wonder Walrus could be seen giving the poleaxed Protectorate hero a pat on the head, turning and diving into the Bay.

Danny watched out of the corner of his eye as his little girl lay there clutching her sides and laughing herself sick…. And pondered things.

When the fracas on the Docks had died down (and Danny and the other dockworkers had recovered from their hysterics) Danny had gone back to his office to wrap things up for the day (even without the police running around, he didn’t think he, or anyone else, was going to get much work done today.) He’d found a gift-wrapped box sitting on his desk, sealed in a ziploc gallon bag still wet from the Bay.

Bemused, he’d opened it. Inside had been the phones, along with receipts showing they had airtime and internet paid up through the next year. Along with them had been a note.

Dear Mr. Hebert;

You do not know me. Maybe someday soon we will meet in person. Even if we do not, know that I am a friend.

I know about your tragic loss, and I send you all my deepest condolences. Losing a loved one is like having your heart ripped out, only to still feel it beating in pain in your chest. I know how you want to run from that pain, to hide from it deep inside yourself and never come back out. But I’m telling you now, for the sake of your daughter you cannot do that any more.

Taylor’s a good person. But right now she is being tormented, not just by her own loss but by three sadists at her school who have been bullying her with impunity, from the moment she entered high school. I will tell you no more beyond that: it is neither my place nor my duty to disclose that, or to persuade Taylor to reveal it. As her father that duty, I’m afraid, lies with you.

There is one thing you must remember: She has told you none of this not because she is “keeping secrets” or because she mistrusts you, but because she cares for you-- she’s seen how broken in spirit you are and it hurt her to think of adding to your pain.

She suffers in silence because she loves you. Never forget that.

There’s dark days ahead (but then again, aren’t they always?) and the two of you are going to have a lot of secrets to spill to each other. But you’re not going to go forward if you don’t trust each other first. Have faith in each other, and faith in God. You will see your way through.

And in that vein, Mr. Hebert, you cannot let your pain and loss be an excuse for handicapping yourself. The ability to communicate quickly to anyone, anywhere, is a gift of the modern age, and a vital tool for life or death situations. You cannot afford to wait to get to a pay phone in a crisis. Enclosed are two state-of-the-art smart phones and their chargers. All the bells and whistles, plus a few extras, and built as tough as a wrench. Give one to your daughter, keep them charged and keep them with you at all times, because they just might-- no, almost certainly will-- save your lives someday.

Good people are hard to find, and I’d hate to lose two of them. Take care of yourselves.
Sincerely,

A FRIEND

He’d never felt so conflicted about a gift. Part of him wanted to cry in gratitude. Part of him wanted to fling the thing out into the bay. But… he couldn’t argue with this “anonymous friend” about letting his grief control him. And if what he was saying about Taylor being bullied was true… he felt a flare of anger he quickly pressed down… then he wanted her to be in contact whenever, wherever, for her own safety.

And short of having her carry around a CB Radio in her backpack, well, this was it.

“Did you see Armsmaster’s face? Omigosh, play it again!”

He smiled. Definitely worth it.

...Halloween night...

Shadow Stalker cursed and swore as she leapt from one rooftop to the next. She was in a foul mood. Which was reasonable to expect, considering her personality, but for a change she had a reason. The tossspots at PRT had been talking up this new cape, Skinwalker. they had a real jones on to get their meathooks into him, and were pushing everyone, Protectorate and Ward alike, to bring this guy in. They had even started offering signup bonuses to anyone who persuaded the guy to sign on the dotted line. Extra privileges, all sorts of things. Bigger expense accounts for the Tinkers, you name it.

So naturally this dog-faced a-hole had been impossible to find.

So she’d been doing a maybe-not-quite registered patrol on Halloween Night… keeping the little kiddies safe, of course, she thought to herself with an eyeroll… when by sheer stupid chance she’d stumbled across Skinwalker. She couldn’t believe it. He’d been standing on some residential street, just-- handing out candy out of a pillowcase. No, not candy: trinkets. Plastic toys, miniature flashlights, glow-sticks, that sort of thing. The kids had eaten it up. The parents too, once they got over their freakout at a seven foot whatever tall werewolf handing out goodies to their kids. She’d watched him from the shadows for a while. He’d hung there for about a half hour or so then transformed into an owl and flown off, the goody bag in his talons, to set up shop five or six blocks away.

By blind luck she’d tagged the bag with a tracer dart as he swooped overhead. From then on she’d spent the night using the HUD in her mask to track him. It had been infuriating. She’d get close, within ten or fifteen feet… but only while she was intangible. The moment she went solid, no matter how well she’d hidden, no matter how quiet she was, his ears would prick up and he’d start peering about in her general direction. Was she slipping up? Getting sloppy?

No. Crap. He had some sort of danger sense, or something. That had to be the explanation--

Well, Sophia thought to herself as she peered over the edge of the rooftop at the trick-or-treaters in
the street below, she had all sorts of ways to persuade...

“Trick.” The voice, like Darth Vader without the wheezing rasp, was right behind her.

She whirled around, crossbow at the ready. He was standing no more than six feet behind her, holding something in one hand and smirking down at her. “I think you mean ‘Trick or Treat,’ “ she said-- even as she snapped off a shot on the word “or.” Most jokers got caught flatfooted by that trick; they weren’t expecting you to pop a shot a couple of words before you finished your witty repartee.

He wasn’t. He dodged the dart by the simple expedient of leaping over her, landing on the ledge behind her as nimbly as a cat. She whirled around--

SPLAT.

“Nah,” he said as she fished the banana cream pie out of the eyeholes in her mask. “Just ‘Trick.’” She heard the beating of wings; he was of course long gone by the time she could see again. Her tracking dart was jammed point first into the roof at her feet. She swore and sputtered. How the hell was anyone supposed to catch a guy who could literally sense...

Then it clicked. He’d somehow been able to sense where she was, except when she had been intangible.

She had an edge. Better yet, she realized, he had a “tell.” Any time she’d gone from one state to the next he’d started looking around for her. He couldn’t help it; it would be like hearing a gunshot or seeing a flash of light out of the corner of your eye and not responding. She’d bet her next week’s expense budget that he’d do that no matter the form he was in.

She almost cackled out loud. Screw the Unwritten Rules. She was going to track him down no matter what form he was in and--

Then she saw where the concrete ledge had been scratched up with the point of her tracking dart. The message he’d scratched in the stone made her freeze.

I HAVE YOUR SCENT NOW

The implication was clear. She could track him, get him to expose himself-- but he could track her, too. Her language smeared a sulphurous blue streak in the sky.

“Hey Taylor, long time no see. Sorry I haven’t… oh hey, new phone?” Adrian said.

Taylor looked up; she had been leaning against her locker, waiting for him, apparently. She had her new phone gripped in between her thumbs; probably playing one of the games he’d downloaded into the thing. “Oh hi Adrian, I’ve been waiting for you-- uh just a second.” She looked at the phone again. There was a twang and a squeal and the sound of blocks falling. “Die, piggies, die,” she said
under her breath. “Uh yeah, it’s a new phone,” she said, brushing her hair back, careful not to dislodge the glass butterfly perched there. “My Dad finally cracked, I guess. Or someone gifted them to him and made him crack...” she gave a nervous offhand laugh.

He looked at it and whistled. “Wow. That looks… major league expensive,” he said.

“Yeah, time paid up for a full year, digital video camera, internet, email, the works,” she said. “Even these little cool games and...”

“Does it make phone calls?” he quipped. In his head he smirked to himself. She had no idea how many extra “works” that thing came with. Thanks to Parian, he’d gotten contact with a Tinker rogue who’d broken about a hundred FCC regulations and jailbroken the bejeezus out of the thing. It had only cost him about a half dozen AOBs (mark II) In trade. The guy was paranoid, and liked to back up his security backups. Plus he thought the little steampunk-looking robots were nifty.

Then Bayleaf had opened the case and enchanted the inside with about a hundred protective Runes, case and components alike. That thing probably had an armor class somewhere around that of battleship plate. Adrian wondered how long it would be before they noticed that their phones never really quite ran out of power or air time...

“Har har. Yes. Which makes ME very happy. Now Dad and I can stay in touch, reach each other in case of emergencies. Which is very copacetic.” Her smile got a hitch in it. “Of course we both took blood oaths to never use the things while driving...”

“Wise,” he said. “Oh, gimme your number?” He pulled out his own phone; it was the same as hers--but didn’t show it, of course. It looked a bit battered, and had a cheap protective case. They both hunched over their phones and fiddled with the buttons, swapping their phone numbers and their email.


“Oh, its just me, doing something so stereotypically teen,” she said. “I’ve never actually had anyone to swap this stuff with, not since...” she stopped.

“Not since Emma, right?” Adrian said. Taylor shook her head. “Hey, they haven’t been giving you more crap, have they?”

Taylor sighed. “Just the usual,” she said. “A few shoves, some namecalling. Getting the rest of their Goldfish Poop gang to say nasty things in earshot...” she shrugged.

“Hey.” he said. She looked up. “It’ll get better, I promise.” She smiled uncertainly at him.

“You know, I was kind of wondering...” she said. “Maybe we could hang out sometime? After school, I mean? We only see each other in class or the hallways, and...” she shrugged, ducking her head, obviously trying to turtle up in case he rejected her.

His own smile shrank a bit. “Look, I think you should know, I’m gonna be kind of seriously busy for the next couple of weeks,” he said. “Mostly getting ready for the Holidays.” He tapped her butterfly jewelry by way of explanation. “I might even be missing a few classes...”

“Oh.” She looked downcast, but tried to hide it. “I understand--”

“Hey.” She stopped at the interruption. “I’d love to hang out with you, really. Been trying to figure out how to broach the idea myself,” he said. “But... well. Obligations… Tell you what. Can we maybe get together New Years?” She brightened. “They’re doing a street party thing for the big
countdown. We’ll go out, eat some bad food-cart food, point and laugh at all the new years’ drunks--
- paint the town red. Whaddya say?”

“I’ll have to ask my Dad about it,” she said, smiling. “But yeah, sure.”

“Hey, meet your Dad, too, that’s good,” he said. “I’m sure I’ll make a good impression--” He
popped his collar and slicked his hair back, then mimed ringing a doorbell. “Ding Dong,” he
pretended the door opened. He slouched down and did his best Beavis and Butthead imitation. “Hi,
Mr. Hebert, I’m here for yer daughter. A hur hur hur--” he mimed a door slamming in his face.
Taylor laughed. “Oh yeah, I’ll make a real good impression. Drive up on my Harley...”

“You have a Harley?”

“Kinda-- it’s a Schwinn with a cardboard cutout taped to the side.” He pretended to pedal frantically.
Taylor was laughing so hard now she had a stitch in her side. “Okay,” he said when she calmed
down. “It’s a date then.”

“I… guess?” Taylor said.

“If I don’t see you before then… I’ll call ahead of time. Okay?” He looked at her earnestly.

“Okay.” The bell blatted. “Ugh, time for class with Gladly,” Taylor said, shoulders sagging in
disgust.

“Aww. But if we do Weally WELL, he might give us a COOKIE,” Adrian said, earnest and wide-
eyed.
Taylor snickered. “Did you get your half of the report done?” she asked.

“Impact of capes on the world?” He held up some printout papers filled with notes. “Yuppies.”

“Let’s go face the music then...” They headed off down the hall.

“Really, he’s not THAT bad,” Taylor said.

“Are you kidding? He’s a living cliche’. He’s like a character from one of those 80s teen comedy
movies who keeps trying to use “cool teen speak” and can’t get it right...”

Adrian hadn’t been dissembling about being busy. People were snapping up every toy he made as
fast as he could make them, and ordering more through his email account. It had gotten to where he
had taken two days and built a desktop clockwork assembly line to build the more common
components of his widgets. It was busy cranking out little gears, levers, and camshafts night and day
from scrap metal he fed into the hopper at one end. Half those components were fed to another auto
assembler and turned into miniature ratiocinators for the alarm-o-bots and their yet-to-be-completed
bigger brothers.

But cranking out stocking stuffers wasn’t what was going to keep him busy. He had been cracking
down mostly on the Merchant drug dealers, busting them up, destroying their merchandise, sending the dealers to the cops wrapped up like birthday presents. They’d gotten more aggressive as a consequence. More and more of them were carrying guns; more than a few of them had started bringing large, angry dogs on chains with them, presumably in the hopes the dogs would scent him early and sound the alarm, or attack him if he got close enough.

But still Skidmark, Squealer and the other Merchant capes were still laying low. It was frustrating. With all the chaos coming up in the timeline, Adrian wanted at least one cape gang defanged and out of the way, and the Merchants were his target of choice-- simply for the fact that they seemed the least organized and effective, and thus the easiest challenge. The Empire just had too many capes, and too strong a hierarchy… if Kaiser fell there were a half dozen others to take his place. Coil was currently untouchable. Lung and Bakuda would bring down half the city (and squash him like a grape, if he was being honest with himself.) But take out the Merchant capes, especially Skidmark and whoever was pulling his strings, and the rest of the Merchants would fall apart like wet newspaper.

First it was time to drop some bugs in some ears again...

It was well past sunset again. Armsmaster was out doing a solo patrol in the south side of the City, following no patrol route in particular and frankly, sulking. His conversationalist wasn’t getting much headway in pulling him out of his pout either. “It’s obvious that this-- rogue-- is targeting me in particular for public embarrassment,” he said grouchily. “His stunts and pranks disproportionately end up involving ME. Everything he’s done has been calculated to make me look like a fool!”

“You could be biasing the results,” Dragon pointed out, her icon in his HUD cocking an eyebrow. “You have dedicated considerable time to trying to track him down, and in steadily increasing amounts. It just may be that you’re merely the first, ah, target available.” She carefully avoided the phrase “fall guy.” “Besides which his jokes have generally been fairly harmless.”

“He turned into a tree, hid in an orchard and pelted me with crab apples!” Armsmaster snarled. He reined in his temper with difficulty. “Every time I have encountered him my approval ratings with the public have gone DOWN...”

“Probably because you are the only one not LAUGHING,” Dragon said. “Public figures who can laugh at themselves gain more popularity and trust; they’re perceived as being more human and relatable. Look at the Wards. They’ve had run-ins with him as well. Shadow Stalker got hit with a pie... she stood there on a rooftop squalling and yelling like a scalded cat, and got nothing but complaints from parents about her cursing.

“Later on, he sneaks up behind ClockBlocker while he’s doing an interview with a blogger on the street and sprinkles Soy Sauce on him, slavering and licking his chops.” She stopped to chuckle at the memory. “He turns around, sees a seven foot werewolf holding a plastic fork and knife, screams like a little girl and nearly jumps out of his costume... a minute later he’s laughing along with the guy holding the webcam about how ‘Skinwalker got him that time.’ Guess whose PHO ratings went up and whose went down the next day?”

“So I’m supposed to pretend to find his antics humorous?” Armsmaster said scathingly.
“No. I’ve seen you trying to fake laughter. In a word: Don’t.”

“I don’t find anything this Skinwalker does humorous in the least,” Armsmaster growled.

Dragon sighed. *And that’s the whole problem, Colin,* she thought. *When a person made of silicon and computer programming is easier to make laugh than you are, you have ISSUES.*

Armsmaster was just cruising past the Ferry South when he saw it. There was a whistle and pop, and a firework burst somewhere over the middle of Shantytown. Then a second, then a third, showering the sky with rosettes and sparkles. “It’s him!” Colin blurted. “It has to be!”

“How can you tell?”

A fourth rocket went up. With a dozen staccato pops, letters formed:

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ARMSY
IS A
DOINK
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“Call it a hunch,” Armsmaster growled. He revved the motor on his bike.

“Colin,” Dragon said, her voice steady and soothing. “Now don’t do anything rash… Colin--!” Armsmaster wasn’t listening. He hit the accelerator and roared off down the road, his siren blaring.

He had slowed down considerably by the time he reached the point he had calculated the rockets were launched. The Shantytown didn’t exactly have a regular street grid, and the makeshift roads between the makeshift houses often more resembled those of some old European village, with zigs and zags and hairpin turns.

He was barely moving at a crawl when he reached the open patch where the rockets came from—-a bare patch of dirt that might have been the lot for a house at one time, edged with crumbling sidewalks and half-vanished pavement. The rocket stands were still standing in the middle, smoking slightly.

His bike suddenly stuttered and stalled, its running lights dimming, and then glided to a halt, completely shut down. The monitors on his armor fizzed with static, his HUD turning into snow and winking out. He dismounted in a forward roll, coming to his feet with his halberd in hand.

Skinwalker was standing on the other side of the square, holding a---Colin squinted; it looked like an overlarge remote control, with brass buttons and fittings and a rotating satellite dish on the end. “Ah, the gnomish universal remote,” Skinwalker said, his baritone voice cheerful. “Always fun at parties.” He pushed another button on it. There was a crash behind him; Armsmaster looked back and saw a chain link security gate covered in wires and blinking christmas lights pop up from the ground on steel spring hinges like a gigantic mouse trap and crash into place, blocking off the exit. Sparks popped and sizzled as the locks made contact. If that wasn’t visible warning enough, the “Danger: High Voltage” signs would have been a clue. He saw similar gates pop up at the two other exits, then still more flipped down, closing off the top… locking his damnably slow-flying cambot outside, he noted with annoyance.
The remote in Skinwalker’s hand fizzed and sputtered and made an odd “sproing” sound. “Ah nuts,” Skinwalker grumped. “Well, it did its job anyway.” He dropped the device into a pouch on his belt and gestured up at the blinking, buzzing, light and sign covered cage entrapping them. “Faraday cage,” he said. “You like it? Wanted to make sure you didn’t do anything rash-- like call a bunch of your friends to ruin things.”

“You’ve finally crossed the line, Skinwalker,” Armsmaster said, hoping the cambot could hear him over the buzz of the electrified cage. holding his halberd at the ready.

Skinwalker replied, protecting for the cheap seats. “Have I? You’re the one who’s been running up and down the length of Brockton Bay, shaking the trees and rattling the locks, trying to hunt me down-- all because after our first meeting you wanted a rematch.” He pulled an impossibly long wooden staff out of the pouch at his hip. “Well, here it is. A genuine no holds barred cage match.” He spun the staff around, dropping into a combat stance of his own. “Let’s see what you’ve got, Hal-Beard.” At some unseen signal, music began to blare: Armsmaster bit back a groan of annoyance. Really? The Star Trek Pon Farr Duel Music. He braced himself as the wolfman rushed him.

Their staffs flew in a blur, cracking against each other in a flurry of strikes and parries. They crossed staffs, straining against each other. Skinwalker’s muzzle was next to Armsmaster’s ear when he spoke.

“I hope you’re recording this because we haven’t got much time.”

Startled, Armsmaster rolled fell back and rolled away. Skinwalker backflipped clear in the opposite direction. They circled each other warily. As soon as his back was to the cambot hovering outside he spoke again.

“I’m sorry about this, it was the only way to contact you without tipping my hand. Don’t let anyone see your recordings of this. You have enemies in the PRT.” His voice was just loud enough for Armsmaster to hear, with his enhanced audio microphones. The Cambot wouldn’t be able to pick it up at all, not with all that buzzing wiring in the way. And anyone watching the footage wouldn’t be able to read their lips, either, thanks to all the blinking lights and warning signs obstructing the view.

If this was a prank or a trick, it was a damned complex one. Armsmaster waited till the cambot had circled around to the other side. “Enemies? Who?” With his wolfen ears he should have been able to hear that, Colin hoped.

“Coil.” They came together in another flurry of blows. He kept speaking even as he fought. “Make this look good-- he’s going to be going over it with a fine tooth comb. He’s got spies all up and down your organization.” He deliberately left an opening, took a hard blow from the butt of Colin’s halberd across his forearm. “Not bad for a stuffed shirt,” he said aloud, breathing heavily. “Your girlfriend oughta found something by now.”

“Dragon found traces of illicit data traffic. But how do you know it’s him?” He tried for a sweeping kick, only to come up short.

“Too long to tell. But nearly everything in this city traces back to him.” He leaped across the makeshift arena, snarling, and grappled with Armsmaster for his halberd. He spoke through his snarling teeth. “The Undersiders are his cats paw; he pays them to pull jobs to distract you at the right time. The Travelers are under his thumb too--"

"How?" Armsmaster hissed through gritted teeth.

Skinwalker snarled and shifted his stance. "One of them is a case 53 monster with a messed up
power." He let Armsmaster knock him away again, rolled in the dust and retrieved his staff. "But he's got way more than that."

He jabbed and thrust as Armsmaster parried. "Worse, he's got powers. He's a time tweaker--Heisenberg effect on a macro scale. He splits time, creates two temporary timelines--"

Armsmaster swore aloud at that. "--then picks the one he likes to keep when the waveform collapses," he concluded. His werewolf sparring partner gave a quick nod. Armsmaster's mind raced ahead at the implications. That would be why the Undersiders and Travelers were so successful. Coil runs two timelines, one's a go, the other's a no go. If they succeed, he collapses the second timeline. If they fail, he collapses the first.

Armsmaster actually took a blow to the ribs. The implications were staggering. If Coil was careful with that power he'd be untouchable, able to erase any mistake he made as if it never happened. He could commit the most brazen crimes; he could walk out the front door of the PRT with top secret files under his arm, or torture prisoners for information, then just collapse the waveform and keep the timeline where he kept his nose clean... and leave his victims none the wiser. He shoved the halberd between Skinwalker's legs, tripping him. Skinwalker hit the ground. "Where's his base? Do you know that?"

Skinwalker grimaced and rolled to his feet again. "Under the City. An Endbringer shelter that fell off the books."

"So why haven't you tried to take him out?" Armsmaster grunted.

"Three words: Load Bearing Boss," Skinwalker said.

"His base is wired to explode," Armsmaster concluded. An underground explosion downtown, with Brockton Bay sitting on that enormous aquifer... it would bring down multiple skyscrapers, killing thousands.

They danced in a circle around each other. "That and worse. He's got a dossier on the Empire Eighty Eight capes--their real names, everything. If things get hot he'll release it to the press."

Armsmaster felt ice down the back of his neck. If Coil broke the Unwritten Rules that badly it would be war. Instant war, with no mercy and no quarter given.

They spun in their dangerous ballet. "It gets worse. The Case 53? She absorbs people. Eats them, makes evil clones of them--complete with twisted versions of their powers. Nilbog 2.0." Armsmaster felt his already-chilled blood freeze. If Coil pushed the big red button, every cape in the region would respond to the crisis. They'd come swarming in just be fodder for an army of monsters. Armsmaster had visions of psychotic clones of Legend, Eidolon, Alexandria rampaging across the world... And thus far, the needle on Armsmaster's lie detector hadn't wavered. Skinwalker was telling the absolute truth. "What's he waiting for?" Armsmaster said. It certainly sounded like Coil had all the tools at hand to hold the entire city hostage. What else did he need?

"the mayor's niece, Dinah Alcott." Armsmaster scowled in confusion. "She's a precog. The most powerful ever. She can give predictions as percentages... and she can't lie. Her power won't let her."

Armsmaster kept his expression stony as he kipped to his feet. He could feel the blood draining from his face. "If he leverages her power with his--"

"With her, he'll be unstoppable," Skinwalker said. He hopped backward and did a fancy flourish with his staff. "Not bad, Armsmaster, but not good enough," he said, projecting his voice so the
cambot picked it up. “Come on, you want to be in the big leagues, don’t you?”

Armsmaster didn’t quite have to fake his growl as he pressed his attack. “Why are you doing all this?” he said, equally loud. He hoped Skinwalker could pick up what he was trying to say. Why all this? Even if there were spies and infiltrators, why not just... drop a letter, or speak to one of the Protectorate higher-ups directly?

Skinwalker grunted. "Think about it," he said.

Armsmaster's mind raced. It had to be more than just infiltrators Skinwalker was worried about, more just than some PRT troopers or office workers playing double agent. It had to be someone highly placed; so highly placed that even the most clandestine information would pass through their hands. "Who?" Colin demanded.

The wolfman hesitated. He closed with Armsmaster, got in a weapon-clinch with him, then to Colin’s utter shock, deliberately faked Armsmaster pushing him backwards into the electrified wall of the cage. The wolfman snarled as sparks flew and bulbs blew. Under the cover of the tesla-coil buzz of shorting wires he snarled one name:

“Thomas Calvert!”

Armsmaster leaped back. The wolf-man fell forward onto his hands and knees, his back smoking slightly. “A bit more voltage than I intended,” he wheezed. He clutched his chest with one clawed hand. Green light swirled, trailing across his chest and over his back. He moaned as if in relief. “Well,” he said, getting to his feet and leaning on his staff. “I'll admit it, you’re better than I am.” He gave Armsmaster a toothy grin.

Armsmaster would later kick himself for walking right into it. “Then why are you smiling?” he said, still holding his staff at the ready.

Skinwalker gave him a wide-eyed, wide-open-mouthed doggy smile. “I... am not left handed!” He spun his staff in his right hand and thrust the end through the fencing. He struck a large red button Armsmaster hadn’t noticed before. There was a loud BLAAT; the lights went dark, the fence wiring stopped sparking and the makeshift cage collapsed outward, leaving the alleyways free.

“So it is time for me to go...” He said with a bow. “Oh, and I’m sorry for this too.”

“Sorry for WAAGh!” From every corner, from under trash cans and from beneath trailers, out of the shadows and through holes in fences and walls, came dozens of tiny, knee high robots with rotating strobe lights for heads. They surrounded Armsmaster and swarmed over him, clinging with suckers and claws and little magnet hands, blaring and tooting and flashing blinding light of every color in his face. Several began spraying him with fire-suppressant foam. Others began trying to dismantle his armor from outside with screwdrivers. He began flailing about with his halberd, trying unsuccessfully to detach his assailants.

“Catch you later, Armsy,” Skinwalker said. He transformed into an owl and leapt into the sky.

“Get off, you little--- SKINWALKERRRR!”
Skinwalker, aka Bayleaf, aka Adrian Smith, arrived home at his lair. He climbed down through the skylight and collapsed across the bed. Auurgh. “Faking” a fight hurt almost worse than fighting for real.

The clock next to his bed chimed. “It’s now six AM.” it said sweetly. “Time to get up.”

Adrian groaned. “Tell you what,” he said to noone in particular. “Let’s take today and tomorrow off, whaddy a say. We'll start.. the next phase then...”
Chapter 7

The dealers were pretty confident.

The four of them were working together. Things were going smoothly for once. Once they’d heard about the Skinwalker, and how he was going through the dealers in the area like a lawnmower, they had taken precautions. They had set up a folding table in the second floor of a half-demolished parking garage, using the security fences and barricades to block off all but one entrance. A couple of trash barrel fires spaced around the closed-in area gave them plenty of light to see by, but not enough to attract the bored cops who wandered through the Docks. They all had guns, pistols mostly but at least one kalishnikov, and they had not two but four big ugly dogs, Rottie halfbreeds, not well trained but mean enough and smart enough to “sic” whatever they were pointed at. The customers, unsurprisingly, were much better behaved than usual.

“This works better,” one of them noted, idly folding bills.

The guy next to him holding the Kalishnikov grinned, baring a mouthful of rotten teeth. “Shoulda thought o’ settin’ up like this years ago,” he said. “Steada handin’ off baggies in the street like a chump. That Skinwalker guy did us a favor.”

The guy tending the dogs huffed. “Huh, here’s hopin’ he don’t do us no more favors, thank you very much,” he said.

“Ah lighten up,” the one holding the kalishnikov said, hefting it. “He shows up, we’ve got some surprises to give him.”

The guy tending the dogs looked over his shoulder. “Well, you do that, be sure you do it right and make sure he’s dead,” he said fearfully.

“What’s you’re problem, man? He’s just a cape.” The guy at the table shoved a baggie into their latest customer’s hand and sent him shuffling for the exit. “The fool plays with US, he’s gonna get the short end of it.”

“Don’t you know nuthin’ about animals?” the dog guy said. Having to pour kibble for the mongrels had apparently convinced him he was the expert on animals in the group. “All this stuff he’s done so far— he’s not playing around; he’s toying with his prey. Ever seen a cat play with a mouse? All lazy n’ shit… till they get serious. Then those claws move so fast you can’t even SEE ‘em.

“If you shoot this guy, get it right the first shot— cause if he gets serious, you’ll never get a second.”

FOOSH. The four Merchants yelped like scalded cats and wheeled about to face the direction of the sound. Had they been from Azeroth they might have recognized the sound of a gnomish fire extinguisher. The two trash barrels at the far end of the garage had gone out, plunging it into darkness. In that darkness something moved. And growled.

“It’s him!” Three of them aimed their guns at the shadows. “No wait!” the dog guy said. “You shoot that thing you’ll pull every cop in the city. Let the dogs at him first!” He unlocked the dog’s collars and pointed at the glowing eyes in the dark. “GET ‘IM!” The four dogs pounded for the shadow, snarling and slavering.

Two clawed hands shot out of the dark and grabbed the first two dogs by their throats. They were whipped around in a circle in the air and brought down on top of the other two, slamming all four to the concrete with canine shrieks of pain. The Skinwalker opened his mouth and ROARED into their
faces. Two of them rolled over on their backs, whimpering. The third scuttled backward, limping and cringing and shrieking like an old woman’s pug who’d seen a cat for the first time.

The fourth one tried to press his luck. He leapt for the crouching figure’s throat, snapping and snarling, its eyes mad with fury. The hands seized it again. There was a loud crack and the struggling dog went limp.

The guy holding the Kalishnikov opened up; the other two beside him fired their pistols. The dog’s corpse came hurtling out of the shadows like a softball, striking the guy with the assault rifle and knocking him backwards twenty feet, cutting the bark of the gun off. The dead dog was swiftly followed by the two burn-barrels; they struck the Merchants with the pistols with a loud gong, laying them out flat. Vines sprang out of nowhere, cocooning the concussed dealers and tangling the legs of the last one standing, immobilizing him.

The fourth merchant wet himself in terror as the Skinwalker stepped fully into the light. He kicked the table into the ceiling, scattering the goods and the money everywhere. A taloned hand grabbed the terrified merchant by his ratty shirt front and lifted him off the ground till he was looking at the feral cape face to face. He’d never seen so many teeth in his life. “You’re not worth my time,” the Skinwalker said in a voice as deep and resonant as a god’s. “Where’d you get this? From who? Names, places, I want everything you know.”

Fifteen minutes later, after a great deal of hysterical ratting-out, he left them. He took their guns, he took their cellphones, wallets, shoes, and left them hogtied on the floor… watching their merchandise burn to ash in one of the burn-barrels, and their instructions etched in a nearby support column with a diamond-sharp claw:

TELL SKIDMARK I’M COMING

This scene was repeated all night, all over the city. Three locations, five locations, a dozen. Dawn came with dozens of merchants left trussed for the cops or simply looted of all they had, hundreds of thousands in illicit drugs burned, who knew how much drug money confiscated… and no real clues on where Skidmark and his crew were hiding.

Adrian sighed in disgust as he dropped down through the skylight into his lair. His bones ached, he was so tired. He had a handful of cellphones and wallets; he’d go through them later. Maybe he’d find something in the contact lists… but he wasn’t hopeful. He was no Sherlock Holmes, or even a Sam Spade. He could only hope the pressure finally flipped Skidmark’s switch.

The first snow of the holiday season came in, thick and heavy, cloaking everything in billowing
waves of white. Even Brockton Bay couldn’t help looking better when it was wearing its winter best, and a tiny bit of genuine holiday cheer seemed to be making the rounds.

Dinah Alcott wasn’t feeling it very much though. All she could feel was afraid.

School was out for the holidays; they’d had a “holiday party” instead of classes-- what her friend Elliot joked was “a Christmahannakwanzaa party”-- and watched old christmas movies and eaten popcorn and junk food till everyone was buzzed out on sugar and caffeine. The school bus packed full of shrieking, excited kids had just dropped her off on her street, and she was trudging home through the still falling snow.

The streets were already plowed, but the sidewalks were still covered in a deep layer of white. It made for slow going when you were short and dressed in klunky rubber galoshes. It was pretty at least, Dinah thought. And the falling snow made everything so still.

She went over the numbers in her head again.

Chance she would be abducted this week? 23% and rising.

Chance she would be abducted before the end of the holidays? 67% and rising.

Chance she would be abducted by the end of January? 89% and rising.

She bit her lip and sniffled. She hated her power. All she had to do was ask, all she had to do was hear a question or think a question about the future, and her power would tell her how likely it was to happen. No lies, no secrets, no mistakes. And since adults went around all the time saying things like “what are the odds?” or “how likely could it be?”-- she’d known all sorts of horrible things, almost from the day she’d triggered.

Among all the horrible things she now knew, she knew that someone was going to kidnap her.

She wasn’t foolish; she’d tried to warn her parents, to warn any adult. But they’d laughed and said the same thing that she had heard on a TV commercial that had activated her power in the first place. “Don’t be silly, do you know how unlikely that is you’d be kidnapped?”

She had. She’d told them, to the third decimal place. They’d ignored her.

Probability that anyone she told would believe her before it was too late? 5.3%

Tears puddled in her eyes, she struggled to wipe them away with her mittens, to little effect. Whoever they were, couldn’t they at least wait until after Christmas?

She heard a footstep and a twig snap. She looked around, her breath hitched in her throat. There was noone around; her footprints were the only ones that marred the fresh-fallen snow. There was a little park across the road that all the kids played at-- noone was there now; they were all inside where it was warm and dry. What she saw standing on the rise made her breath catch in her throat, but in an entirely different way.

It was a reindeer.

It was snowy white, with huge antlers like the branches of a tree. It was wearing a harness and
saddlebags of some sort and had bangles-- Christmas ornaments?-- dangling from its antlers. It stood there, just looking at her, majestic and unafraid.

“Omigosh. No way,” she breathed. She stumbled; without realizing it she’d walked towards it, across the street and up over the little ankle-high wall surrounding the park. The reindeer was less than twenty feet away from her now. It pawed at the ground; she heard bells jingle.

“No. Way..!” she said again.

Slowly, gracefully… almost majestically, she thought; that was a good word for it, majestic…. It stepped through the snow, walking towards her. For the first time she realized just how big it was; she didn’t even come to its shoulder. She hesitated. She was a sensible, practical little girl. And her practical side reminded her that it was a strange animal; it could be dangerous…

...But still, her struggling, battered innocence protested...

It stood perfectly still. Slowly it lowered its head till its nose was almost touching her. Carefully, she lifted up one hand and put it on the reindeer’s nose, feeling the velvety pad under her palm. “Oh wow,” she said, a smile of wonder creeping across her face. “Hi. I’m Dinah,” she said. She felt silly even as she said it. It couldn’t possibly--

The reindeer tilted its head, almost like a dog. It made a “whuff” sound and craned its neck back, reaching over its shoulder for the bag hanging on its side. When its head came back around it was holding a giftwrapped box in its mouth by the ribbon. A tag fluttered from it, the words “FOR DINAH” on it in big black letters.

“For me?” she squeaked. She took the package, wrapping her arms around it-- it was huge and bulky, twice as tall as it was deep and wide. “Thank--- thank you!” The reindeer nuzzled her. It wheeled about and galloped away, bells jingling, and vanished into the falling snow. The bells fell silent and she was alone.

She staggered through her front door a few minutes later, package in arms. “Mom, Dad, I’m home!”

Her mother came in from the kitchen. “No need to shout, Dinah, I-- goodness, that’s a big package. Where did you get it?”

Dinah considered her options, realized she couldn’t possibly make up a really good lie, and went with the truth, which was confusing enough. “One of Santa’s Reindeer gave it to me!”

Her father was on the couch, reading the paper (who DID that anymore?) He looked up in confusion. “What?”

Her mother looked confused, but then her expression cleared. “Oh, that’s right. That’s what they call the school gift exchange thing. When you get a gift they say you got it from Santa’s Reindeer… I remember her teacher saying something about that...”

Dinah resisted the urge to roll her eyes and stamp her foot in frustration. Her parents seemed to have a superpower too-- only hearing what they wanted to hear.

“Well it certainly looks like they splurged,” her father said. “So which reindeer was it, Punkin?” he teased. “Rudolph, Vixen, Blitzen?”

Dinah’s eyes went round and her mouth popped open. “Oh, NUTS!” she said, stamping her foot for real this time. “I forgot to ask!!” That was going to bug her forever...
Her parents blinked, then burst out laughing. “Oh Dinah, you are so silly!”

“Arrrrrrgh!”

“Well, go on honey, open it!” her father urged.

“Oh, honey, she should really wait till Christmas—” but before her mother even finished speaking Dinah had already torn half the paper off.

“One early present won’t hurt,” her father said indulgently. “Why when I was a boy we had a tradition where we opened one present on Christmas Eve...” he chuckled. “Of course we always ended up breaking down and opening ALL of them that night, but—”

Dinah laid the box down on its side on the coffee table and opened it. Inside were two very expensive looking toy robots stacked up on one another, with squat bodies, headlight eyes and rotating strobe lights for heads. “Unusual sort of gift for a little girl,” her father murmured, lifting one out of the box and looking it over. “Beautiful work though. I think this is real brass, or maybe bronze.”

“There’s a business card in the box,” Mrs. Alcott said, plucking it out. “From the workshop of World of Crafts.’ Oh, HIM.”

“Him who?”

“There’s a fellow with a pushcart down on the Boardwalk, he sells things like this,” she said. “Little brass toys, wind up butterflies, trees in bottles, all sorts of things. He sometimes shows up at the Lord Street Market, too, I hear.”

“Huh. Nifty.” Mr. Alcott turned the one he was holding over in his hands. “I guess it’s some sort of alarm clock or something?” He put it back in the box. “Why don’t you take those on up to your room for now, Punkin. We’ll be having dinner in a little bit.”

“Okay.” Dinah scooped up the box and raced up the stairs.

“No running!”

Grumping, she slowed down and walked like a proper lady up the stairs and into her room. She laid the box on her bed, carefully closed the door to her bedroom, and fished out the pamphlet she’d spotted in the bottom of the box. She noticed her new toys had names engraved on their chests.

The first one was OB-1.

The second was KEN-OB.

Ugh. Grownups and their jokes.

She unfolded the accordion paper and started to read.

CONGRATULATIONS!

You are now the proud owner of TWO (2)

A-O-B model Defender-Bots (limited edition.)
Custom built to be Danger Tuff™
and
READY FOR ACTION!

Awesome DEFENDER-TASTIC FEATURES include:

Super durable!

Self recharging!

High volume and visibility DANGER ALARM
To let the forces of JUSTICE know
when EVIL rears its ugly head!

GPS and DISTRESS BEACON!

High power ELECTRO BEAMS
to give the Bad Guys the shock of their lives!

INVISIO FIELD
to render you and your defender-bot
undetectable to the Enemy!
(Lasts indefinitely; only remains active while stationary)

ULTRA DEFENSE FORCE FIELD
Nullifies all incoming attacks!
(Field of limited duration and durability; must recharge
forcefield capacitors approx. 60 seconds between uses.)
And when things are at their most dangerous, the

**GNOMERIGAN WORLD ENLARGER/REDUCER**

is there to help your Defender-Bots SAVE THE DAY!

Take them with you everywhere!

**Ask yourself: what are the odds**

that you could need a Defender-Bot?

Beneath each blurb was a cartoon drawing of the “Defender-Bots” punching, zapping, and force-fielding their way through evil aliens, sinister ninjas, raging monsters and more. Just silly Saturday morning cartoon stuff.

She traced her finger over the line that had been double inked. “Ask yourself: what are the odds?”

Hastily she pulled her backpack open and dug out a pencil and a piece of paper. Hands shaking, she wrote out her questions.

“If I keep the Defender-Bots with me… what are the odds I’ll be abducted this week?”

0.2%

“If I keep the Defender-Bots with me… what are the odds I’ll be abducted this month?”

.25%

“If I keep the Defender-Bots with me… what are the odds I’ll be abducted in a year?”

.49%

Her breathing quickened. No, wait. Just because she wouldn’t be abducted, didn’t mean something worse could happen. The bad guy, whoever he was, could still decide to do something horrible to her or to her family. There were just too many bad things that could happen, or that the villain could do.
Her head was already aching from so many questions to her Power. She wet her lips and asked the best question she could think of. “What are the odds that the Defender Bots came from someone who can save me and my family from the bad guy?”

93%

She asked one more. “What are the odds he will?”

100%

“Biddlbiddlebip.”

“Bbbltp.”

The two Obie-bots’ eyes lit up. The box they were in tipped over and they climbed out to stand on the bedspread. They watched her with unblinking yellow-green eyes. “Obie-One?” she said. The one on the left went “Ding” and saluted with a Clink! “Ken-Obie?” The other one went “Ding” and saluted as well. “You guys are gonna keep me safe? And my family?”

“Ding!” “Ding!”

The tears that had threatened before finally spilled over. It wasn’t till now that she realized how much it mattered to have someone, or even someTHING, to talk to about her troubles that believed her. She pulled the two little robots into a hug. For the first time in forever, she felt that things were gonna be okay.

Panacea walked out into the enclosed garden. It was a breath of fresh air; cold, freezing snowy air, but fresh air all the same. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes, started to light up… then reconsidered. “Eh,” she muttered, stuffing the pack and lighter into the nearby trash can. “I’m turning into Miss Polly Pureheart.”

“Goooood...” she yipped and turned around. “I didn’t see you there!” Snow covered or not, how did she miss a talking tree?

The Giving Tree was there again, his branches laden with snow. He’d been dubbed that by one of the nurses, a lady who was a fan of Shel Silverstein, and it had stuck. Every couple of days he would appear at one hospital or clinic or the other for a few hours, rooted in the middle of the garden or the quad, reaching for the sky and shedding that healing light as far as it could reach. Sometimes there would be secondary growths here and there around the hospital; foot high mushrooms that shed their own healing aura, redoubling the effect. The staff at each location had taken to putting the more “in need” patients closer to where they thought he would appear, or if the weather was good wheeling out the more ambulatory patients to rest in his shade.
“How are you doing?” she asked. He shook the snow off his branches and smiled at her. The cold didn’t seem to bother him, but he did seem a little more sluggish than the first time they’d met a month ago.

“I am…. Well,” he said. “Howww. … fares… the seedling?”

She pointed past him. In the middle of the quad in a planter was an oak sapling. Were one to judge by its growth, it would be at least a year or two in age. “Ahhh,” he said. He ambled around it, examining it from all sides. “You have… been trying things… I see,” he said, looking at her knowingly.

She nodded. The sapling was stronger, hardier, with a more robust immunity to insects and diseases. Its xylem and phloem were scattered in several layers, rather than in one thin vulnerable layer under the bark. She was tempted to see if she could somehow make it evergreen, but had resisted the urge so far. The Giving Tree rested his hand against the trunk and nodded. “It will grow… well. Good. Strong.”

He looked at her. “I should… let… you know…. This… will be… my… last visit… till spring.” He looked up ruefully and shook more snow off his crown. “I have… stayed over long… as it is.”

Amy wrung her hands. She had postponed asking this for too long as it was. “Then with your permission,” she said after a deep breath. “There is one more change I would like to make to the sapling.”

He looked at her, curiosity plain on his craggy face. “Oh?” She held out her hand. “Ahhh. I..see.” She took his hand in hers, and placed her other hand on the trunk of the oak sapling. She closed her eyes and opened her Power.

She would probably spend the rest of her life trying to describe, in analytical scientific terms, what she saw… or what she did. But she understood it somehow all the same, like a fish understands water or a bird understands the sky.

The sapling began to glow. Leaves or no leaves, winter or no winter, it grew several feet taller and several inches thicker. The bark split, then healed, then split again. It stretched, waxed, grew--- and then stilled. Panacea opened her eyes. The sapling was glowing like the Giving Tree… faint, a barely visible aura almost like a heat shimmer, but it was there.

The Giving Tree patted her shoulder, then patted the trunk, obviously pleased. “It… sleeps… for now. But in the Spring… it will share. Healing. Life. Yes.”

“It won’t be, um, intelligent like you,” she said. “But it will give off that healing aura like you do.” She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair, under her hood. “I’m going to, to make more like it,” she said with the air of someone finally committing to a course of action. “Plant seedlings and saplings at every hospital I can. They won’t breed, the PRT would have kittens if they did. They’d have ALL the kittens.” She grimaced. “They can’t do much, though, so long as they can’t breed. My mom’s going to have thirty percent of the kittens all by herself, as it is… But you shouldn’t have to bear all the burden alone.”

The Giving Tree laid a hand on her shoulder and leaned in. “Neither… should you…” he said solemnly. He tapped her on the nose. “Beep.”

He suddenly turned solemn. “I need… to ask a favor…”

“What is it?” Wordlessly, he handed her a pasteboard card. Where did that come from? She read the
wording on it and blinked. “I… okay, I don’t do requests,” she said. “Not… okay, not usually. But because it’s you, and just this once.” She pulled a pen out of her uniform pocket (why did so few capes wear costumes with something that common sense?) and signed the card. “I’m trusting you,” she warned him. “I figure it’s gotta be important if you’re asking.”

He took the card back and tucked it away… somewhere. “It could change… the fate… of the world,” he said ominously. She shivered, and it wasn’t from the snow seeping through her boots. He gave her a reassuring smile. “Be well.”

There was a sudden gust of wind. The snow blew up and swirled around the garden, blotting out everything in a blinding cloud of white. When the wind fell away, he was gone. Amy looked around, blinking and wiping snow off her face. “I hate it when he does that,” she muttered.

Armsmaster hunched over his worktable with a digital magnifier on an armature pulled down in front of his face and one of his custom-made multitools in his hand. He was picking apart yet another of the Alarm-O-Bots that had mobbed him at the end of the farcical “cage match” Skinwalker had set up. The broken remains of a half dozen others were scattered around him. None were in any condition anyone would call “reparable.” He had been a bit… enthusiastic in subduing them.

There was a knock at the door. “Enter,” he muttered. The voice-activated door slid aside, admitting Velocity. “So how goes the research?” he asked, looking around at the scattered parts.

“Not very far,” Colin admitted, pushing aside the magnifier. “No serial numbers, no seals, all the major parts seem to be recycled or even hand crafted.” He tapped a part. “I’d swear these parts here were actually drop forged.”

“What about the ‘brain,’ the CPU?” Velocity suggested.

“Bits out of old cell phones or electronic toys,” Armsmaster said. “The programming itself is simplistic-- little more than “Run at target. grab hold and climb. When knocked down, get up and repeat.’” He grunted. “Less brains than your average Roomba.”

“You forgot “Spray target with CO2 extinguisher,” Velocity quipped. He picked up one disemboweled bot and looked at it. “You know, these could be useful. With a little better programming and a little containment foam--”

Armsmaster set down his multitool with a clang. “No. Just…. no.”

Velocity held up his hands in defeat. “Fine, fine.”

Armsmaster pulled out a thumb drive and handed it to Velocity without looking. “If you’d do a hi-speed review of my helmet cam for my last patrol, I’d appreciate it,” he said, distracted.

Velocity pulled back a bit, miffed at Armsmaster’s brusque request. He took the thumb drive anyway; there was no point at being annoyed with Armsmaster for being Armsmaster. He looked around for a laptop. Armsmaster shoved an app-book across the tabletop to him. “It’s at 120x,” he grunted.
Now Velocity was getting annoyed. He took the book and plugged the drive in. Eight hours of video footage began playing at 120 times normal speed. Velocity blurred as he allowed his power to speed him up to match the video. He picked up a digital pad and started noting time markers down. For several minutes all you could see of him was a very blurry, and very bored looking man in tights.

His expression changed considerably when the tape suddenly cut to footage of Armmaster and Skinwalker’s “cage match.” He watched it through, carefully keeping a poker face, then watched a good bit of the rest of the footage for good measure before he stopped it. “Spot anything worth noting?” Armmaster said, his voice bland.

Velocity suddenly remembered that most monitors and digital cameras, save for the ones Armmaster had designed specifically for Velocity’s use, only worked at a top speed of 60 frames per second. Anyone attempting to spy on them via hidden camera would only see a pixelated blur on the screen in front of him or on the pad in his hand at best. Clever sod. “A couple things,” Velocity agreed, tapping the pad. He scribbled several notes next to the list, then passed the pad over. *How many have seen this?* Was written in the corner.

Armmaster nodded and pretended to write a note next to the first item while Velocity looked over his shoulder. *You, me, Dragon, Miss Militia.*

*Any evidence?*

*Dragon’s spotted some things: back doors, keystroke loggers, time bombs, dormant programs to take over key systems. Still tracing them back to TC. Software and hardware both compromised.*

*Piggot?* Was the second.

*May be compromised,* Armmaster wrote. *Served with TC vs. Nilbog.* Velocity suppressed a shudder. The Ellisburg incident was a horror story come to life. A man named Jamie Rinke had Triggered as an S-class biotinker—able to create autonomous lifeforms from any living organic material. He’d gone completely insane and released a swarm of monsters on the city that devoured the populace or dragged them off to be ingredients for new monsters. The heroes they’d sent in had been routed and the PRT team accompanying them had been wiped out to a man—save for two: Calvert and Piggot. And Piggot had only *mostly* gotten out. She’d left most of the flesh on her lower legs and several internal organs, including her kidneys, behind. The authorities had resorted to walling in the entire city and manning the wall 24-7 with a small army and nearly every weapon of destruction known to man.

Why they hadn’t simply nuked the abomination until the ground was molten for a thousand years was beyond Velocity’s ability to guess.

If Calvert and Piggot were brothers in arms from that crucible, there was a good chance they were working together now, too.

There was a click on the intercom. “Armmaster, this is Piggot. Please assemble the Protectorate AND the Wards in my office immediately.”

“Speak of the Devil,” Velocity muttered.

Armmaster ignored the quip and hit the reply button the bracer of his armor (he hated having to drop everything just to cross the room and hit a button on the wall.) “On my way. What is the reason for the call?”

“I have an inquiry to make,” the Director said, her voice as flat and level as always. “I want to know
one thing:

“Why the HELL is there a reindeer standing in the middle of my office?”

It was a bit of a trip from the Protectorate base out in the Bay to the PRT building in the heart of the city. Armsmaster constantly resented the inefficiency of the arrangement, even if he accepted the alleged need for some illusion of distance between the two organizations. Even the two-minute flight from helicopter pad to helicopter pad was an annoyance, but at least it was no longer than that... even with everyone and their cousin deciding to tag along.

The Director’s office took up one entire floor near the top of the building. Which was fortunate, as she was about to need the space.

When the heroes and wards all arrived, they were greeted with a strange scene. Outside in the hallway were several armed PRT guards, all trying both to look alert and intimidating, and to peer past each other into the Director’s office. They squeezed past the gauntlet of guards and entered to find the tableau within to justify the one without.

Director Piggot was sitting at her desk, utterly still, her scowling face as immobile as if it were made of stone. Standing in front of her desk, grazing placidly on one of the potted plants, was a white stag with an enormous rack of antlers.

Everyone stared. “But-- how?” Assault said, waving one hand about.

“That would be MY question,” Piggot said grimly. “I went to use the facilities, came in, sat down, turned around and there he was.”

“But how did he get through the door? His antlers…” Assault persisted, measuring off their size in the air with his hands. “He wouldn’t fit through the door--”

“He’s a shapeshifter isn’t he?” Battery said. “… assuming it is the Skinwalker.”

“Iunno, he seems like the sort of guy who’d buy a real elk and drop it in Piggot’s office just for the giggles,” Assault pointed out.

“Why hasn’t the Director shot him or something?” Triumph asked in a (inevitable for him) stage whisper. Piggot sighed. She’d obviously heard that. People three floors away had obviously heard that. Never ask a cape with voice-blaster powers to whisper.

“Because,” she said in annoyance, not taking her eyes off the reindeer desecrating her desk plants. “My gun is missing, the controls for the office security systems are for some reason not working, and as annoying as it is having a 500 pound live reindeer stuck in my office, having a 500 pound DEAD reindeer stuck in my office would be considerably worse. Do you have any other questions, Triumph?” The lion-themed hero looked sheepish.

“Well somebody think of SOMETHING,” Battery said. If her husband started giggling again she was going to have to hurt someone.

The Protectorate, or at least the local available numbers, were crowded at the door, unwilling to step closer. Battling violent gangs, brutal villains, and sociopathic megalomaniacs had apparently left
them untrained for dealing with livestock. Feeling a bit embarrassed for himself and his team. Armsmaster stepped up. “Skinwalker, you are under arrest for trespassing on PRT offices. Stand down, and return to a, er, more compact form immediately.” The reindeer stared at him with all the apparent comprehension of a cow, then returned to its al fresco lunch. “And I just tried to arrest a cow with antlers,” Armsmaster said in a tired monotone. “Truly a highlight of my career.”

“If you do not stop eating my violets, I swear I will find a way to crate you and ship you to Finland for soup ingredients,” Piggot hissed. The reindeer stopped chewing and stared at her for a long moment. Then slowly, deliberately, it took another bite. Piggot made a sound like an angry schnauzer revving up.

Armsmaster stepped forward and waved the unbladed haft of his halberd at the elk. “HO! Hah! Er, Giddyup!…. Whooaah–!” The reindeer bugled angrily at the implied challenge and took several lunging steps at the armored hero, who hastily retreated back to the group of capes blocking the door.

“My hero,” Piggot said. The sarcasm in her voice could have curdled gasoline.

Per fire regulations, the office had two entrances. The other one was the elevator that ran from the basement garage clear to the top floor, and was situated on the far side of the room. It dinged, signaling the late arrival of the Wards. “Sorry we’re late Director Piggot,” Aegis was already saying as he stepped off the elevator, “There was a tour group and-- what the hell?” He stumbled to a halt just inside the office.

Shadow Stalker clapped eyes on the reindeer next. She whipped her crossbow out of nowhere, nocked and ready. “Holy crap, a moose! ...You want me to shoot it?” She sounded way too eager.

“No!” Armsmaster said “I do not even want to try to think of how to get an unconscious large ungulate out of this office. And tranq darts can make the target void their bowels as well. I do NOT want to see that.”

Shadow Stalker lowered her crossbow in surprise. “What, they can?” she asked, disbelieving. “Why didn’t you jerks tell me that? I coulda stabbed myself with one of those! “

“A guy can dream...” Clockblocker muttered.

“Coincidentally, Clockblocker,” Piggot said in a conversational tone, “If I find out any of you had any part in this little prank, there will be hell to pay.”

Kid Win snorted. “On what she pays us? Get real,” he muttered to the others.

“Where would you buy an elk in Brockton Bay anyway?” Aegis muttered back.

“Maybe they rent…?”

The elevator dinged again, announcing the arrival of Gallant, Browbeat, and Vista. “Okay, we had to get our gear out of-- oh my gosh, a REINDEER?” Vista said, her voice rising to a squeak. Then, with the artless naivete that underlined for the hundredth time that for all her experience as a Ward she was still just a twelve-year-old girl, she walked straight across the room and began petting the reindeer on its nose.

To everyone’s relief, the deer merely nuzzled her palm and butted its head into the patting. Vista laughed and scratched behind its ears. “I know some of you guys wanted to get into the holiday spirit, but this is ridiculous,” Vista giggled.

Slowly the two groups filtered their way into the room. Not all the way, though. Missy and the
reindeer still had a fairly good clear space around them. Miss Militia couldn’t resist putting her oar in. “We do seem to make things more difficult for ourselves than we need to, don’t we,” she said. Several capes glared at her.

“Okay. So why is it here?” Browbeat asked.

That seemed to be the magic question. The reindeer’s ears perked up. He craned his neck back and dug around under the flap of one of his saddlebags and pulled out… a gift wrapped box. He set it on the ground at his hooves and then pulled out another. And then another.

Armsmaster felt himself on the verge of an apoplexy. This HAD to be Skinwalker, in yet another form… and now showing off a bit of tinker tech Armsmaster would have given his left arm for: a dimensional pocket. To deliver Christmas presents!

“Ooh, presents!” Assault said. With a jesting grin he reached down to pick up one of the bigger boxes.

Whop. An enormous cloven hoof came down, pinning the box to the floor. The reindeer glared at him and snorted, eyes narrowed. Assault backed off, hands held up. “Whoa. Eheh. Kids go first, right?”

The reindeer gave him a disdainful look. Then it picked up one package with its mouth by the ribbon and handed it to Vista. “Ooh, thank you!” Before anyone could say anything she began ripping open the paper.

“Vista!” Gallant said. “That could be booby-trapped!”

Vista shot him a scornful look. “A reindeer in sleighbells shows up in the Director’s office, eats her desk plants, pulls like a jillion packages out of hammerspace while every hero in the Bay watches, then just stands there watching while one of us gets ready to set off a bomb in its face? What part of that story makes sense, Gallant?”

You could almost hear Gallant’s jaw opening and closing behind the visor of his full-face helmet. He didn’t have time to formulate a comeback, because the reindeer was now handing him a package as well. “Iii...”

“The word is ‘thank you,’ Gallant,” Vista said without looking up from her package. The sticky tape was giving her gloved fingers trouble.

Packages were handed out in swift order to each of the wards. Then it began nudging boxes in the direction of the Protectorate heroes. The first of them had plucked up their nerve enough to pick the boxes up when Vista squealed. “Oooh, look!”

She held up her prize. It was a gun of some sort, done out in emerald green crystal and brass trim, along with a holster in gold and green. Vista gleefully strapped it around her waist. “It looks like a Weta ray gun,” Clockblocker commented.

“You know the Tinker who made that?” Armsmaster said.

“No, not a tinker,” he said. “Propmakers. They make widgets and gadgets for the movies, and they have a sideline selling these prop weapons to collectors.”

While he was talking Vista was drawing a bead on a nearby filing cabinet. “Eat hot subatomic death, evildoer,” she muttered, and pulled the trigger. There was a crackling noise and a jagged beam of energy leapt from the muzzle of the weapon, striking the steel cabinet and limning it in light. There
was a loud “smeeerp” sound and the filing cabinet shrank to one tenth its size.

Everyone froze in shock. Vista stood there, rigid with surprise, the shrink ray held stiffly in her hands. “I thought it was a toy!” she squeaked.

“Teach you to assume,” Aegis said unnecessarily.

“Are you out of your mind?” Miss Militia barked at the reindeer. Several people started to speak up at once, a couple of them looking as if they planned to snatch the ray gun out of Vista’s hand. The reindeer looked unphased. It began clopping its hoof on the floor.

Clop… clop… clop….

When it reached thirty, it stopped. There was a “vuuuum” sound, and the filing cabinet returned to normal size. “Oh thank--” Vista said, relieved. “It’s only temporary!”

There were many sorts of ray weapons in the gnomish tinker inventory. The shrink ray was just one. And, if Vista ever read the manual and figured out how to flip the reverse switch, the enlarger ray was another. A ranged weapon that could safely render anyone attacking the young dimension warper harmless would go a long way to easing Bayleaf’s mind.

“Temporary or not, that thing is untested tinker technology from an unknown maker,” Armsmaster said sternly. “It’s going through the full testing regime before you even THINK of touching it...”

“Great,” said Clockblocker, a slightly panicked note in his laugh. “Then would somebody please come take this from me before I hurt myself?” He was holding another ray gun, a slightly sleeker model in grey, silver and white in his outstretched hand.

“Just put it down, Clockblocker,” Armsmaster ordered.

“I’d like to,” Clockblocker said, his voice very small. “There’s only one problem.”

“What?”

“There’s a warning light on this thing,” Clockblocker said. “And it’s blinking.” He was right. There were two vacuum tubes sticking out of the back at an angle, just above the grip. One was blinking red.

“Time-freeze the thing!” Aegis said.

“I’m trying,” Clockblocker said, his hand shaking. “It’s not working!” As they watched the little blinking light began to blink faster, and faster...

Clockblocker’s power was potent, if esoteric. He could make anything he touched freeze in time. The effect was apparently random, ranging from thirty seconds to ten minutes. (If anyone had managed to chart the time immobilized vs. the mass involved, then added a third axis for power he had put into the effort, they might have noticed a pattern. But alas for insufficient data points...) And it worked on anything solid, liquid, and even on rare occasions on gases or energy fields. For him to be unable to time-freeze something wasn’t merely unusual, it was alarming.

The light was strobing five times a second now. Clockblocker cringed and got ready to fruitlessly fling the gun across the office when the radio tube suddenly blinked out, and the one next to it began glowing green.

The reindeer grunted. Clockblocker looked at it. The reindeer had stepped into one of the open boxes
and, agitated, was trying to shake it off. With a kick of the forehoof it flipped the empty box into the air, straight at Clockblocker’s head. Clockblocker, already jittery, jabbed the steampunk-looking ray gun in the direction of the cardboard and spasmodically pulled the trigger. A pencil thin ray of light struck the box and it froze in midair. Not even the paper or ribbon fluttered.

“Holy @$%@ in a buttered bundt pan,” Clockblocker breathed. He poked the box with the barrel of the gun. It was immobile. “A gun that duplicates my power?” You couldn’t see his face behind the blank visor he wore, but the confusion in his voice was clear. “Then what the hell was up with that light?”

Triumph suddenly started kicking through the papers still on the floor. “Ah, there it is.” He reached down and pulled out an accordion-folded leaflet. “When all else fails, read the instructions,” he said to everyone.

“How did you know that was in there?” Velocity demanded.

Triumph gave him a knowing look. “My family goes through this every Christmas,” he said, opening the leaflet and starting to read. “You’d think 'read the enclosed manual before using’ was ancient Greek or something...” he muttered. “Okay, ‘Gnomerigan Temporal Energy Immobilizer Ray.’ Big clue there… Ah. That blinky light? Just indicated it was recharging, one to three shots depending on settings. Green light for full charge.” Clockblocker made some surly-sounding oaths. “Oh wow. 'Your Temporal Energy Immobilizer is self-recharging, automatically re-energizing its capacitors off of ambient temporal energy in the immediate environment. Full charge may take up to thirty minutes to reach.’ And the rest looks like explanations of what all those fiddly dials on the side do.” Triumph grinned… well, Triumphantly. “Of course. Temporal Energy. Except Clockblocker was wetting his pants–”

“Hey!”

“-- and pumping it full of ‘Temporal Energy’ as hard as he could,” Triumph said. “Dude. It recharges its batteries off your power!”

A curious individual would wonder where the schematics for the time freezing ray came from. This in fact was one of Bayleaf’s own Azeroth inspired inventions. Azeroth magitek had multiple ways to temporarily freeze a target in place… ice spells and the like… but what few people knew (unless they had been given very comprehensive education in the matter) was that they ALL involved time manipulation. The hunter’s freeze trap, the mage’s Ice Block, all of them actually used temporal energy to suspend the target temporarily in time… the appearance of icy crystals and the aura of cold was a side effect of the water and air molecules around them suddenly being immobilized. (basic reasoning would lead to the realization that it was not usually real ice, as suddenly freezing and thawing a person like that would not put them in suspended animation but turn their tissues and organs to mush, killing them. Not that such methods didn’t have their use in the ruthlessness of combat, but it was always better to have options.) From there it was a quick hop to using the gnomish and goblinish knack for synthesizing the effects of such arcane spells, and the first Time Ray was invented.

Clockblocker had gone from badly rattled to all but cackling with glee. “Oh wow. Oh wow. And it turns my power into a ranged attack,” he said giddily. “No more having to touch villains like Mush with my bare hands to time-freeze them!” The box tumbled to the ground, unnoticed. “Don’t you get it guys?” He looked at the others. “It’s gear. It’s gear to upgrade our powers!”

That was the cue. The Wards were the first to move in. Vista being the closest, she began reading off gift tags and handing them to their recipients. Wrapping paper was soon flying. Half the adults present were all but tearing their hair out at the violation of security protocol. The other half…
“Screw it,” Miss Militia said. “I just HAVE to see what this guy came up with to leverage MY power.” She took the box Vista handed her.

“Darn straight, free loot,” Assault said.

Armsmaster threw his hands in the air. “Fine… PERFECT…”

“We have to open them anyway, Armsmaster,” Velocity said. “Might as well…see… hmm.” He lifted his gift out of the box. Inside were a pair of elbow length gauntlets. The gauntlets had what appeared to be brass knuckles built into them.

“I suppose he doesn’t know the limitations of your powers,” Armsmaster said.

“Well, the thought is appreciated,” Velocity said.

Velocity’s speedster powers came with one incredibly aggravating drawback. The faster he moved, the less he could affect the environment and vise versa. While it meant he was essentially untouchable once he was moving, it also meant that he couldn’t even pick up a coffee cup while at speed, and his punches had about the same impact as those of an anemic toddler.

Bayleaf had resorted to brute forcing the problem. The gloves had been crafted by Parian, and infused with as much Strength enhancement as she could manage. The brass knuckles, being technically separate weapons, had been infused with even more Damage. Then Bayleaf had taken the completed gauntlets and put outright enchantments—Strength and Damage enchantments—on top of THAT. Bayleaf had guessed (correctly, as it would turn out) that this would counterbalance the diminishing effect of Velocity’s power and enable him to manipulate… and punch… with the strength of a normal human adult.

He would be proven correct. Of course, at normal speed Velocity could now punch out a compact car. He was in for a surprise when they all finally got to the testing range.

Armsmaster was holding his own gift and looking pained. They were… boots, technically. Armored boots. Armored boots in blue and silver (his colors!) with downward rocket thrusters sprouting out of them at the ankle and heel. Gnomish flying boots (though he didn’t know from Gnomish.) They were fuel efficient, provided excellent flight speed and looked like something Squealer had invented on “test the new synthetic drug” night at the Merchants lair. Never had a man looked so torn.

Dragon was giggling in his ear—deliberately. A thousand or so miles away in her secret base, all her backup drives were defragging in the computer equivalent of hysterical laughter. “Well, they match your suit,” she said to him.

Armsmaster was looking in the bottom of the box as if all his hopes had been lost there. “Well the utility of them probably compensates for the aesthetic and-- oh thank GOD there are schematics in the box--” he dove into the packing paper frantically. Maybe he could rebuild them into something more streamlined and above all efficient--

Miss Militia was looking pleased. She was trying on a new bandolier with ten fist-sized, futuristic looking metallic cylinders on it and reading the leaflet that came in the box. “Grenades. Reusable. Variety Pack, includes Darkness, EMP, Stun, Kinetic, Thermal, Cryonic and… Force Field? Bandolier serves as recharger; works off ambient energy in the immediate vicinity but will recharge faster with a wall outlet… Niiice.”

There was something else in the box, a rather heavy item. She dug down in and cooed like a Beverly Hills starlet over a new diamond necklace at what she found: A colt 45 peacemaker, obviously an
antique and lovingly restored. (Bayleaf truly had found all sorts of treasures with his garage-sale run.) A loaded ammo belt and holster were included. With it came a single note: *Always carry a hold out.* Happily, she strapped it to her hip.

Triumph looked at her, part in wariness, part in amusement. “And here I thought you couldn’t possibly look *more* dangerous,” he said.

“And what did you get?” she asked him impishly.

He read the card as his new cape swirled around his shoulders. “A… parachute cloak… and a sonic shield.. I’m not sure if it’s a belt or a bandoleer though…”

“A box of bandage rolls??” Aegis said, looking into his box in confusion.

“For the human meat shield,” ClockBlocker quipped. “Imagine that.”

“Those are the bandages Skinwalker uses when someone gets hurt,” Vista said. “They heal normal people fast, I bet they’ll heal you even faster.”

“And a… Recombobulator belt. Whatever that is.” he looked through some more. “Ice deflector bracer, fire deflector bracer. Hm.”

Aegis was technically a flying brute. But only technically. The reality was that he was not remotely invulnerable or even truly super strong; he just simply could take monstrous damage and keep on going. He had high speed healing, and a hyper-efficient biology with super-effective redundancies. Blind him and he could see through his skin; stab him in the heart and other organs would take over the job of keeping his circulation going. Even monstrous damage such as decapitation would not kill him. Of course the nature of things meant that, since he *could* take horrendous damage and live, that he inevitably *would*. He spent most of his time healing or regrowing lost body parts.

Bayleaf had been at a loss as to what to give him to help, so he had simply decided to cover a few of the bases. The bracers were rebuilt gnomish fire and ice deflectors, as he estimated that fire and freezing effects were the most damaging to human tissue. The recombobulator would provide a boost of near-instant healing ten times a day. The First Aid bandages also had healing effects but their purpose was largely to act as human duct tape, and hold Aegis’ guts in or his limbs in place till they healed. If the boy was intent on going in harm’s way, then all he could do was try to mitigate the harm.

“Hey, they FIT!” Browbeat came back into the room, his voice beaming.

“Where did you go?” Gallant demanded.

“I had to go find someplace to change,” he said. “I just had to try ‘em on.” Everyone then noticed his normal blue-and-diamond body suit had been replaced with a new one, this on in a similar pattern but in green and purple, with the top predominantly green, the bottom predominantly purple. “And holy cow but they FIT.”

“Uh, so big deal,” Shadow Stalker said.

“Nah, you don’t get it,” Browbeat said. “Look.” He began to grow and swell, his biokinesis coming to play as he forced his muscles and skeleton to grow. Soon he was pumped to his max, with a chest like a beer barrel and arms as thick around as the next person’s waist… but the cloth didn’t tear or stretch. “And look--” he deflated like a beachball, shrinking down till he was nearly as skinny as Clockblocker. The suit didn’t fold or sag, remaining comfortably snug. “I think it’s armored too… watch.” He began growing spikes from various points on his body. They grew out six inches and
more, needle sharp…. While the cloth tented it did not puncture.

“I did not know he could do that,” Gallant muttered to Aegis, looking at the spikes.

“I coulda lived without knowing,” Aegis agreed.

Browbeat slowly returned to his normal musclebound proportions. “I don’t get the colors though,” he said. “Green booties, purple pants, green top...” Some of the older heroes in the room contemplated telling him about a certain gamma irradiated, size-changing, overmuscled superhero from comic books of yore, but decided against it.

“…Invisibility and Force Field belt,” Battery murmured. She strapped it on, it hung stylishly loose on her waist. “It’s a bit bulky, but I think I like it.” Battery’s power granted her speed and super strength… but only in proportion to the amount of time she spent remaining totally stationary “recharging.” Which meant she was often a sitting duck. With the belt, cobbled together from a gnomish force field generator and a stationary invisibility cloak, she would now either be in motion as a super-strong and super-fast cape, or turtled up as an invisible, invulnerable one.

“Yeah. Whoever this guy is, he’s a genius,” Assault said. “This stuff is all brilliant.” His holiday gift was a bag of tricks… a handy haversack filled with a random selection of toys, widgets and gadgets: paint guns, fireworks, smoke bombs, noisemakers, decoys, dazzlers, distractors and the like. In World of Warcraft they were just “toys.” In reality, they could have constituted the contents of the utility belt of a demented Batman. Assault was sure to get some truly interesting uses out of them.

“What do you suppose a ‘Puntable Marmot’ is?”

Kid Win shook the overlarge box he’d been handed. Whatever was in it sounded broken. He set it down and opened it. “It’s junk?” he blurted, shaking the box again. Bits and parts rolled around inside. “No, it’s… a box of parts?” It was parts. It was a sampling of all the components and reagents in the Warcraft engineering portfolio, along with a broad selection of loose electronic and mechanical parts from more mundane sources. There was at least one or two of everything. Just the sight of some of them was enough to get Kid Win’s tinker power senses tingling. He fished out the card he saw sliding around inside and read it.

Kid Win had a few handicaps getting in his way of being a great Tinker. He had a minor case of dyscalculia which made the basic mathematics needed for his skillset a trial, as well as a minor case of ADHD. He was also too fixated with attempting to emulate Hero, the world’s first tinker and one of the world’s greatest heroes when he was alive… but to whom Kid Win had nothing in common. And most vitally, he had not figured out what his specialty as a Tinker was. So the writing on the card constituted, for him, a life-changing epiphany:

THINK

MODULAR

He blinked. Then he grinned. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah!” He sat down on the nearest piece of furniture, pulled a multitool out of its compartment on his armor, and began assembling some of the components into… something noone else there dared speculate. Whatever it was, it was going to have a LOT of USB ports.

Gallant was holding an open box… and a pair of goggles with a wraparound band. “I… have no
idea what this is about,” he said.

“Try ‘em on,” Browbeat urged. Gallant shrugged. He turned his back, removed his helmet, and put the goggles on. “Huh. Nothing looks any different.” He slid his helmet back on. “At least they fit on underneath my…. WOAH.” He staggered a bit. Several people took a step towards him in alarm.

“Gallant, are you all right?” Piggot said, half rising from her seat before grimacing and sitting back down.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Gallant said, waving everyone off. “I just got this rush to the head...” for some reason he looked at his hand. “Whoa. Auras are a LOT brighter and clearer now.” He looked around. “Or is it just me…?”

Gallant had been a challenge. His power was, no other word for it, weak sauce. He could sense and, to some extent “see” the emotions of others as colored auras. He could also shoot blasts of emotion at others that were accompanied with a weak telekinetic push. It was the main reason he wore a suit of power armor crafted by Kid Win, to compensate for his relatively weak combat ability.

Bayleaf had, once again, no direct way he knew of via enchanting, engineering, or druidic powers to enhance Gallant’s abilities or make him more formidable. And just giving him more armor to wear would have not helped that vulnerability. He’d had to extrapolate. The closest approximation in Azeroth terms to Gallant’s ability was the “Fear” spell. And the way arcane abilities were boosted in Azeroth was through boosting the attribute of “intellect.” So Bayleaf had built Gallant a pair of the highest-ranked intellect boosting goggles in the engineering schematic library.

What Bayleaf didn’t know was just how effective this was going to be. He’d removed the built in gun from the “Heavy Skullblaster”, tweaked it with some night vision, and replaced the gun slot with a couple of gem sockets... which he’d then fitted with two of the semiprecious stones he’d salvaged, ones aligned to enhance intelligence as well.

Intellect boosting items were, Bayleaf found after some personal experimentation, unpredictable. Much like certain pharmaceuticals were alleged to boost intelligence or creativity, sometimes the results were highly subjective… the wearer of an intellect-boosting gem wasn’t infused with new knowledge or experience, but was instead more able to access what they already had, or to think more clearly without distraction or mental clutter. And that only within certain limitations. It could only work with what was already there, and sometimes what was there wasn’t much.

Gallant however, did not number among those type. Gallant was already fairly intelligent. The helmet alone boosted Gallant’s intellect and stamina attributes by almost 2,000 points each. The gems boosted intellect further. When he donned the goggles, it was the equivalent of forcing a rushing flash flood down a riverbed. The pathways in Gallant’s mind and between his mind and his Power were irreversibly opened wide… turned from a steady stream into a rushing, wide open river. And the sensation of his once sluggish powers flowing at full force was intoxicating.

Gallant flexed his hand, watching the aura pooling into it, forming a swirling ball only he could see. He looked up and saw the filing cabinet Missy had shrunk just a few minutes ago.

It was a bad day to be a filing cabinet.

Gallant lashed out his hand. There was a loud WHUMM, and a semi-visible ball of something shot from his hand, raising a wind with its passing, across the room and struck the filing cabinet. Yesterday Gallant’s blast would have barely jostled it. Today, it nearly obliterated it. It hit the cabinet with a deafening crash, crumpling it like a beer can hit with a shotgun blast, and launching it across the room. It banged against the shatterproof transpari-luminium window and slid to the floor in a
cloud of loose paper.

Everyone stared, stunned.

Carefully, Gallant lifted his helmet and pulled the goggles from underneath. He looked at his hand and flexed it again. The swirling ball of aura formed just as easily as before. “I, um,” he said. “I think I want to submit myself to Powers Testing again...” he sat down on one of the nearby chairs, still staring at his hand.

Shadow Stalker had stuck to leaning against the wall while she watched the proceedings, arms crossed and radiating contempt for everyone in the room. She’d turned her nose up at the box Vista had tried to hand her. Vista was in no mood for it and dropped it at her feet with a shrug.

It had sat there this entire time while she avidly ignored it. But avarice was winning out over ego; she finally reached down and picked it up. A quick flick with her pocket knife and the box was open. She dumped the contents out in her hand. There was a folded Christmas card, and what looked like a miniature model of her mask. The hell?

It was a perfect duplicate of her frowning-woman mask, about the size of the palm of her hand, and hung from a leather thong. Was it supposed to hang around her neck like a pendant or something? She read the card. “The F@# is this?” she snapped. She tossed the card and the pendant away and stormed out of the room.

Vista picked the card up and read it herself. She exploded into snickers and giggles, then read it aloud for the others.

YOU’VE BEEN ROTTEN
AND HERE’S THE SCOOP
YOU OUGHT TO GET NOTHING
BUT REINDEER POOP

The Wards all cracked up. Clockblocker had been taking a drink from the cooler. Half of it ended up across the room. Vista finally stopped giggling and turned the card over to read the rest. Her smile turned to a frown of puzzlement.

BUT BAD TIMES ARE COMING
FOR ALL, ITS TRUE
SO WEAR THIS TOKEN
SO NONE CONTROL YOU

Shadow Stalker was a rotten person, one who would deserve a lot of the things that happened to her. But there were some things Bayleaf could never permit or tolerate, not even passively. Some time in
the near future Shadow Stalker was going to run afoul of a young villain called Regent. She would badly hurt one of Regent’s few friends… and Regent would take revenge.

Regent’s power was the ability to take control of other people’s bodies. At first, causing spasms or twitches, making them fumble or trip— but with enough exposure gaining the ability to control them entirely like puppets, hear through their ears, see through their eyes. He would seize control of Shadow Stalker this way, and force her to do… deplorable things, both in and out of costume, stripping away her secret identity and utterly destroying her life.

Bayleaf could not live with himself and not at least try to prevent that. But after hours of sifting through all his endowed knowledge of Azeroth’s magitek, one distressing fact became clear: there was nothing, absolutely nothing that yet existed in azeroth’s magic system or technology that would protect a person from having their mind, emotions or body taken over by another. No protections at all— not even partial protection from the oh-so-common FEAR spells that were constantly flung around. He had resorted to cobbling together bits and pieces of anything that came remotely close to what he was looking for. Purify spells to try and purge outside influences, freedom of motion spells that prevented binding or freezing, wards to protect from spells in general (though he had no idea how well they would work against mind influences— as he recalled they’d done jack diddly against fear effects in the game), even one or two “reset” effects that would essentially jolt the person’s mind awake by rebooting it, hopefully throwing off any fugue it was under. He hodge-podged it together into the amulet, cursing the blinkered lack of creativity of Azeroth’s tunnel-vision mages the entire time, and packaged it up for Shadow Stalker to claim. It was the best that he could do with what he had.

What little he could do, was enough to set the imaginations of all the Protectorate gathered running wild. “You’re telling me he has the ability to craft protections against Master-Stranger powers?” Piggot said in disbelief.

“Claims to, at least, if we're understanding that bit of doggerel right,” Armsmaster said, crossing his arms and eyeing the medallion. “That may be a difficult thing to safely test.”

“I wanna know why he thinks Shadow Stalker of all people needs it,” Aegis said.

“Well if YOU could tell anyone in the world to go take a flying leap, and they’d do it-- who’d YOU pick?” Clockblocker quipped.

“Clockblocker--” Aegis and Armsmaster said simultaneously. Clockblocker just stared at them. It was amazing how a blank face mask could convey defiance so easily. Armsmaster just halted in mid sentence, lips compressed in his one-size-fits-all expression of annoyance. Aegis threw his hands in the air. “Whatever.”

Piggot rubbed her face with her hands wearily. She’d spent the first ten minutes of this ridiculous fiasco hammering on the emergency lockdown button like she was playing “the Little Drummer Boy,” to no avail. Steel shutters should have dropped down over the doors and windows; containment foam sprayers should have lowered from the ceiling and coated anything in the room that moved with brute-rated restraint foam. Nothing happened, of course. Then she had spent thirty minutes watching her merry band of mutant lunatics sitting around opening presents like some deranged funhouse mirror version of a family on Christmas morning.

“My nerves are shot,” she muttered. Someone rapped on her desk. She looked up. The reindeer was standing there, holding an envelope in its mouth. The words TO EMILY PIGGOT were clearly visible in big block letters across the front.

“There’s no use pretending I don’t see you and waiting till you go away, is there,” she said. The
reindeer solemnly shook his head no. She sighed and took the envelope, ripping it open with quick efficiency.

A pasteboard card fell out. She picked it up and read the calligraphy, lips moving.

FREE

ONE (1) COMPLETE HEAD TO TOE RESTORATIVE HEALING
FROM PANACEA, AKA AMY DALLON of NEW WAVE

NO Payment necessary

NO Obligations, social legal or otherwise

NO Favors owed, demanded,

or expected in return

so you have

NO EXCUSES

Call RIGHT NOW

Panacea’s signature was across the bottom.

She stood up, quivering in rage. “How DARE you--!”

Before she could say another word the reindeer head-butted her in the chest, knocking her back down in her office chair. It glared at her from an inch away, clearly mad and taking no crap. It set its hoof on the envelope; with an expert flip it sent the envelope sliding across the desktop to her.

“WHUFF. Mrrrr.”

She dared to look down and saw that the envelope held something else; a piece of typing paper. She slid it out and unfolded it

Emily Piggot,

We know your past, we know why you refuse treatment from a Parahuman.

We also know we cannot afford to waste time putting up with your phobias,
your stubbornness or your bigotry.
The PRT, the City, and the WORLD

need you sound of mind and body NOW.

So do your duty, soldier, hitch up your pants

and DEAL WITH THIS.

Because I swear if you don’t

I’ll come up there, hogtie you and THROW you

at Panacea if that’s what it takes.

PARA BELLUM.

The lights in the room flickered. Startled, she looked up. Odd lights were swirling around the reindeer. He stepped back and gave her a wink. With a rush of wind and a flash of glitter, the reindeer who may or may not have been the rogue known as Skinwalker vanished.

“Aaaaaand he can teleport too,” Assault said. “Or he can teleport other things to and from himself…”

Piggot flipped the signed card over and over in her hands. “Can anyone tell me, or even just guess, what that was all about?” she said. “The newest and most notorious rogue in the Bay shows up in my office disguised as an elk-- or sends an elk on his own behalf-- to my office, hands out “presents” that qualify as UPGRADES to all the capes in the building, all but forces me to take this card-- why? Someone, anyone, give me a clue here.”

Armsmaster, Velocity and Miss Militia all glanced at each other. “Are the security systems working again, Ma’am?” Miss Militia asked. “You might want to check just in case. The stage one office lockdown at least.” She gave Piggot a meaningful look.

Piggot looked at her askance, but nodded. “Yes, just the minimal check at least. I think for my own mental wellbeing...” she pressed a stud on the underside of the desk. Shutters over the doors and windows dropped. External power was cut off, as were all data lines in and out. Almost before the shutters had locked Armsmaster was sticking little rectangular boxes to the walls, evenly spaced apart. Velocity blurred around the room, checking every available corner and crevice for lenses-- and spraying over one or two with a can of foam.

Armsmaster pulled out one last device, a small quadcopter drone, and set it to hover in the exact center of the room. A faint hum filled the room. “White noise generator,” he said. “It won’t interfere with our conversation but will white out any digital audio device.”

He looked around the room. Everyone except Shadow Stalker was here. Good enough; she was still probationary anyway. If he decided she needed briefing he’d do it himself. “Everyone, what you see in this room now does not leave this room,” he said. “Countless lives may depend on it.”

He still had the thumbdrive. He stuck it into Piggot’s desktop (after brusquely yanking out both the
cable and the wireless feeds) and switched it over to “project” mode. “In my last run-in with Skinwalker,” he said as he fast forwarded to the cage match, “He managed to pass some vital information to me...”

Skidmark was pissed.

Of course, Skidmark was always pissed. He was also usually soused, stoked, fried, wasted, buzzed, lit, stoned, pickled, toasted, plastered, embalmed and possibly sauteed. That was the consequence of being the drug kingpin of Brockton Bay and the leader of the Merchants, and having the self-discipline of a toddler in a candy factory. Any other human being, any other organic lifeform would have been a broken down spasmodic wreck after the years of debauchery and chemical abuse that Skidmark had subjected himself to.

Yet somehow, through who knew what perversity of nature—perhaps some secondary attribute of his cape powers that made him impossible to kill as crabgrass—somehow he was able to retain enough cohesive brainpower in his sputtering neural tissue to keep his gang together and keep the wheels moving, even if they did only spin idly in the air.

That still-functioning strata of his brain was currently aware that the Merchants were having serious trouble. And that conscious portion of his mind was bile-spitting furious about it. “Don’t tell me that BLEEP!” he yelled, cuffing the runner upside his head so hard he fell down. “I don’t wanna hear no BLEEP about how you ain’t got no BLEEPing product and no BLEEPing money!”

The runner glared up at him and wiped the blood off the corner of his mouth. “So waddya want me to do, read you a bedtime story?” he yelled. “We got hit by a cape, lost everything! The money, the drugs, the guns, hell we even lost one of the DOGS! Three of ‘em don’t do nuthin but lie on the ground and cry, and one of ‘em he snapped its neck like a pretzel stick!”

Skidmark muttered an oath. “Who was it? One o’ them krauts? The chinks? WHO?”

“Some new guy. Big frickin’ werewolf guy. Huge. Threw one of our guard dogs like he was a baseball.” He spat on the floor, leaving a red stain. “He left a message, too.”

He curled up on the ground when Skidmark spun around. “What?” Skidmark spat.

“’Tell Skidmark I’m coming,’” the guy said. “Carved in the concrete with his claw.”

Skidmark cursed again. “It’s the same BLEEP then.” He staggered over to the broken down recliner that served as his throne and threw himself down in it. He covered his eyes with one hand. “That makes a dozen. Twelve, twelve times we been hit in the last two BLEEPin days.” “This werewolf guy, some invisible BLEEPing tiger thing, couple of our runners had backpacks, got the stuff snatched off their BLEEPin’ backs by a giant BLEEPing owl...”

Squealer raised her head from the couch. “My favorite was the one where we lost that fishing boat fulla coke to that walrus,” she said lazily. “heheheh.”

“Benny got hit by a tree,” one of the stoners on the floor said.
There was silence for a few minutes while everyone tried to digest that.– and failed. “A what?” Skidmark said.

“Benny. He was swipin’ some stuff at the ER, this… friggin… TREE grabbed him. Vines everywhere. Tied him up, then told him that this was bad for him and he should clean up and.. you know… find God and stuff or whatever, the usual stuff those types give ya.” The junkie paused. “Only he talked real slow. Kiiiiinda liiiiiike thiiiiiiiiis. So slow noone’d ever understand.”

“Then how’d Benny understand him?”

“He was on Quaaludes.”

Skidmark thought that over. “Shut up,” he said.

Mush leaned forward on his pile of garbage in the corner. “Word is, the PRT thinks that at least some o’ those guys are all the same guy,” he said. “Some sort o’ shape changer cape.” The deformed little gnome looking cape took a hit off his spliff. “At least some, anyway.”

“So is it one guy, or like, half a dozen?” Squealer asked.

“Who BLEEPin knows, who BLEEPin cares,” Skidmark snarled, baring his rotten teeth. “Point is they’re hittin’ US and they’re turnin’ up the heat more every day.” He brooded. “I gotta think.” He got to his feet again and slouched out of the room.

“You want anything babe?” Squealer said, waving at the coffee table. There were a few scattered bits of drug paraphernalia on its glass surface.

“No, BLEEP it, I said I gotta THINK,” he yelled over his shoulder. The others heard the door slam, but took little note.

The room Skidmark had retreated to was his ultimate sanctum. His sanctum… something or other, BLEEP it, he couldn’t remember the word. It was little more than a closet, just a back room in a lousy apartment in a lousy abandoned tenement building in the failed Projects. But as far as Skidmark was concerned, what he kept in there was the secret of all his success.

There was nothing in the room but a scattering of pillows on the floor, and small bedside style cabinet with a locked door. Skidmark locked the door he’d entered, then unlocked the cabinet. Inside was a bottle of dried buttons of some unidentifiable substance. Sitting next to it on a velvet cushion was a magic 8 ball. Skidmark sat down on the cushions crosslegged and set the ball on its cushion in front of him. He took the bottle out, tipped exactly ONE shrivelled little fibrous button out onto his palm, placed the bottle inside the cabinet and stuck the pill under his tongue. He took a deep breath and got ready for the dive.

“Time to talk to Mr. Lucky,” he said.

Years ago, when Skidmark had first got his powers and his woman and was just starting his gang, he used to carry this same toy 8-ball with him wherever he would go. It was his lucky charm, he’d joke, and more often than not it was almost true. Just for the hell of it sometimes he’d use the thing to make some decision or other, just to see what would happen. By sheer blind luck, or perhaps misfortune depending on your perspective, he had a winning streak. Every time he consulted Mr. Lucky, things went wildly right. They went from a couple of freaks selling dope out of back of a van to being in charge of a BLEEPing gang, running hookers, protection, and every kind of drug imaginable. Money flowing like water. He took to keeping Mr. Lucky out of sight, consulting him when it was only big questions. He didn’t want Mr. Lucky to run out any time soon.
It was about five years ago that he noticed that Mr. Lucky’s advice got a lot more detailed, more clever, more useful when he hit a little something before one of their talks. At that time they were starting to pull in and put out a lot of the truly weird stuff. Peyote, Kava, Jimsonweed, shrooms, acid, jungle frog spit, you name it… It was during an experimental phase that Skidmark hit on just the right blend of dope, salvia, ritalin, and a few other herbs and spices that made his consultations with Mr. Lucky even more fruitful. Mr. Lucky’s suggestions were more brilliant than ever, and thanks to the magic pills Skidmark would walk out of his little room with every detail burned into his brain in mile high neon letters. He’d never managed to make that mix just right ever again, so he husbanded his last bottle of the dried, pressed pills like they were gold.

He waited until the colors and edges of everything started to ripple, then picked up the ball and shook it.

He waited a minute. It took a while for Mr. Lucky to wake up. The words finally appeared in the little window.

HELLO, OLD FRIEND.
HOW ARE YOU?

“Doin’ good, Mr. Lucky,” Skidmark said with a lazy smile. “Doin’ real good like always. Got me a problem, though.”

GO ON.

“Some BLEEPers are hittin’ my dealers, my runners. They even got one of my shipments. Bam bam bam, night after night, five, six, ten times a night. And they ain’t lettin’ up. It’s startin’ to hurt morale, y’dig?”

DESCRIBE THEM.

“My boys are seein’ all sorts o’… things. A tiger. An owl. A wolf-man. Mostly the wolf-man.” He decided not to mention the tree or the walrus. There was a long pause. Then the words bubbled up.

HIS NAME IS SKINWALKER.
HE IS VERY DANGEROUS.
YOU MUST ELIMINATE HIM.
Skidmark nodded; that was the gospel truth, right there. “Question is, how?”

DRAW HIM OUT.

“Okay, how?? We stick our noses out, he hits us, then he vanishes before we even knew he was there.”

There was another long wait while Mr. Lucky thought. Skidmark was cool, though; the longer Mr. Lucky took to think, the better his ideas were. He sat and watched the colors swirl around the edge of the cosmic void.

HE HUNTS YOU.

“Yeah, I got that,” Skidmark said, nodding like a bobbing doll.

HE ALSO HUNTS
NAZIS.

“Do tell.”

PRESS THE E88.
FIGHT THEM. DRAW
THEM OUT.

A SMALL
TURF FIGHT,
NO CAPES.

BUT
HE WILL NOT
BE ABLE TO RESIST.

Skidmarks lips peeled back from his teeth, making him look like a rotting jack o’ lantern. “I get it. The BLEEP won’t be able to resist the chance to bust a buncha junkies and a buncha Nazis too.”

WHEN HE INTERVENES, YOUR CAPES WILL BE WAITING FOR HIM.

AND IF YOU ARE LUCKY, THE E88 WILL KILL HIM FOR YOU.

Skidmark’s gruesome grin grew wider. “I always am with you around, Mr. Lucky.”
It was that time again. Adrian sighed as he trudged down the second floor hall to Mr. Gladly’s classroom. He’d been nailed for detention again—this time, after school. A couple of asian kids had taken a potshot at him in the hallway… God only knew what THEIR beef was with him… And Gladly (the tosser) had spotted them scuffling and pinned the blame on him for “agitating the situation.” Adrian had snapped at him for his bias, pointing out that they had jumped HIM. Gladly had swelled up like a balloon and started huffing about respect for your elders, etc. and dropped the boom: after school detention.

On top of his IN school detention he was only halfway through serving.

So now he was getting to spend a couple hours AFTER the school closed sitting with Gladly in an empty classroom, to inflate the popularity-schmoozing loser’s flaccid ego.

Adrian growled to himself. He was getting herded away from Taylor’s side more and more often, and he had a good suspicion it wasn’t accidental. Several of the teachers had taken to ordering him to sit on the opposite side of the classroom. Blackwell had unilaterally changed his schedule so that they shared fewer classes. Even in his off periods, when he’d normally sit in the bleachers and watch Taylor during her gym class, the gym coach had taken to running him off, dropping hints about “improper behavior”…. Not quite accusing him of being a perv, but getting as close as she dared.

It wasn’t long after he’d snagged Madison trying to dump pencil shavings on Taylor’s back that it started. It wasn’t hard to guess what had happened. Someone had dropped the hint that he and Taylor were “troublemakers” when they got together. Probably with a few bambi-eyed stories about him “threatening” them, and maybe some little hints from another of the bimbettes about her lawyer Daddy, and how rough it could get if they didn’t stop this mean old boy from picking on his precious little girl.

He had to wonder what kind of leverage the Ward of the trio was shifting. Claiming she was investigating him as a possible drug dealer or supervillain flunky, maybe?

Once the staff had started driving him off, they’d taken on targeting Taylor again. He’d spotted her in the hallway going the other way one day; head down, it looked like water or soda had been poured over her head and down her back. He was seething, but at that precise moment what could he do?

He grunted and yawned. Between the drama here at Waste Of Youth High, running his little side business (At least it was officially winter now and he could roll up the pushcart till spring… the online business was still ticking though) and all the projects he had been working on in the Lost Workshop for the Wards, almost since the day of his arrival, had been keeping him up. That and harrying the Merchants whenever and wherever, dropping the boom on the occasional Nazi or ABB gangbanger on the way… When was the last full night of sleep he’d had? Two, three days ago? If that?

He slumped into the room and closed the door behind him. Surprise surprise, he wasn’t alone today. There were three other kids there: one asian kid in the corner seat, ignoring everybody; A black girl sitting off to the left, feet propped up on the back of the next chair, rocking her chair on two legs and looking bored. The asian guy, he was sporting ABB colors as casually as you please. The girl, she was wearing a strapless crop top, mesh tights cutoff jeans that were halfway up her butt, a purple streak in her hair and an insolent look on her face. And on the right…

“Hey, Faux Hawk,” Adrian said, amused. “Imagine seeing you here.”
“Yeah, imagine that, a neonazi wannabe in detention,” the girl muttered.

Hawk (he’d adopted the stupid name as his own after he’d heard Adrian say it, but dropped the “faux”) grinned at him. “Hey, pal,” he said in his best sleazy voice. “Wanna be a NAAAAAAAZI?”

Adrian grinned. This had become a running joke between them ever since that first day at lunch. He gave the expected response. “Oy, have you got the wrong meshugeneh,” he said. The asian kid actually smothered a laugh; the black girl looked at them both like she couldn’t decide whether to be offended or confused.

“Mister Smith!” Mr. Gladly said. Ah, there he was, behind the desk where an educator normally sat. Pity there wasn't one available.

“--Present.”

He started, stopped in annoyance and started again. “Mr. Smith, I do not want to hear that sort of humor in here again.”

Adrian stared at him for a second. Really? “Okay, how about this one: Two Jews walk into a bar--”

“NO!”

Adrian gave him his best “Achmed the Dead Terrorist”. “What? You would not let Jews into your BAR? You racist bastard!”

“MISTER SMITH!” Gladly barked, fuming. Wow, where was all this spine when Gladly was dealing with the juvie hall candidates in his regular class? The other three students spluttered and snickered. “Find a seat, sit down and stop causing trouble.”

Adrian shrugged, and slid into the first seat handy. Gladly picked up his clipboard and looked it over.

“Aisha Laborn.”

“Present,” the black girl said, rolling her eyes and looking even more bored.

Oh crap. Grue’s baby sister. Grue, aka Brian Laborn, was the erstwhile leader of the Undersiders; a gang of small time villains who were (except for their thinker Tattletale) unknowingly working for Coil. Apparently Aisha hadn’t triggered yet, otherwise she wouldn’t even be here. In the main timeline her powers as Imp had made people forget she even existed the moment they looked away—sort of like those aliens with the suits and bulging heads on Dr. Who. And in the main timeline she had been anything but bashful about using that power at every opportunity. Detention? When she could walk right out of the classroom whenever she wanted and the teacher wouldn’t even remember she existed? Not a chance. In the original timeline she had naturally gone straight from Juvenile Delinquent to Career Villain without so much as a pause. She, and the Undersiders, were on Adrian’s ever-expanding list of people he either had to stop or to save, and possibly both. And that on top of preventing the end of the world.

But hey. No pressure. Right?

“John Muller.”

“Here,” Faux Hawk said, holding up his hand.

“Adrian Smith.”
“Well I dunno,” Adrian said with a small smirk. “It HAS been almost thirty whole seconds and--”

Gladly sighed. “Just say present, Mr. Smith.”

“Well you’re no fun...”

“Mister Smith do I have to--”

“Fine, fine, Present.”

“Tommy Wong.”

“Here,� the asian kid muttered.

“Good.” Gladly signed the attendance sheet with a flourish and threw it on the desk. “You four are here for the next four hours. If you give me any trouble, you’ll be back here again next week. And the next. And then every DAY of the week, until we get that little discipline problem you all have under control.

“Now I’m going down to the office to do some computer work and run off some print copies for tomorrow’s class. You are to stay in here, be quiet, and cause no trouble. Anything other than that, I will do my level best to make your lives miserable. Understood?” Everyone mumbled. “I said-”

“Understood,” everyone droned. Adrian could hear that he wasn’t the only one gritting his teeth.

“Good.” Gladly left, folders under his arm and back stiff, closing the door behind him.

“What a tool,” Hawk said.

“Are you kidding? His middle name should be ‘Craftsman,’” Adrian said, his humor coming back. The others snickered. “Kinda sad. If he had some spine in his class, he wouldn’t be spending his afternoons here doing this.”

“Oh hey. Heard about Spike in the locker room, tryin’ to jump you,” Hawk said. “Sorry about that. He’s a tard.” He paused. “Did you really...?”

“Snap him in the nards with a rat tail? Yup.” Adrian pulled his sunglasses down over his eyes and leaned back in his seat.

Aisha went round eyed. “You what??”

“You heard him,” Hawk said, suddenly getting sullen as he realized a non-white was talking in his direction. Adrian intercepted before any slurs could be sparked off.

“Yeah, guy came over and started squealing about how he thought I was gay. Probably says that about everyone that wears deodorant.”

Hawk had to laugh at that one. “Yeah, Spike’s kind of a jackass.”

“That’s putting it lightly,” Adrian snarked. “He’s so homophobic he can only eat a banana sideways.”

“HAH!” Aisha said. “Good one.”

Tommy Wong spoke up. “I can’t believe you two,” he said.
“What about us?”

Tommy looked back at them and sneered. “You two sitting there cracking jokes with a Nazi,” he said.

“So whaddya want me to do? Walk in and start a fight with him? A cage match maybe?”

“She’s black! And you’re a Jew!”

“He’s not a Jew,” Hawk said dismissively.

“I might be,” Adrian corrected him. He held up his VicAlert tag. “Amnesia victim. Supervillain with memory gas.”

“Wow, that sucks,” Aisha said. “So what makes you think you might be a Jew…?”

"Think about it," Adrian said, resting his chin in his hand and giving her a lazy smile. "What's one thing ALL male Jews have in common?"

"I don't... Awh man, you nasty," she said as he made several meaningful glances downward and she realized what he was implying. Hawk laughed so hard he nearly fell backwards out of his chair. “Oh shut up!” she snapped.

“--Potato pancakes,” Adrian said seriously. "Can’t live without ‘em. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, gotta have ‘em.”

“Har dee har...” she went “fch” at him and sat back, arms crossed. “That all you do? Tell racist jokes?”

“Sure. Everyone’s racist. White people got racism. Black people got reverse racism. Chinese people got sideways racism. Jews got backwards racism--” He stopped for a second and got sober. “You fight with people, all you see is enemies. You laugh with ‘em, it’s hard not to see just another person with problems like your own. Maybe if we all laughed a little more and got mad a little less, we wouldn’t be having all these problems.” Some of them thought that over for a minute.

“Yeah, well if Gladly hears you telling jokes like that he’ll get his tighty whities in a knot like you wouldn’t believe,” Tommy said.

“Yeah, the big hypocrite,” Aisha said. At their confused looks she pointed around. “A neonazi, a chinese guy, a black chick and a jew, all thrown together in detention. Like he was picking us out for a color combo sampler platter. All he has to do is have us walk into a bar together.” She rolled her lip. “This has gotta be the most racist detention in the history of public school.”

Adrian started to chuckle. It was a deep sound, surprising even from a fellow his size, and it threatened to break into a full blown belly laugh. “Hey,” he said, lifting his sunglasses and giving the others the side-eye. “You ever hear the story of the world’s most RACIST field trip?”

The others looked curious. “Racist field trip?” Hawk said.

“Yeah...” Adrian’s gaze drifted, he smiled almost wistfully. “I dunno if I knew the guy, or just saw a video of the guy, or heck, maybe I WAS the guy (screw amnesia, really) but I remember it was a true story...” he sat up, eagerly grinning, his hands moving as he told the story. “Okay, so this guy-- a black guy, of course-- is talking about when he was in third grade, in Montgomery Alabama, and his teacher got it in her little wooden head to take all 30 kids in her class on a field trip. All 30 little black kids. On a field trip.
“To a cotton farm.”

Even the Chinese kid said it. “Oh, no way.”

Adrian nodded, grinning madly. “So they get there, and the teacher hands all these kids plastic bags, with a little cotton puff person on the side, and told them they could pick as much cotton as they wanted...”

Gladly stapled his last stack of papers, gathered them up and headed back to the classroom. He was halfway down the hall when he heard Adrian Smith, the wannabe class clown, talking. And the others… laughing? He opened the door and looked in.

Adrian was apparently in full swing, reciting some crude story or joke of his. The other three students were laughing their backsides off. The nazi kid was hooting and pounding on his desktop with his fist, while the asian boy had his head resting on his arms on the desk and was laughing so hard he shook. Aisha was leaning back in her chair till it was balanced on two legs, head laid back and laughing at the ceiling.

“And so his mama finds the cotton in his pants pocket in the laundry the next day, gets the story out of him, and in case you didn’t guess, that’s when something broke off.” The others hooted. “She goes down to the school, corners the teacher in her classroom and just RAILS on her. “You jive-ass mutha. How DARE you take my boy, and all these other ashy li’l negroes, out to a COTTON PLANT to PICK COTTON for a field trip? You SOULLESS--”

“MISTER SMITH!” Gladly shrilled. Adrian stopped in mid-word; everyone stopped laughing and looked back at Gladly in the doorway. He huffed and fumed, the picture of limp-wristed, metrosexual progressive outrage. “Never have I heard such offensive, racist - “ he sputtered to a halt and raised his chin. “I’m going to drop these off in the projector room. When I get back I’m writing up a report for your permanent record-- and I’m sending an email to Principal Blackwood about your offensive stories and language and behavior!”

“Hey, lay off him,” Aisha said. “It wasn’t racist. It was just a story!”

Gladly suddenly turned earnest. “Miss Laborne, you have to understand,” he said, as if talking to a little child. “We have to crack down on this sort of racially insensitive behavior. We do it for the sake of those like yourself--”

That was exactly the wrong thing to say. Adrian had to choke back a laugh; he all but saw Satan flash across her face before she even spoke. She got to her feet, hands on hips, and swelled up. She even started doing the side-to-side head bob thing. “And who told you, you jive ass turkey, that I needed YOU to take care of my poor little delicate feelings?” She rared up. “And what do you MEAN, “people like me?” You patronizing RACIST CRACKER-- Am I gonna have to give a report to Principal Blackwell about how this detention-givin’-out BIGOT told me, a BLACK GIRL, that I couldn’t--”

Gladly got so agitated it looked like he was going to pee himself like a distressed poodle."All right,
“all right, all right!” he said in a panic. "I'll let it go this time..." He tried to back out of the room without making it too obvious his tail was between his legs. “W-we'll sort this out when I get back,” he said-- and bolted.

Clap.... Clap.... Clap. Aisha turned around. Hawk had his arms stretched out full length and was slowly applauding. Adrian mimed holding up a statuette in his hands. In a cheesy “breathy awards actress” voice he said. “And now, for the category of ‘Best Performance as a Sassy Young Black Woman with a Short Fuse,’ the award goes tooo... Aisha Laborne! Yaaaay!” Tommy joined in on the applause.

Adrian held out the imaginary statue; Aisha pretended to take it and did a little curtsey. “You like me, you really like me!” She said, bouncing up and down in place. She sat down to Tommy and Hawk’s laugh and Adrian’s slow booming chuckle. “Okay, what was all that about? He’s got two gang members and a juvenile delinquent in the room, and he comes in and zooms on you? What’s his problem?”

“Uh, he’s a doink?” Adrian suggested.

Aisha gave him a Look™. “Come on, spill.”

Adrian sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “Couple things. Called him on his bull a couple of times, for one thing. But that’s tied in to bigger stuff. You know Sophia Hess and her two side-bimbos, Madison and Emma, right?”

“You mean thunderbitch and the slags?” Tommy sneered.

Aisha raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah, those three.” there were entire categories of dismissal in her tone. “What about ‘em?”

“When I first got here, they were running a total hate campaign on this one girl named Taylor,” Adrian went on.

“Wait, Taylor? You mean the girl with the hoodie? That girl everyone says is a headcase?” Aisha said.

Adrian growled to himself and started to retort, but it was Tommy who spoke. “You mean everyone, or just the popular girls?” he said pointedly.

Aisha looked thoughtful, like she was recalling all the times she’d heard stuff… and who’d been around saying it. “Oh. Yeah.” she grimaced.

“They were just… utterly trying to destroy her life,” Adrian said. “Trashing her stuff, starting gossip about her, hate mail, tripping her, punching her-- everything you could think of and worse.” He could feel himself seething. “When I met her, she was almost a shell… she...” he stopped.

“Well, I stepped in and got in their way,” he said. “Started looking out for her. Made friends with her. And Daddy’s Little Princesses didn’t like that.” His lips were thin and pressed tight. “And all of a sudden Blackwell, and the teachers, and the staff are all hearing from somewhere that I’m a troublemaker, and that I’m turning Taylor into a troublemaker. And the skinheads are hearing that I’m a gay, and the black kids and the asian kids are hearing I’m E88, and even the potheads are hearing that I’m a narc, of all things… and the staff is going out of its way to give me detention, or get me suspended, and especially to keep me away from poor little easily corrupted Taylor. Changing our seating, changing our schedules...

“And now I’m out of the way the three of them are laying into her again. And there’s stuff coming
up, I can’t say more, but I’m gonna be out of the picture even more. And I just—” Adrian buried his head in his arms, exhausted.

“Dang,” Aisha said solemnly.

Hawk kicked back. “Y’know, I could ask some of the brothers to look in on her, if you want,” he said casually. “You know, being a white sister and all—”

“Uh, Hawk, don’t take this the wrong way, but that would be extraordinarily bad,” Adrian said awkwardly. “Nazi teens picking a fight with the school’s black star athlete… I wanna keep Taylor safe, not start a race war.” And Shadow Stalker would rip through your friends like a baloney slicer on high, he thought to himself. “But it’s cool you’re willing to step up.”

Hawk shrugged and looked away. "Hey, whatever. Thought I'd offer," he said.

If what Hawk said surprised him, what Aisha said next took Adrian completely off guard. After a long pause, she said, "You maybe would be better off with a soul sister keeping an eye on her for ya? I can do that."

Adrian looked at her, his eyebrows raised. "Are you offering? Why, you don't even know either of us."

Aisha snorted. "No, but I know the Bitches Three," she said with a shrug. "I'm more 'n happy to pee in their cornflakes anyway, might as well do it for a noble cause or somethin'. At least I can give you a heads up if your girl's in trouble." She smirked. "Sides, I like the idea of the toughest guy in school owing me a favor."

Adrian nodded; that sounded a little more like the Aisha he knew about. And he'd been in Winslow long enough to know that favor-cutting was a thing there, even between members of rival gangs. More than one nasty fight had been averted because one guy owed the other a solid. "I wouldn't mind that," he said.

Tommy held up his hands. "Hey, don’t look at me,” he said, amused. “I’m leaving the white-knighthing to you crazy gaijin."

Adrian couldn’t resist. He lifted up his sunglasses and gave Tommy puppy-dog eyes. “It’s because I’m black, isn’t it,” he pouted.

Tommy looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “You're white,” he said.

“Really?” Adrian whipped his sunglasses off and looked at his hand. “Huh. DARN that amnesia—”

Hawk nearly choked laughing.

It was the first of several detentions they all served together. By the end of the last one, Adrian would be wishing sincerely that he knew what to do for Tommy... or Aisha... or Hawk. They were messed up kids, but they were still kids... just doing what they thought they had to do to survive. But how could anyone sort out that mess without bringing the whole Jenga tower down?
The alarm chimed in his ear. Groaning, he opened one eye. He cursed when he saw the time; he’d gotten less than three hour’s sleep. Again. The skylight was dark; it had snowed again, blotting out the light from the outside. It was certainly cold enough-- he’d kept fires going in both his forges to cut the chill.

He stretched and yawned and ran his claws through his fur. No matter what form he took, he always woke up as a worgen. That worried him sometimes. If he fell asleep someplace other than his lair it could cost him his secret identity. Still, you couldn’t beat having your own fur coat in the winter.

For now though the anti-Merchant campaign had to continue. Those parasites had to GO. Too much depended on it. He took a quick cold shower, trying to get his blood pumping, and scarfed down a breakfast of cold tinned… well, whatever. He wasn’t reading labels. Meat product of some sort. In less than thirty minutes he was out in the night, pawprints trailing behind him in the rooftop snow.

Something had to break soon. He was getting out on the ragged edge; he felt tired and worn all the time now. If it weren’t for his powers he’d be an exhausted mess. That could cost him--

His ears pricked. Somewhere in the distance, he heard gunfire.

Instantly he was aloft, racing in the direction of the gunshots on silent wings. When he got there, he perched on a telephone pole and tried to figure out what he was seeing. It was a gang fight, that much was a no brainer. But he saw a dozen or so wearing E88 colors, getting pressed by over twenty Merchants. Bayleaf reviewed his mental map; this was several blocks into E88 territory. What were these stoner idiots doing here?

From the look of it the Merchants had gotten a toxic dose of Stupid and tried to set up shop in E88 turf. He could see one Merchant scrambling in the slush, trying to gather up spilled baggies and stuff them in his ratty coat. The Skinheads had apparently objected, shown up with baseball bats, knives and chains to beat some better manners into the stoners. But they’d been quickly outnumbered, and had apparently dropped their melee weapons in the snow and pulled out pistols and shotguns. There were Merchants and Aryans bleeding in the streets.

Adrian found himself struggling to pull together a mental strategy. The noise and chaos was growing. The Merchants for all their screaming weren’t breaking and running, instead taking cover behind parked cars and dumpsters and overturned trash cans and actually making a stand of it.

Adrian could see a pickup truck coming down the road-- more E88, probably, the bed of the truck full of people wielding bats, boards, and chains and worse. Bullets were flying wild; he heard a window shatter and a distant scream.

Plan or no, he had to intervene before some poor innocent at home got killed by a stray bullet. He transformed back into his worgen form, crouched atop the telephone pole, and quickly gestured. A beam of light fell seemingly out of the sky, illuminating the largest group of E88, disorienting and blinding them. A second gesture, and the biggest cluster of Merchants was likewise illuminated. Then a third gesture and the street in between the groups was illumated by yet another Solar Beam. Time to hit the spotlight. Bayleaf leapt down into the street, landing in a crouch in the center of the light. He wrapped his cloak around himself in a cocoon, cast BarkSkin on himself for good measure, and held still.

It worked, for a given measure of work. Everyone stopped firing blindly into the night and instead concentrated their fire on him. Bullets pummeled against him from all sides, making the thick gnarled coating he had grown splinter and crack. It was (at the moment) all small-arms fire, so his cloak was
tough enough to handle it, and BarkSkin added an extra layer of defense-- but were it not for his healing powers, no one would envy him the spattering of bruises he'd have the next day.

The gunfire lulled for a moment, whether from everyone needing to reload or simple confusion at their failure to perforate him, he couldn't say. He heard the pickup roaring down the street. He flicked aside his robe and cast a Solar Wrath straight into the engine. There was an almighty bang and the truck began spewing smoke; it veered to a halt and neonazi punks poured out of the truckbed. All save one; he was struggling to bring something mounted on the roof to bear, but the swivel mount was apparently jammed.

_Holy crap, they've got a Ma Deuce_, Bayleaf realized.

He was probably wrong; he was not exactly informed on the make, caliber, or design of all the possible roof-mounted heavy machine guns out there. But he wasn't sweating the details. It was big, heavy, rapid fire and in a minute it was going to be pointed his way.

He took a deep breath, cast Displacer Beast, and teleported the fifty feet to the truck.

The would-be gunner suddenly found himself having a very bad day. He had just gotten the gun mount unstuck and drawn a bead on the Cape crouching in the street twenty yards away when his target had disappeared-- and reappeared as a roaring, angry grizzly bear all but standing on his chest. The swat of a single paw sent the nazi gunman flying, and Bayleaf immediately turned and tackled the weapon. This thing could shoot through entire buildings; he was NOT leaving it in play.

He had just wrenched it free of its mount and had begun bending the barrel double when something enormous hit him and the truck he was standing on. The truck went flying one way, Bayleaf went flying another. He tumbled to a halt in the middle of the street and got to his hands and knees, shaking the fuzzies out of his head.

“Skidmark says hi, dog boy,” someone said.

Bayleaf looked up. The guy that struck him was standing there in the street, a greasy haired, balding man with a three day growth of stubble on his chin and a yellow-toothed smirk on his face. He was dressed, if that was the word, in a steam and soot-belching mecha that looked like it was bashed together out of rusting car parts.

“Trainwreck.” Bayleaf snarled.

Trainwreck snorted. “Listen to you. Like we’re mortal enemies on some old movie serial. Is “so we meet again” your next line?” He swung one massive metal fist in a sweeping arc. Bayleaf kipped backward, barely dodging. He felt the wind of the fist sweeping past him; it would have been like-- well like getting hit by a train.

Behind him he heard the gunfire starting up again. He snarled and dropped to all fours, slapping a glowing hand to the ground. One of the interrelations of his powers, the same power that enabled him to create the entangling vines he used so much also enabled him to create crude duplicates of his tree-man form. They weren’t truly sapient, having only crude simple subroutines cut and pasted into their vegetable brains-- go here, do this, attack that-- and they didn’t last very long, but they were certainly a hell of a handful for most adversaries. He created three, then three more in rapid succession, and sent them scurrying towards the sounds of conflict to attack and subdue anyone who was fighting. That would be enough to keep the mooks busy while he dealt with the Merchant cape in front of him.

“Ooh, you’re just a big bag full of tricks, aintcha?” Trainwreck mocked. His fists came down in an
overhead hammerblow, shattering the pavement just behind the dodging worgen. Bayleaf was starting to seriously regret not loading out with his more mechanically inclined toys tonight…

The universal remote! He whipped it out of his haversack, aimed it at the attacking cape and pressed the button. For a split second Trainwreck’s suit halted and shuddered. Then there was a sound like a cuckoo clock coming apart at the hinges, and the remote burst into sparks and smoke. Pieces flew in every direction. Bayleaf growled in exasperation and threw the smoking remnants away. Whatever physics-bending energies Trainwreck’s Shard was using to hold that pile of junk together, they were too strong to be tweaked by a simple piece of gnomish tech.

Trainwreck laughed. “Even I build ‘em better than that!” He pointed one fist at Bayleaf. A valve in his arm opened and a jet of boiling steam shot out, engulfing the worgen and filling the street with billowing clouds. Bayleaf barely cast a Heal in time; the curative aura just barely mending his skin as fast as the punishing steam parboiled it. Through the blinding pain he had one thought: he was going to have to open up all the way if he wanted to survive this.

Claws and fangs grew, muscle swelled and his scream of pain became a feral bellow as he opened up to the most powerful form he had. He didn’t like using it: it drained him deeply to activate it, and guzzled power to maintain it. But if he was going toe to toe with a brute like Trainwreck it was the only option. When the steam parted what emerged was not a worgen, but a twelve-foot-tall werebear. It roared like the wrath of Nature itself and lunged at him. They went tumbling, rusting iron fists and claws flying.

Trainwreck soon was starting to regret his life decisions. Grizzlies aren’t just strong, they’re deceptively, terrifyingly fast, and one with the advantages of a werebeast even more so. Werebear-mode Skinwalker was all over him like white on rice, ripping chunks out of his battlemech with his jaws and massive clawed fists wherever he could get a grip. And Trainwreck was too thick-limbed and clumsy to either land a blow on him or get him in his grasp.

Bayleaf had climbed up on Trainwreck’s back and was in the process of peeling away the plating there to get at the boiler when the sky suddenly lit up like day. Startled, everyone looked up, just in time to see a spiral beam of light fall out of the sky and sever Trainwreck’s robot arm at the shoulder. The junkie Tinker screamed and cursed, staggering from the imbalance as his arm, large as a compact car, crashed to the ground.

Bayleaf was knocked free and went flying, landing on the pavement and dwindling to his baseline worgen form as he rolled. He got to all fours, crouched and ready to move. Inside he was really panicking. Purity. It was Purity. Oh crap oh crap oh crap.

Purity, aka Kayden Anders, wife… or ex-wife… of Max Anders, CEO of Medhall Corporation and the leader of the Empire Eighty Eight. She was (or had been) second-in-command of E88, and was also one of the world’s most powerful Blasters. She was more or less completely out of Bayleaf or Trainwreck’s weight class. She pounded Trainwreck, severing another arm and then one leg at the knee; the tinker cape finally had enough and jettisoned his remaining limbs, his mecha’s torso turning into a crude three-wheeled motorcar. It belched black smoke and raced off down the street, swerving left and disappearing down an alley.

Bayleaf thought frantically. How much trouble he was in depended entirely where on the timeline he was. At this point, was she still married to Kaiser? Or had she already left and was in the phase where she was trying to redeem herself as a rogue hero?

To judge by the cheering from the Nazi side of the battle as she set down lances of light at the Merchants, sending them running, the odds weren’t good. But then she turned and blasted the remains of the E88’s pickup truck and its Ma Deuce, blasting both to pieces in a ball of flame. The
cheers from the Nazis stopped pretty much instantly.

“LEAVE,” she said. Then helixed bands of light began lashing down indiscriminately, blowing craters out of the pavement and sending everyone running. After several seconds of this, both the Merchants and the E88 had clearly decided discretion was the part of valor and had fled.

Purity floated down, her light dimming until Bayleaf could discern the female form in the middle of the blot of light. She spotted him taking cover in the lee of an abandoned car, and drifted in his direction. When she spoke he was actually surprised to hear a normal female voice; he’d been expecting something more echoing and aetherial. “You’re the Skinwalker?” she said. Bayleaf nodded, too exhausted to speak. “Tend to the wounded,” she said. “I can’t stay. The police and the EMTs are inbound but it will be at least another twenty to thirty minutes...”

“What’s going on?” Bayleaf demanded. “What started this?”

Purity sounded vexed. “Skidmark has had another one of his sparks of brilliance, and decided to expand his territory into the territory controlled by the E88. His dealers just... showed up and started setting up shop, right on Empire streets. He couldn’t have asked for a response from Kaiser more clearly than if he’d gone up and begged for him to start a street war. There are three more places where blowups like this are happening-- every Empire footsoldier and recruit is out, and it looks like every junkie in Brockton Bay is out too--” she actually sighed. “I have to go. I’ll send help if I can--” she shot into the sky and zipped off to the next site of chaos, a glowing star trailing a streamer of light.

Bayleaf looked around. There wasn’t much he could do besides what he said. He bound the unconscious or wounded gangbangers in vines and began pulling out his enhanced bandages. The gangsters cussed him and moaned about their injuries. He ignored them, and if the wounds were minor enough he threw rolls of bandage at them for them to bind themselves up.

There was a choking sound. He hastily followed it to its source; a teenage punk lying on his back in the street, a sawed-off baseball bat clutched in his hand and blood coating his chest. He was skinny, pimpled, wore a patched leather jacket and had his hair greased into a faux mohawk.

No, Bayleaf dove to the ground at Hawk’s side. The boy’s eyes rolled over to him; he started to panic when he saw the wolf-man crouched over him. “No, it’s okay, it’s okay,” Bayleaf soothed. “I’m here to help.” He planted one hand carefully on Hawk’s shredded chest and began pouring Heal after Heal after Purify after Heal into him.

The heals weren’t holding.

His hand fished in his pouch for more of his bandages. The Purify made the lead shotgun pellets squeeze out and trickle to the sidewalk. He wrapped bandages around Hawk’s chest, trying to hold the blood back, to hold the life in. “What the hell are you doing out here, kid? What the hell are you doing out here?” he moaned to himself.

Hawk looked at him and coughed. Blood flecked his lips. “Ju... just wanted to earn my tats,” he said, shaking in pain.

“How’s your tatt?” Bayleaf said. That was it, keep him awake, keep him talking.

Hawk nodded, his eyes glossy. “Merchant pukes started setting up shop on our streets. Th-the recruiters came around, said a-anyone who stepped up a-and defended our turf..” he coughed again. “Would be made full members. Get our ink done.” He smiled. “I had a sweet one picked out...eagles and shit.”
Bayleaf tried to smile even as his hands worked, layering the bandages on, casting another heal, casting an Efflorescence nearby so the plant’s healing aura overlapped them. “What, no naked chicks?” he teased.

Hawk tried to laugh and choked, his eyes rolling. “Oh don’t make me laugh...”

Bayleaf glanced down at his hand, at the double lightning bolt etched there on his middle finger. “Looks like you already got ink,” he said.


Bayleaf couldn’t help it; he chuckled. The instant Hawk heard that low, booming noise his eyes went round.

“...Adrian?”

There was no point in lying. “Yeah. It’s me.”

“Holy...” His smile of amazement was beautiful and ghastly. “Holy crap. Whaddya know.”

“Yeah, whaddya know.”

“Guess you were right,” he said. He struggled for a breath. “They didn’t fix a thing. All that pride, and that hate, and all those promises, and all they got me was shot in the gut by a junkie with a shotgun.” The irony in his next words all but dripped off tongue. “A white, blonde haired blue eyed junkie, wouldja believe it?”

Bayleaf laughed, his heart racing as he cast another Efflorescence, and another. Why wasn’t the Gift of Elune boosting everything enough? “Guess that’s irony for you.”

Hawk suddenly looked sad. “I shoulda listened to my Sunday School teacher,” he said.

“How do you mean?” Bayleaf said. *Come ON, why isn’t it HEALING FASTER--*

Hawk smiled. His voice was breathy.

“*Jesus loves the little children,*

*All the children of the world,*

*Red and Yellow, Black and White*

*they are precious in his sight*

*Jesus loves the little children*

*of the world...”*

“Someone needs to tell Kaiser that,” he mumbled.

“I’d have to agree to that, yeah.”
“….Think He still loves me?” Hawk said, his eyes wet and his voice mumbling.

“What would your Sunday School teacher say?” Bayleaf said. He didn’t look up from his hands, they were blazing with green light now.

Hawk smiled. “Oh yeah. Right.” He started humming. It took a moment for Bayleaf to recognize the tune.

Yes, Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, yes, Jesus loves me, the bible…

The humming stopped. “No,” Bayleaf said. “NO! Keep talking, keep singing, do something, do anything, DON’T GO TO SLEEP--” he started doing chest compressions. He poured on the heals and purifies till the light stopped coming, he took out more bandages and kept wrapping even as the body cooled. “No, dammit, no no, no you will NOT… you gotta go to school tomorrow, Hawk, you don’t wanna get detention again right? Come on come on come on…” His words dissolved into a blur, into desperate animal whimpering as he pressed on the dead boy’s chest with blood covered hands.

The squad cars screeched to a halt, forming a circle around the crouched inhuman form a half second ahead of the ambulance. Anderson climbed out, gun at the ready and took cover behind his car door as he took stock of the scene. What he saw would haunt him the rest of his life; an enormous, black furred wolfman in a cloak, kneeling in the street, cradling the dead body of some punk kid in his blood-covered arms, crying and whimpering like--- well, he hadn’t heard anything make that sound since his father died and the family dog had found the body. The anguished noises the old hound had made, trying to wake his master, still haunted him at nights. The werewolf was making those exact same sounds.

He lowered his gun and sidled closer… but not too close. Those claws looked huge. “Okay, let the medics take him,” he said in his calm-but-commanding voice. “There’s nothing you can do anymore, let him go…” carefully, the EMTs lifted the boy’s body-- jeez, he had to have a hundred yards of bandages wrapped around him-- and carried it off on a stretcher.

The wolfman reared back his head till his nose was pointed at the sky and HOWLED.

Halfway across the city a quartet of would be criminal masterminds halted on their trek across the snowclad rooftops. Hellhound’s mutant dogs stopped in their tracks, whimpering in fear as a howl--a howl from the mother of all wolves-- echoed in the winter sky. The dogs had been enlarged till
they were the size of minivans, covered with muscle and bony spikes, but even at their most massive and powerful they knew an Alpha when they heard one.

Tattletale shivered and pulled her coat closer around her. (Screw supervillain style, it was freezing out and she’d bundled up.) That sound had gotten her Power’s attention, but for a shocker all she was getting back from it was surprise and confusion.

Regent spoke for all of them. “What in all the kung fu hells was THAT?”

Grue looked over at Tattletale. “Got any info?”

Tattletale shook her head. Her Power had gotten over its discombobulation and was feeding her… a little info anyway. “It’s that new cape, Skinwalker,” she said. “Sounds like he’s feeling Hungry like the Wolf.”

Another howl echoed through the concrete valleys, if anything deeper, louder and longer than the first.

“Um, I have never heard anyone, or anything, make a sound like that,” Regent stated in his all-too-calm voice. “And I would… really rather not know why, and I’d be in another state at the time I find out.”

“He’s suffering,” Hellhound-- Rachel-- said suddenly. The others looked at her where she sat astride one of her dogs. She returned the stare. For once, she was not radiating hostility. “I made that sound once,” she said, uncommonly soft, looking in the direction the howl came from. She patted her chest. “…Here. Inside. When my foster mother was killing my dog by drowning him in the swimming pool.”

The others ruminated on that awful revelation, and on what it meant here. Another howl tore the night; vast, savage, feral. Tattletale spoke up. “He’s not just suffering,” she said with conviction. “He’s enraged. More than enraged. He’s going to find the thing that hurt him, and he’s going to make it suffer like he did… and God help anything that happens to be in his way.”

They all fell silent for several moments at that. “Well!” Regent said in radiant cheer. “That sounds like OUR cue to scrub this diamond heist, go back home, lock all the doors and hide under our beds with all the lights on till the angry vengeful werewolf superhero is all done with whatever he wants to do!”

There was something of a unanimous vocal agreement, and Hellhound’s dogs all turned around and headed back for the Undersider’s lair with all due speed.

BAYLEAF IS GONE.

THE SKINWALKER WAS JUST A NAME.

THE WARCRAFTER IS COMING.
The next few weeks, the Archer’s Bridge Merchants learned the name of a demon.

It was a demon that hunted them day and night, in the docks, in the trainyard, downtown, uptown, Shantytown--anywhere they went. It struck from the shadows, from out of the empty sky, from doorways they swore had been empty just a moment before. If they were passing so much as a baggie of weed on a street corner, he was there. If they were shaking down their hookers for their weekly dues, he appeared. If they were stupid enough to walk into a convenience store with the intent to rob it, they soon found them exiting by way of the front window at high velocity-- with a raging wolfman following right after them.

And he was NOT pulling his punches anymore. If he caught you, you were in for a world of hurt… and he *always* caught you. Run all day, and you only ended up tired when he caught you. The emergency rooms were seeing a regular flow of dealers, pimps and enforcers who were battered, bruised, bloody and broken. Nothing life-threatening, that was worth note… but those he put down weren’t going to be rolling down the street carefree as a breeze anytime soon.

One fool pulled a pistol on him. The proctologist spent six hours on him before the police could learn what the caliber was.

Merchants found themselves dangled from rooftops by various portions of their anatomy, held face down in the nearest pond, fountain, gutter, or toilet, batted around back alleys like a cat playing with a rubber mouse. The Demon only said two things. It told them its name: *Skinwalker.*

And then it asked one question. It was whispered from the shadows into their ears, snarled over prone forms, said an inch from terrified eyes by a mouthful of teeth, screamed by a raging beast-man as it thrashed them up one alley and down another.

“WHERE. IS. SKIDMARK??”

Taylor doubled over as Sophia’s fist buried in her stomach. For the briefest of eternities she thought she was going to puke. “Just a little reminder of your place, Hebert,” Sophia whispered in her ear, before shoving her aside and leaving the bathroom. Madison and Emma followed right behind, not even sparing a look for their victim.

Taylor coughed and spit, then slowly straightened up. She fished her bookbag out of the corner it had been kicked. Then before she could stop herself she kicked the wall. She kicked it again, then again, over and over while a scream of frustration bubbled up in her belly and burst out her throat. Then just as suddenly she was calm again. She wiped the sweaty locks of her hair out of her face and calmly, calmly, always calmly, walked out into the school. Her foot hurt where she’d smacked it into the tile of the bathroom wall, but that only helped to distract her from the pain in her gut.

It was study hall. She quickly went and found a seat, once again in the corners far away from everyone else. She took out her notebook and noted down the time of the “incident,” the location, the
She bit her lip and looked down at her hands. Not much had changed after all, had it? Here she was, back to recording all the times Sophia or her hangers-on bullied her. While the teachers did nothing. And the whole school looked on.

Bullying. What a stupid, juvenile name for it, she thought in a heated moment of anger. Like she was just going through some wacky childhood antics with Spanky and Alfalfa and the gang, and she’d be fine as long as she and Buckwheat outran Butch on their way to school.

She glowered down into her book bag. Things had seemed like they were going better for a while. Just for a while…She glanced over at the empty seat where Adrian should have been. She thought she’d felt alone before.

“Hey, what’s this?” A manicured hand shot down over her shoulder and dipped into her bag. Taylor whipped around; it was Emma, back for more. Her hand reappeared, with Taylor’s new phone in it. “Ooh, nice,” she said, mocking. Without so much as blinking she stuck it in her purse. “Thanks!” She gave Taylor a smug smile and continued on her way to the front of the class.

Oh no way. Taylor got to her feet, her anger sputtering like a fuse. The pain in the muscles of her stomach brought her up short before she did anything hasty. Her anger suddenly switched from sputtering to ice cold— and calculating. “Ms. Knott!” She said in as loud and clear a voice as she could manage. “Ms. Knott, get Emma Barnes to give my phone back!”

Ms. Knott was Taylor’s homeroom teacher and her computer class teacher. She was a somewhat strong-jawed and mannish looking woman, which made her the unfortunate butt of many students’ cruel humor. But in spite of that she was also probably the fairest teacher in the school and one most sympathetic to Taylor’s plight. Still, she found herself with her hands often tied. “Taylor, you’re not supposed to have your phones out during...”


Emma had apparently been taking acting lessons from Madison. She stood up and put the most outrageously offended look on her face, her mouth hanging wide open. “I did NOT! Where do you get off accusing me of stealing?” She pulled the phone out and held it up. “Look, there’s no way Hebert could even AFFORD this phone—”

Taylor felt her anger go from a cold burn to outright frostbit. She spun on the nearest student: Greg Veder. The boy actually flinched back from her when she stuck out her hand. “What??” he asked.

“Phone,” Taylor gritted. He hesitated. “PHONE!” He hastily handed her his cellphone. She held up the phone to her face and began jabbing numbers.

The phone in Emma’s hand began to vibrate. She actually tried to bluff! “Oh sorry, forgot to turn off the ringer—” she said coolly. She began poking at the screen. Then poking at them more frantically. Everyone could see the light from the screen flickering on her face as she fiddled with a phone she was clearly not familiar with. Her eyes went wide for a moment at something, then without warning the smartphone began speaking with a melodious female voice.

“This phone is the property of Taylor Hebert,” it said. “This phone is the property of Taylor Hebert.”

It was subtle, it was understated, it was beautiful. The room exploded in laughter. The Bitch Queen had been HAD! Face red as a fire engine, Emma slammed the phone down on Ms. Knott’s desk. “I gotta go to the ladies’ room,” she mumbled as she bolted for the door.
Taylor had to throttle the urge to do a victory dance down the aisle as she walked down to get her phone. When she got closer she could see Ms. Knott struggling not to laugh. “Interesting security feature,” the teacher said.

“One of a few,” Taylor said breezily, loud enough for the rest of the class to hear. Message given and received; swiping her phone for a “prank” wasn’t a smart option. Taylor examined her phone; no cracks, thank goodness. That little screen was tough. She noticed then that she’d forgotten to lock it earlier. Suppressing a curse she used her thumbprint and passcode to close it down. Oh well, Emma probably hadn’t seen anything important.

"Do you want me to try and inform the principal that--?" Mrs. Knott said. The look in her eye was sympathetic. Taylor sighed.

"Don't bother. She'll just dismiss it as a 'little prank' or something like that," Taylor said.

She'd probably be paying for it-- probably with another gut punch or push down the stairs-- before the day was out. Taylor decided to savor the victory while it lasted; Screw it, she was cutting classes and going home early.

It was the last day before the Holidays. Two whole weeks without the Trio. Two whole weeks without Winslow. Just two whole weeks before Adrian was back. She could hold out. She just had to hold out.

The end of the day saw Emma dragging Madison over to Sophia’s locker and huddling up. “Oh, what already?” Sophia said a bit irritably. Things had been crazy at the PRT lately, thanks to that Skinwalker headcase. He’d been waging a one-man war on the Merchants and everyone else was catching the fallout… which meant more paperwork and more patrols and more crap to put up with from Piggy and Arsemaster. Seems nobody could make up their minds they were happy the dope dealing freaks were getting their butts kicked, or mad that it was happening without PRT permission, or that the guy wasn’t doing it the “proper” PRT way (with a PRT lawyer’s hand up his butt like a Muppet.) It was putting Sophia in a real mood.

Emma looked around. “We got a problem. Taylor’s got a new phone.”

Sophia gave her a look that said volumes about what she thought of Emma’s intelligence. “So??”

Emma leaned in. “You don’t understand. She’s got a new cellphone… a high end one with a built in audio recorder and video camera.”

Sophia managed to get the hint. So did Madison. Sophia’s face filled with rage. “You mean she was recording us??” Sophia hissed. Madison squeaked in horror.

“I managed to get a look at it,” Emma said. She refrained from saying how. “She had an absolutely huge folder of videos and sound files… another one full of old emails. Three guesses whose.”

“What do we do?” Madison whispered frantically.

Sophia’s face was growing more and more suffused with rage. She was seething. she was FUMING. That little Hebert turd tried to pull a fast one on HER? Thought she was so clever? Sophia would... she bit back her homicidal rage and thought. "Okay. We just grab the phone and we're golden."
"But she left an hour ago--"

Sophia swore. She thought it over frantically, then surprising the other two girls, she calmed down. She'd spent her entire Cape career... and truthfully a lot of time before it... reading people's intentions, guessing (quite accurately) what some dweeb or scumbag was going to do when the pressure was on, guessing when some punk was gonna jump right instead of left... and truth be told, Sophia was good at it. Taylor Hebert was an easy read. "It's okay. We're still golden."

"But what if she shows someone--" Madison started.

"Look, she's got a great big file of 'evidence' on that phone, right?" Sophia said patiently. Madison and Emma nodded. "So why hasn't she turned it in yet? Because she's looking to get something really good, something that buttons it all up, and she ain't got it yet. And she's waited till the Holidays and done nothing..."

"You're right," Emma said. "She wouldn't want to spoil Christmas, after all."

"So she's waiting to do the Big Reveal when school starts up again," Sophia said. "Does she got a computer at home?"

Emma shook her head. "Nothing worthy of the name anyway," she said. "It's even older than the ones in the computer lab here, and those things sure aren't compatible with a smartphone." She tossed her hair disdainfully. "Her Dad's been a total technophobe ever since her Mom died."

Sophia smiled. "Good." That meant Taylor probably wasn't saving those images anywhere else... and once they had the phone, Sophia knew a few off-the-record Tinkers and hackers who could tell them when, where, and how many times Taylor had uploaded anything from it, and could erase the files off the 'cloud' or anywhere else they were. "We already got a little surprise planned for her. We just go through with it, grab the phone, lose it in the bottom of the harbor, and we're in the clear."

The other two girls’ panic slowly subsided, their smug confidence returned. “Yeah, it’s only understandable if she loses such a tiny little thing...” Emma said.

“Cow better enjoy her time with Santa Claus,” Sophia said, scowling. “Cause after we put her through her little lesson and get that phone, I’m gonna put her on speed dial to the Tooth Fairy.” She slammed the door to her locker shut hard enough to make it rattle.

It was a good evening at the Palanquin. The floor downstairs was packed with holiday partiers, the bar was doing good business, the mood was festive all around. Even Faultline was feeling fairly merry, or jolly, or whatever the appropriate term was. They’d set up a quiet little private holiday party up here in the office for herself and the rest of her mercenary crew. Nothing much, just a little punch, a few snacks, a little holiday music, a few decorations… that was about what Labyrinth could handle without being overwhelmed. Really, Faultline didn’t want to imagine what sort of alternate reality Labyrinth would start overlapping into the real world if the holiday cheer overexcited the semi-autistic cape. Probably something with a Christmas Special theme. Giant Christmas ornaments or something.

Newter was down on the main floor checking out things to make sure everything was still going
smooth. You could look out the observation window and see the lanky orange amphibiod flitting about the floor, moving from group to group, his tail flicking back and forth, making sure everyone was happy and partying. Gregor the Snail's shell-studded bulk was ensconced in the sofa, sipping his punch and humming along with the carols on the record player. It was definitely odd seeing the festively colored punch sliding down his translucent throat… Spitfire (sans her ordinary gas-mask and overalls) was sitting beside Labyrinth… sulking. Faultline and the rest had broken her out of the juvenile detention center-- but the penalties they’d enacted for her breaking the team rules were making a serious groucho out of her. Well, as far as Faultline was concerned she could just sit and suffer. She knew the rules, and she could just take her punishment like a good girl and forfeit her share of next month’s take.

Newter came gliding into the room in his loose-limbed gait and perched on the back of a chair, his tail curling around the legs. “Something’s up, boss,” he said to Faultline. “It might be trouble.”

Faultline immediately set down her cup and faced the amphibianoid cape. “What sort?”

“Got some company. That new cape… the wolf-man. They call him ‘Skinwalker’.”

“Not precisely a fortuitous name if one is hoping for peaceful circumstances,” Gregor said somberly. He knew a few of the Skinwalker legends; they weren't all pretty.

“He’s not caused any trouble or anything… well, not deliberately; having a seven-plus foot tall werewolf on the dance floor is gonna stir things up a bit regardless, but he’s minding his manners.” Newter shrugged in a fluid rolling move. “It’s obvious he’s trying to get our-- or your-- attention.” He got to his feet.

Faultline followed him to the DJ’s booth. She went up to the glass window overlooking the main room below and looked where Newter pointed. She looked again for good measure. “Karaoke?” she said, disbelieving. She was correct; the worgen was on the karaoke machine, belting a tune out to the entertainment of the other partyers. “What is he doing?” Faultline said, mystified.

“Barry White,” Newter said. His eyebrow ridges (he had no eyebrows, alas) climbed. “And killin’ it, too.” Curious, Faultline turned on the booth two way speakers. He was right; the big wolfman was crooning along to “My First My Last My Everything,” his deep rich voice caressing the lyrics like velvet. He was hamming it up too, vamping to the ladies in the front row of the crowd, more than a few of whom were laughing and eating it up.

“Invite him on up,” Faultline sighed, reaching for her welding mask. “Hell, if nothing else maybe we’ll hire him as entertainment.”

A few minutes had the werewolf cape sitting in Faultline’s office, sipping punch from a cup and exchanging polite pleasantries with the gang. “No hard feelings, I hope,” he said to Spitfire. Spitfire just glowered at him through her mask with her arms crossed. It rolled off him like water off a duck’s back. He looked at Faultline, who had donned her own mask as well. “I was under the impression she was still incarcerated?”

Faultline had to admit she understood why the ladies at the club had actually made friendly with the wolf-man. He had a voice that would send tingles down a woman’s spine. “Yes, imagine that, a team of superhuman mercenaries illicitly liberating one of their members from imprisonment.” She quipped. “How outrageous.”

“I assume you’re taking her to task?” he asked. “Judging from her rather hostile pose, I mean.”

“Yes, you need not fear a repeat performance,” she said. “We do not take contracts inside the city.”
“Unless the job is right and the money is really good, of course,” Skinwalker quipped, raising his cup to her in salute.

“It’s usually considered poor form to insult a host,” Gregor remarked idly.

“She’s a mercenary. Her first ethic is business. It would be insulting to assume she would let one ethic get in the way of the other,” Skinwalker retorted. He tossed the last of his punch into the back of his mouth and threw the cup in the trash. “I’ll go ahead and assume you brought me up here to find out why I was here in your club doing bad karaoke.”

“You wanted to ask for something.”

He smiled. She was surprised; she didn’t think dogs could do that. “Information.”

“Not our usual forte, but...” she shrugged. “On what? Or whom?”

“Skidmark,” he said. “He and his merry band of Outbreak monkeys are proving surprisingly difficult to track down, all things considered.”

“All things considered?” Newter said.

“Like the fact that Skidmark has so many chemicals in his bloodstream that he should have died by spontaneous combustion,” Skinwalker said drily.

“And why do you think we have information on Skidmark?” Faultline asked.

The wolfman counted off on his fingers. “One, you’re a mercenary. The saying ‘be polite, courteous, professional, and have a plan to kill everyone in the room’ apples to you like any soldier. So keeping track of threats, even wastoids like the Merchants, should be second nature to you.

“Two, you’re an outlaw operating in Brockton Bay. It’s an open secret that you parlay with one another when things get hairy-- a little something from the days when a supervillain named the Marquis ran this town.

“Three… well, Newter here.”

“What about me?” Newter asked suspiciously.

Skinwalker gave him a doggy grin, tongue lolling. “First off you’re a party animal. A… lounge lizard, you might say?”

“Ar har, de har har,” the vaguely amphibian/reptilian cape was clearly amused though.

“And even if you don’t do the ‘party’ scene, a lot of the girls who hang all over you do, and they might have let something slip about where the number one dealer in the city keeps all his party supplies.”

“Plus you secrete high quality hallucinogens from your skin. When Skidmark heard about you he probably sprung wood so hard he knocked all the coke lines off his coffee table.” At this one more than one of the Crew snorted and clapped his hand over his mouth. “He’s probably tried at least a few times to recruit you away from Faultline.”

“Yeah, he has tried once or twice,” Newter admitted to Faultline’s surprise. Newter’s lip curled. “I told him I had higher aspirations than to end up in one of his drug labs on the ingredient list.”

“So yes, we do have some information, and what we don’t have we can probably get,” Faultline
interjected. “The next question is, what do you have to pay for it?”

Skinwalker grimaced and sat back. “That’s the thing of it,” he said. “I do have the means to pay for it, but…” he looked at her, his palms held up helplessly. His expression was entirely earnest. “Okay, I have SOME money, but probably not enough to even scratch your price list. I can make you all some custom gear… but that will take time. Months even. Assuming I can design something genuinely useful for your, ah, line of work…”

“You’re a tinker?”

“Of a sort,” he confessed. “But-- my abilities can have very odd limitations. You’d have to ask the local Protectorate and the Wards for references on quality....” he shrugged.

“My third option… and this one I know your Case 53 members would willingly trade for-- information.” The mood in the room shifted as Gregor and Newter suddenly became a lot more attentive.

“You mean about--” Newter pulled down the collar of his tank top and tapped one long skinny finger on the “c” shaped tattoo over his heart.

Skinwalker’s grimace grew deeper with anxiety, guilt, uncertainty. “Yes. But here’s the catch. I don’t know how much I can tell you without getting all of you killed. Or worse.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop. “Or worse?” Faultline repeated.

“Or Worse,” Skinwalker confirmed. “Your mystery, your secret is tied into pretty much every conspiracy on the planet. Conspiracy on top of conspiracy inside ANOTHER conspiracy… and there’s no telling what part of the Jenga tower can be pulled out without causing the whole thing to topple. And if the sweater unraveled far enough, it could mean-- and I am not exaggerating here-- it could mean the very literal end of the world. SO I just DON’T KNOW...” He ran his clawed hands down his face. For the first time Faultline noticed how haggard he looked, and the bags under his eyes. She also caught a whiff hinting at how long it had last been since he had bathed (she could be forgiven for not noticing; when one lived in a house with Case53s, unusual smells were part of the daily routine.)

“One second,” he said wearily. He cupped his hands under his face. His hands glowed emerald green, the light flowing up over him. When it faded, he looked if not less haggard, than at least more alert. He waved his hands over himself and another splash of light flowed over him. “a rejuvenation and a decontaminate,” he said. “Not exactly a nap and a shower but it’ll do for now.”

Faultline found herself wondering how many times he’d done that particular trick over the past few days.

He got serious. “Okay. I’m going to give you the information. I needed to anyways eventually.. long story. But get one thing straight. We might very well be attacked.”

“Once word gets out?” Gregor said.

“Once I finish my first sentence,” he answered. The conviction in his voice was chilling. “These people have Thinkers and Precogs under their control that make every other one you can name look laughable. They have Movers-- teleporters-- with global range and pinpoint accuracy. They have governments all over the world on a leash. And they conduct surveillance worldwide, twenty four seven, and have no limits beyond their own nearly nonexistent ethics. So yes, they are that powerful and that dangerous and that determined to keep all their little secrets.
“Due to some really odd factors about my origins, I fall into a sort of blind spot where their powers don’t see and where their most potent tricks don’t work. But I don’t know how wide the effect is, or whether it is… contagious… or not. So this conversation could get very exciting in the next few minutes.” He got to his feet and pulled a staff out of seemingly nowhere, holding it at the ready.

The others took their cue from him. Faultline undid the catch on the holster of her gun. Gregor, Newter and Spitfire got to their feet, moving into different parts of the room. Gregor murmured a few words to Labyrinth. She got to her own feet, moving behind him and suddenly looking very timid, but any of them could feel her flexing her strange terrain-altering powers in the immediate environment.

“Gregor, Newter,” Skinwalker began, “You were experiments. You were abducted from your own homes and your own worlds—”

“Our own Worlds?” Newter gulped.

“— By a paradimensional organization of capes. They have developed ways to give people Powers artificially, and have been among other things selling “powers in a bottle” to people with a big enough bankroll. Sometimes they trade favors-- one miracle in a bottle, for an unspecified ‘favor’ owed them in the future. You both were test subjects. Two of literal thousands. Maybe tens of thousands. They’ve killed countless people with their experiments and are responsible, indirectly, for millions more.”

The others in the room felt the blood drain from their faces as the wolf-man talked. Nobody had the temerity to doubt him. It was in the utter conviction in his voice, in his stance, in the way he held his weapon at the ready and the way his eyes never stopped scanning the room.

“They created Coil. They created at least three of the current roster of Brockton Bay heroes. They created at least two of the Slaughterhouse Nine… and have conspired-- stolen, blackmailed, assassinated--- to keep them alive and kicking, solely because they think their powers might be useful in the future.”

“And their ultimate objective is to—”

There was a faint sound, an almost imperceptible change in the air pressure. A rectangle of light formed in the middle of the room, and a tall, pale woman with black hair in a ponytail and wearing a black suit and fedora stepped through. Everyone braced themselves and lunged.

The woman never broke stride. In three long steps she crossed the room and high-kicked the pistol out of Faultline’s hand, sending it tumbling over her head and behind her. The fedora-clad woman seemed to slide past her, giving her a knife-strike in the neck and the precise point that Faultline’s welding mask left it exposed and dropping her to the floor.

The woman caught the gun, turned on one heel and fired across the room, clearly aiming for Gregor’s head… only to instead strike Newter in the shoulder as he leapt into her line of fire. Her eyes widened in surprise, but still she managed to sidestep the tumbling Case53’s body and fling the gun overhand so it struck Gregor between the eyes, stunning him just as he was preparing to spray one of his chemicals at her. Spitfire, unable to use her power without immolating everything in the room, was left to hopping back and forth and trying to get out of everyone's way and constantly getting in it.

She pressed the attack, vaulting over Faultline’s desk and snatching a wicked-looking ornamental envelope opener out of its holder and springing directly for Labyrinth. The astonishment on her face was epic when a powerful clawed hand grabbed her by the calf and brought her down out of the air,
slamming her into the floor.

The moment the doorway had appeared, Skinwalker had been on the move too. He’d leapt forward, pulling a kibbled metallic disk the size of a hubcap out from under his robes and flung it through the portal. It could be seen striking the floor on the other side and rapidly unfolding into a shower-stall sized something before the doorway hastily closed.

He’d then twisted about and managed to intercept the attacking fedora wearing woman before she could try to kill the child… before she could kill another child. He slammed her full length into the floor. Snarling silently she’d flipped over and kipped up to her feet, facing him. Her eyes went wide when she she focused on him, as if she’d never seen him before--

She lashed out at him with a kick. It caught his staff and popped it out of his one-handed grip, flipping it to the floor. Her second strike he caught her leg under his elbow. She jabbed at his throat with both thumbs, looking to fracture his windpipe. He caught both her arms in his hands before she even got close. He began slapping her face with her own hands. “Stop hitting yourself, Contessa, stop hitting yourself, why are you hitting yourself Contessa--” he said in a high nasally voice.

He lost his elbow-grip on her leg. She dropped it to the floor, threw herself backwards as far as Skinwalker’s grip on her arms would let her and kicked him square in the chin. His head snapped up and with a yelp of pain he lost his hold on her. She lunged away from him, panic clear on her face. She kicked off the wall and came back the other way, trying to get to the open floor in the middle of the room. “DOORWA--”

Before she could finish the word Skinwalker’s clawed hand caught her by the back of the head. With a swooping arc he brought her around and slammed her face down into the sheet cake sitting on the snack table.

SPLARCH.

He snatched up his staff in his other hand, shillelagh style, and brought the knobbed end around, cracking it across the back of her head. She slumped into the cake, unconscious. They all stood frozen for a moment, clutching at their various injuries and panting for breath, staring wide-eyed at the wolfman and his captive. “Say hello,” Skinwalker said, his ribs working like bellows, “To Contessa: agent, key strategist, enforcer and assassin for Cauldron. But I’m sure some of you have met her before.” He grabbed her by the skull and smeared her face in the cake “Isn’t that RIGHT, Contessa? Isn’t that riiight?”

“Man,” Spitfire said. “This is personal between you two, isn’t it.”

Skinwalker let go of Contessa’s head. “No,” he growled. “I just frickin’ hate God Mode Mary Sues.”
When Contessa awoke again, she was sitting in the middle of the meeting room, tied hand and foot to a sturdy metal chair and her hat stuffed in her mouth. Faultline and her crew, all bandaged up, were sitting around her in a semicircle, weapons loose in their hands and their eyes fixed on her. Sitting at one end of the group was the single most terrifying thing she’d ever seen in her life.... Because she hadn’t known he was there. She jerked wildly in her bonds, eyes round.

He was sitting there in a backwards chair, arms folded over the back and his chin resting on them as he watched her. “There, you see? It isn’t just like she didn’t know about me ahead of time. It’s like the moment she took her eyes off me, she forgot I even existed.” The wolf man stroked his chin. “How very Eleventh Doctor Who.” He grinned at her. “It’s probably because she depends so much on her Power. Still, I’m betting she’s not the only one in their merry little conspiracy that has this problem with me.”

“What is her power?” Faultline said.

“They call it ‘Path to Victory,’” he said. “She simply chooses a goal, and her power gives her step-by-step actions to complete, like a recipe on a box of cake mix… “walk through this door, turn right, go fifteen steps north and press the red button three times.” That sort of thing. She doesn’t even have to understand them, just follow them. And ding, instant Victory.”

"That's such utter bullshit!" Newter exploded."It's haxx, OP, Mary Sue-- I don't have words for how B.S. that is!"

Adrian nodded. "Bullshit or not, it's the truth. Her Shard basically... creates a perfect simulation of the world and extrapolates out for her. Lets her predict any possible movement, like that computer Deep Blue predicting every possible move in a chess game."

“But the universe isn't a chess game.” Everyone turned in surprise. Labyrinth had spoken. The waiflike blonde's soft voice carried in the silence. “Chaos theory. The Heisenberg Principle. Schroedinger’s cat. After a certain point the universe is fundamentally unpredictable, no matter how much data you gather. You can’t make a perfect plan for everything, or anything, because simple chance will mess it up.”

“And the bigger the plan, the bigger the mess up,” Skinwalker agreed. One advantage Azeroth science had over Earth Bet science was that it had early on acknowledged the existence of the Chaos Effect. It was rather hard not to when you had the capacity to store the stuff in jars and bottles like marmalade.

"And her power comes with other tiny little drawbacks her masters have sort of willfully overlooked. For one thing, all her 'Paths to Victory' they slavishly follow are built on information provided by the enemy. I think the problem with that is self evident.

"Second: she’s had this power since she was something like five years old, and she uses it constantly, just to get through the day. So her actual intellect is little more than a child’s. She doesn’t have to KNOW anything, just obey the instructions in her head, so she’s never actually LEARNED anything in all this time.” He shuffled in his chair a little. “Which makes me a problem for her. Her Power… because of my unique nature… can’t really detect me, like the blind spot in your eye. So it can’t lay out a path to Victory for her, so it forgets about me… And makes her forget me too, like an inconvenient truth. And her real mind, her real, five-year-old mind, isn't up to handling things like me. Her Path to Victory-- the really BIG one, that Cauldron is following so fanatically-- is as blind as the rest of us.”

“Which brings us to the problem. You see, Cauldron has been operating on a Great Master Plan-- her plan--” he pointed at Contessa-- “since it was founded. And it’s grown so complicated and so big
it’s literally engulfed the world.”

“Aaaand that plan?” Newter said, nursing his bandaged shoulder. Regrettably, Skinwalker was out of his magic band-aids.

Skinwalker’s face grew grim. “To save humanity by killing Scion.”

The exclamations of surprise, shock and dismay were nearly universal. “That’s crazy!” Spitfire spluttered. “He’s… he’s SCION! He’s the world’s greatest hero--”

“He’s an alien creature, who intends to devour our world as part of his species’ reproductive cycle,” Skinwalker interrupted. You could have heard a pin drop.

“That thing you see flying around out there? That’s just his… well, his avatar. Or maybe more like just his fingertip, sticking in from the parallel dimension his actual, gigantic, planet-sized Space Whale body is hiding. He’s got less in common with humanity biologically than we do with a microbe. And he and his mate, or what’s left of her, are the source of nearly all the superhuman powers on earth.”

He gave them a moment for that awful revelation to sink in. “Could you possibly start over from the Giant Space Whales, I think?” Gregor said, shifting the ice bag on his head.

Skinwalker nodded. “Super advanced alien race. Gigantic, multi-dimensional things-- picture a multidimensional fractal the size of a gas planet. They spin off through space as duets; one of them is the Thinker, the other is the Warrior. When they find an inhabited planet they sort of… wrap themselves around it, invisible and intangible.

“Then they start dropping Shards. Little fractal bits of themselves--- bits that are also their technology in some incomprehensible fashion-- that attach themselves to what the Shard considers a compatible host. The Shard gives them powers to use. Pushes the host to use them, use them as much as possible. The Shard collects all the data it can, then when the host dies, they return to the Space Whales with it, who download and save all that it has learned.

“When the Space Whales decide they’ve gotten all the information they possibly can, they destroy that world, and all the parallels of that world connected to it, blow it up... take all the shards back and fly off into space, with a full tank of energy from the explosion to find a new world to harvest. Maybe shoot off an offspring or two, if they’ve gathered enough energy and grown enough new Shards to start Baby off with...”

“That’s… horrible,” Newter said weakly.

“What do they need all this data for?” Faultline asked suddenly. “I could see needing energy to reproduce, but...”

“They’re... well, they’re trying to cheat death,” Skinwalker said. “They figured out long ago that someday, billions of years from now, the material universe will finally burn out like a candle. Seeing as they’re effectively immortal, they’d rather it not happen. They’re trying to find a way to beat Entropy.”

“By covering world after world with super powered beings, then killing them all?” Spitfire said skeptically.

“Well, you see, like I said they’re super-advanced,” Skinwalker said. “But they have absolutely no innovation, no creativity, no imagination... they’ve sort of like Contessa here.” He pointed at the bound and gagged operative. “They’ve been letting their Shards do all the work for them for so long
they don’t know how do anything for themselves anymore, even think. So, despite their arrogance regarding any mere three dimensional creature as nothing but a lab rat, they depend on us to use their powers to innovate-- to be creative, generate new ideas, come up with new ways to do things.

“Unfortunately for us Scion is the Fighter, not the Thinker. The best idea Scion had to encourage us lab rats to use our Shards as much as possible was to push us into conflict wherever possible. Maybe you’ve noticed how much more aggressive capes are than normal? It’s also why the Shards only bond to people who’ve had a Trigger event. Traumatized people given immense power and encouraged to lash out at the world...” he shrugged. “Like tossing two bugs in a jar and shaking it to see them fight.”

“But you said his mate is dead!” Spitfire protested, “Why is he still...”

“Going through the motions?” Skinwalker said. “Acting like she’s still there? Shuffling along from day to day on autopilot, doing what he feels obligated to do but with no enthusiasm, no joy?” He looked at her and gave her a humorless little smile. “Gee, it’s almost like he’s a widower or something.” His smile disappeared. “At the height of his depression, he spoke to one human. One. Some suicidally depressed drunk… who told him to do something with himself. Save lives. Help people. Make a meaning for himself if he couldn’t find one.” He paused. “Thank God for that man, wherever he is. How easily he could have just said ‘end it all, get it over with’...”

“So Scion’s been trying it. Half-assed, of course. We mean about as much to him as a population of mice living in his basement. It’s nothing more than a hobby to distract himself.” He turned grim. “Sooner or later he’s going to fold it all in, sweep the pieces off the table, flip the table and leave. It’s only a question of how long before his boredom and despair get to him.”

Newter got up with a stunned look on his long face and walked out of the room. He returned with an open bottle of liquor. He sat down and pulled at it hard before passing it to Gregor the Snail. It made its way to Spitfire then to Faultline quickly enough. “So we have to let her go,” Faultline said, pointing the neck of the bottle at Contessa, her voice rough from the Grey Goose she’d poured down her throat. “She… and Cauldron are the world’s only hope.”

“And why do you think that?” Skinwalker snorted.

Faultline did a double take. “You just said… Plan of Victory, or whatever...”

“And what makes you think they got that right?” Skinwalker said. He got to his feet and paced a bit, rubbing his face. The need for a refresh from his powers was coming more and more often. “Look, don’t you realize what their genius master plan IS? Scion is basically a thousand times more powerful than any cape. He has ALL the powers... all the ones we have and more. The only reason he hasn’t destroyed the Endbringers is because he made them and released them, all to generate more conflict. He’s effectively indestructible by conventional means. Even if you managed to destroy his “body,” it’s just a fingertip-- a blister sticking into this universe that he can regenerate at will. So Cauldron’s planning to find some way to destroy him. Great, terrific, marvelous.

“Cauldron is basically led by two people: Contessa here--” he waved his hand-- “and by a woman who calls herself Doctor Mother. Eden, the other alien, was injured by a chance encounter in space with another of their kind some time before the Space Whale couple reached our world, and when she went to land her physical self on her parallel dimension she lost control and crashed. On Contessa and Doctor Mother’s version of Earth. Polluting the soil, the water... and anyone contaminated with Eden’s tissues gained a Shard, and gained powers. So the next thing you know there’s monsters, madmen, superpowered warlords, you get the picture.

“By pure luck Contessa got the Path to Victory. But because of a little safety feature the Space
Whales put into it, she couldn’t act against even the mortally wounded Eden herself, not directly. So she found Doctor Mother, gave her a knife, and told her just where to cut the giant alien Space Whale’s brain. They lobotomized it, and have been using its flesh to dose people to give them powers ever since."

“Ugh.” Was Spitfire’s verdict before she took another swig of Grey Goose.

“But Contessa was five years old when she gained the Path to Victory. And Doctor Mother is neither a doctor nor a mother…. they’re just titles to impress people. And according to my sources the world they lived on was stuck somewhere developmentally in the Bronze Age!

“So they asked the Shard a super-simplistic question, the kind a couple of bronze-age peasant women would ask: how do I kill Scion? the plan that Contessa’s Shard came up with was the exact sort of thing you’d expect a Bronze Age peasant woman to understand and accept-- to make a giant army of superhumans to punch Scion really really hard until he was defeated. ” Skinwalker snorted. “That’s their master plan. A plan perfectly in the vein of every bronze age heroic saga... To arm as many Greeks as they could with bronze swords, and send them storming up the slopes of Olympus to kill the gods. A plan that bloody common sense tells you couldn’t work and WON’T work. Their plan is the equivalent of trying to drown an ocean.”

“That white shiny laboratory looking place you saw through the portal? Stage props, so they look more advanced and enlightened than they are. Their futuristic tech is almost entirely their experiments using Shard powers to put on a light show. Their ‘scientific research’ consists of chopping off bits of lobotomized alien, whipping it up in a juicer, and going ‘let’s see what this does to the hobo we kidnapped when he drinks it.’

“But the Path to Victory thing would still work?”

“If you call a miniscule fraction of humanity across countless worlds managing to cling to life on cratered, burning worlds a victory, you’re welcome to it. Remember how Ragnarok ends, with only two human beings in the entire world and a tree? Sort of like that but without the optimism. And that’s IF Cauldron wins.

“That’s the thing. Contessa and her boss are from a culture that hadn’t yet discovered chaos theory, or probability, or any of the other things we take for granted. They were still in an era where our scientists were a couple hundred years back, thinking that if they just gathered enough data they could perfectly predict and plan anything. Stuff our most advanced outer-edge physicists and mathematicians are coming back and confirming, like Labyrinth said, is functionally impossible.” He huffed in amusement. “Stuff more spiritually minded people have been saying for thousands of years. ‘Man Plans, God Laughs,’ remember?”

“Well the Space Whales… and their Shards… are the same way. The Space Whales are completely materialistic and deterministic. They’ve so completely abandoned the idea of anything philosophical, or spiritual, or beyond the physical that they can’t even contemplate it as a concept. And whatever happened with their great transcendence, somehow they are still stuck believing they can predict and plan anything with sufficient raw data. Even though they’re so uncreative they have to rely on us lowly lower life forms to even invent new ideas for them.”

“In case you missed the last hour, this all-knowing, all-seeing, all-planning Path to Victory Shard misses things. If it can’t even see me, how much else is it missing?”

“But at the same time, that’s our hope, that’s our salvation. Scion is NOT omnipotent and he’s NOT omniscient. If his Shards can miss things, HE can miss things. That means he has blind spots, weak spots, vulnerabilities. And that means that all-knowing, all-seeing Cauldron and their Path to Victory
have missed things too… like ways to win against Scion that don’t involve leaving entire worlds in ruin.”

“Faith and Hope… two things Cauldron, and the Shards, and Scion are too primitive and limited to even know exist.”

“Whoa. That was DEEP.” Gregor blinked at Skinwalker, then blinked at Newter who was leaning against him. “My friend, I think you got some of your sweat on me…”

“Oops. Sorry, man. It’ll wear off in a minute.”

“Well that’s a great half-time speech, Coach,” Faultline said. “But what’s our next move?” She waved at the red-faced Contessa. “What do we do with her?”

“Well, considering Cauldron is a bunch of lunatics who don’t think assassination is a big deal, and I don’t wanna wake up dead,” Newter said, “we should probably hold her as a hostage against this Doctor Mother’s good behavior--”

A doorway opened up directly beneath Contessa. She plummeted through, chair and all. The portal vanished. “--- or we could just stand here and watch that happen,” Newter concluded. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted at the floor where the door had been. “NEXT TIME TRY PLAYING WITHOUT CHEAT CODES, YOU SKANK!”

Faultline got to her feet and unholstered her gun again. “Are we about to get attacked again?”

“Probably not, for two reasons,” Skinwalker said. “My ‘blind spot’ effect is apparently pretty comprehensive. Remember how she missed when she tried to shoot Gregor? I wasn’t even in her line of sight. My just being in proximity apparently garbles her Shard’s abilities to read the environment. It’ll probably linger a while over you all and this general area, domino effect and all, but-- ah. Just a minute.”

Due to all the excitement, the walls immediately around Labyrinth had started shifting into her alternate dimensions, or perhaps vice versa. The wall immediately behind her had begun looking like an Escheresque window out onto a plane full of floating rainbow colored spheres and white polygons. Skinwalker climbed up on the couch beside her and reached through, grasping at the nearest spheres. “Yellow? No, blue. Oooh, that one will do, a nice rainbow one...” he grabbed a wibbling globe about the size of his palm and carefully pulled it back. It passed from the phantasm-world into the real world with a pop.

“Okay, let’s see what we got.” He pulled an engraved copper rod out of his belt pouch and began poking at the sphere in his hand, squinting in concentration. There was a sound something like Splatinkle!

And the sphere popped, leaving behind a tiny glowing purple shard. “Oh perfect! Anyone have a jar or bottle-- ah perfect,” he said, accepting what they handed him. He popped the shard into the Grey Goose bottle and set it on the table, sealing the neck with a dollop of wax. The shard floated in the middle of the bottle, glowing and humming faintly and looking vaguely surreal. And Faultline wasn’t sure it wasn’t the Grey Goose talking but the crystal wasn’t rotating, it was changing shape … “And what is THAT?” she said.

“A shard of Chaos,” Skinwalker said.

“And you pulled that out of one of Labyrinth’s… realms?” Faultline was starting to feel seriously dizzy contemplating all this.
“In the intersection between one reality and the next. That’s where you can find it normally, if you know what to look for. Lucky I caught a glimpse of it.” He examined the shard. “Not very much, but probably more than enough to give Cauldron’s capes a blinding headache if they so much as look in this room’s general direction. And if they try to open a doorway here, well, good luck. Here, let’s boost it a little…” He withdrew a coil of thick copper wire from his bag and chunk of quartz, wound the wire around the bottle in opposite directions and made a spark gap at the top. Then he wedged the quartz in the gap. It immediately began to chime faintly, like a finger run around the rim of a wine glass. “That’ll do it,” he said. “That’ll expand the zone to about the size of this building.” He set it on Faultline’s desk.

“I think I have a new favorite desk ornament,” she murmured. “How many of these can you make? Because if we’re going to fight Cauldron, we’re going to need to cut off their access in more than one place.”

Skinwalker thought of the shelves of jars full of dusts and shards and essences back in the Lost Workshop. He thought of the dozens of little shiny, glowy, glass and copper whirligigs, tiny versions of this oversized one, he’d sold and even given away to people great and small all over Brockton Bay. And he smirked. Smugly.

“No need to worry about that right away,” he said. “And I think Cauldron is going to be too busy cleaning up a mess to bother anyone for a while. Did you happen to see that thing I tossed through the portal?”

“I did note that, yes,” Gregor said. “A bomb of some sort?”

“No exactly. Half of a goblin teleportation device that leads to where I STORE my bombs…. And a few other things.”

Gregor gave him a stunned look, then slowly nodded. “That should keep them preoccupied,” he said. Then he paused. *Goblin?*

“You don’t know the half of it.” He looked at Faultline. “So you all know the terrible truth of your secret pasts. What do you intend to do now?”

Faultline sighed, shoulders slumped. “I’m thinking we’re going to take that magic see-me-not bottle, go find some place to hunker down about two or three thousand miles from here, and wait out whatever comes next. We’re mercenaries. This… this is all beyond our pay grade.”

“Fraid I gotta agree,” Newter said. Murmurs of assent and nods of agreement went around the room. Skinwalker sighed. That was a handful more pieces, taken right off the board entirely. Whether it was to the good or the bad, he wasn’t sure.

“Are you going after Cauldron yourself?”

Skinwalker shook his head. “Cauldron is too big a target still,” he said. “Too widespread, stuck in too many things. Jenga tower, remember?

“Right now I’ve got one block I want to remove. The Merchants. So long as they’re in play, they’re a resource for bigger, nastier types to exploit. That festering sore Skidmark has been poisoning this city for too long. He goes down.”

Faultline nodded. “Good luck with that.”

Newter looked over at Faultline for approval; she nodded. Newter grunted, then turned to Skinwalker. “Can’t say you didn’t give what you promised.” He looked over at the chaos bottle and
his brow ridges climbed. “Gave us way more than we could chew, for that matter. So I’ll tell you what we know about Skidmark.

“The Merchants don’t have a single lair. They move around all the time, from abandoned building to abandoned building, going wherever Skidmark’s paranoia leads them. He’s sure to have heard you’re looking for him so he’s probably moving his location every night.

“Now what he does have is recruitment parties. You were right about him trying to get me to sign on; that wanker makes a pitch every time he sees me, and he always invites me out to these “Big epic parties” of his. They invite every bum, bozo and freak in the burg, throw some food and drugs at them, give a recruiting pitch… and run cage fights.


Newter nodded. “Between lowballer gang members who want to climb up in the ranks. He’s playing the off chance that someone put through the steel cage will Trigger. New cape, new lieutenant.”

“But the odds for that are so small they… yeah. And it’s Skidmark coming up with this plan. Never mind.”

“Heh. Anyway, he makes sure word gets to me whenever he’s going to have one of these crackhead blowouts. His next one’s gonna be-- God’s honest truth-- Christmas Eve, at the old Twin Pines Shopping Mall near the docks. Mandatory attendance. Every ranking member of the Merchants, which means anyone sober enough to shoot straight, is gonna be there. Mush, Trainwreck, Squealer, they’ll all be there too.”

Skinwalker nodded. “Perfect.”

Faultline stared at him. “And what do you plan on doing, all by yourself, against four Capes and about a thousand armed goons?”

Skinwalker looked at her. “I’m going to END them.”

Doctor Mother cowered behind her desk, staring in shell shock at the corpse sprawled across it. The Number Man was dead. Stone cold dead. He was lying there, on his back, staring at the ceiling with a crude circular saw buried in his skull, right between the eyes.

Kurt Wynn was… had been… a banker and investor with a Shard-given power to understand everything perfectly as mathematical formulas. His supernatural ability not only gave him, gave Cauldron, the power to manipulate world economies, driving entire nations under their hidden goad and whip, but gave him preternatural abilities that rivaled Contessa’s. He could dodge bullets. Scale walls like a spider by calculating likely finger and toeholds, collapse buildings with a few strategically placed blows, ricochet projectiles so they struck targets of his choice. He was also a criminal and a complete sociopath who destroyed lives through economic chicanery and who killed without a single moral qualm, but that only made him more useful, dammit!

And here he’d been struck down by the blade of a table saw. And he never saw it coming. It beggared belief.
Ten minutes ago, things had been normal. Contessa had stepped through one of Doormaker’s portals to deal with some information leaks. Then something had flown back through the portal before Doormaker could close it. It had landed in the lobby, and as a befuddled Doctor Mother had watched, unfolded into something that looked like a cross between a shower stall and a tanning booth. It had sparked, buzzed, formed a vortex of energy of some sort inside itself… and begun vomiting mechanical, exploding chaos into Cauldron HQ.

One of the byproducts of the crafting skill of Engineering, whether gnomish or goblin, was explosives. A lot of explosives. A ridiculous excess thereof, in fact. And they were terrifyingly easy to make, even from base materials. Skinwalker had rapidly accumulated a considerable stockpile of the things, to the point that safety (or the lack thereof) was worrying him. But he’d known since day one he was going to be dealing with a number of incredibly nasty and well equipped organizations such as Cauldron, and had allowed the surplus to build up as a necessary evil.

Other things had started to pile up in bulk as well. Rudimentary Bots, firework rockets, landsharks, mecha suit test models, traps, launchers, quite a number of defective mechanical pets, remote controlled Tonks… so he’d devised this plan as a first-wave attack against a target of opportunity. He’d built a collapsible Goblin teleporter, kept one half in his workshop store room, the other half in his haversack, and waited.

The moment the teleport pad activated, the bots followed their rather simple programming:

1. Take full load of explosives.
2. Enter active teleporter.
3. Wreck the Bejeezus out of everything on the other side.

When a six foot high pile of round mortar style cartoon bombs had appeared in the lobby, it had been alarming. When they had rolled to a halt, sprouted arms and legs and started charging their chosen targets (machinery, doors, people) screaming “BANZAI!” it had gone up the ladder from alarming to panic inducing.

Explosions had rocked the lobby, then the hallways beyond it as supposedly sturdy doors were blasted off their hinges by kamikaze robots. A second wave had followed, then a third, little bitty robots with big round bombs balanced on their heads pouring through holes burst in the doors and walls and racing up the hallways.

There was plentiful security in Cauldron HQ… in the test subject quarters and on the perimeter. Here in the depths of their offices, it had seemed both excessive and potentially counterproductive to add blast doors and mounted weapons. That decision would be reviewed most thoroughly in the days to come as the ridiculous invasion blasted doors, walls, furniture and other obstacles to oblivion.

In her delirium, she’d had the ridiculous thought that at least they weren’t yelling Allahu Akbar, that would have been just a bit too much…

When the bomber-bots had stopped coming, they had been followed by what could only be called toys. Crude looking miniature tanks that trundled on little treads and fired a steady stream of skyrockets in every direction, sending whistling streaks of fire and explosions of sparks everywhere. Flying machines like miniature zeppelins and autogyros--- that it turned out were loaded with what
looked like dynamite, and were just as suicidal as the first wave. Metal shark fins with rocket engines that raced off and exploded. Mechanical spiders and scorpions that stung and bit… and then exploded. Clockwork chickens that exploded. Clockwork sheep that exploded. What was it with this lunatic and exploding clockwork things?!

The worst had been the two waist high miniature mechas. Grinning metal gargoyle heads with legs and arms that chugged and spat sparks and smoke and had buzz saw blades where their hands should have been. Several of the more aggressive guards, or perhaps the slower ones, had lost hands and fingers to those horrors. One of them had cornered her and the Number Man in her office. The Number Man had thrown a pen that (naturally) struck it in just the right place to disable it. Unfortunately it reacted to being disabled by self destructing. The explosion had sent parts and shrapnel in every direction, including one sawblade-hand that had struck the Number Man right between the eyes and delivered his final sum of Karma.

Then there had been a titanic, earth shattering kaboom.

Doctor Mother looked around. She took stock: She saw burn marks. She saw holes in the walls, floors, ceiling. She saw trashed office equipment. It was relative quiet at the moment in this part of the complex. She could still hear the occasional whistle of a firework in the distance. The Custodian was not responding: the explosions and fire must have temporarily disrupted her invisible, ghostly “bodies.”

The intercom on her desk beeped.

She regarded it for a second in disbelief. By luck, she pressed the correct button to activate the damnable thing. “This is Doctor Mother.”

A voice came through, staticky and tinny. “Uh,yeah, this is Jones. From Security. Are you all right Ma’am?”

She sighed. “Yes.” She looked around. “For a given value of ‘fine,’” she added. “The Number Man is dead, however. The Custodian is not responding either. Can you give me a status report on everyone else?”

Jones took a moment. “Uh, okay, yeah. The, ah, Slug appears to have been injured, several second and third degree burns. And ah, a concussion, the medics say. He’s not going to be doing any mind-erasing or brainwashing type… stuff, for at least a month or two, they’re telling me. Until his skull fracture heals. The Doormaker is suffering a nosebleed. He tried to look back in on, ah, his last portal location and he can’t find it for some reason. If tries his nosebleed starts up again. The, uh, Clairvoyant guy, boy howdy, he’s sort of having the same problem it seems…alla sudden he can’t even focus in on half of Brockton Bay, by golly. Like it’s all fulla holes or sump’n.”

Doctor Mother was stunned. What in the Devil could make all of Brockton Bay turn partially invisible to the Clairvoyant? Or any part of it inaccessible to the Doormaker? “What of Contessa? Can they get a fix on her?” she demanded.

“Ohh, she’s okay. She’s in the lobby.” Pause. “What used to be the lobby.”

“Used… to be.”

“Yyyeah. You remember that one last really BIG explosion?”

“Now that you mention it, it does stir my memory,” she said. Her voice could have chilled dry ice.

Jones continued, oblivious. “WELL. We sent some tech guys to secure that Teleporter pad thingy?”
Before it teleportered anything else? And, um, it looks like it self-destructed. Aaaaand we don’t have a lobby there no more.”

Doctor Mother groaned.

“We do got the beginnings of a nice little open air atrium, though.”

Doctor Mother ran her hands down her face.

“You need to hire two new tech guys, by the way.”

“And what. About. Contessa?”

“Oh, she’s fine and dandy. The Doormaker managed to pull her back through just AFTER the explosion, but BEFORE the whatever-it-was started giving him nosebleeds.”

“Tell her I need her in… what’s left of my office,” she said.

Jones hesitated. “Oookay. But… she’s tied to a chair in there.” Pause. “And has her hat stuffed in her mouth.” Pause. “Aaaaand she’s covered in cake.” Longer pause. “The boys and me don’t wanna go in there, Ma’am.”

“LOOK, JUST—” Doctor Mother cut herself off as Contessa staggered through the door. “Never mind, go back to your duties-- wait. Have any of those infernal contraptions gotten down to the test subject chambers?” – her own lovely little euphemism for Cauldron’s prison cells.

“OH, we’re down here already ma’am, it doesn’t look like any of those mechanical things got down here at all.” There was a crash in the background. “Well maybe one.” Then there was an explosion. “Maybe two.”

“Deal with it, Jones,” Doctor Mother gritted her teeth. Forcing herself to mentally acknowledge that force-feeding Jones one of the more interesting Cauldron vials would not fix the problem, she disconnected the intercom. “Contessa, what happened? Where did you go?”

She was haggard, disheveled, hatless, and had only just scraped most of the frosting spattering her away. It took Doctor Mother a moment to place the expression on the currently hatless Contessa’s face: fear. She looked for all the world like a frightened little child. “I don’t know,” she said, her eyes darting around.

“What? What happened? What was there?”

“I– I don’t know! I can’t remember! Something bad, something VERY bad and scary. You can’t make me go back there, you can’t! I WON’T GO!” She fled the room as if the hounds of Hell were on her heels.

Doctor Mother sat back, speechless.

For some reason, for the first time in all these years she had the feeling she hadn’t thought her brilliant plan all the way through...
Chapter 10

The Twin Pines Mall had been intended as competition for the Boardwalk and the Lord’s Market. It was a huge square building in the middle of a city block of parking, with an open center court and a vaulted glass ceiling, an enormous decorative pool and fountain, and three stories of full-sized shops. Unlike the Boardwalk or the Market, it would be open year round, available so residents could shop in climate-controlled comfort.

But shortsightedness did the project in. The reason the Market and the Boardwalk had persisted for so long was that the people in the area didn’t need more than that; the small neighborhood and downtown shops got all the local money, and the tourists only wanted to go to the scene open air shops or the ritzy seafront stores and restaurants, not a shopping mall. The building had barely been finished before the investors looked at the numbers and folded their hands, unwilling to send good money after bad. They got a huge tax deduction for business loss, and settled in to wait… fruitlessly… for someone to come buy the property. It had sat abandoned ever since then, while the owners waited for the building to crumble to dust on its own.

That was just fine with Skidmark. The old mall was perfect for the Merchant Rave; having some fat old rich white dudes footing the bill to build the perfect arena for his show was just the cherry on top. Made him laugh just thinking about it. He walked around the top floor of the building, Mr. Lucky in hand, looking down and watching his crew set things up.

“But why Christmas Eve?” Mush asked him. “Most people have big parties on New Years.” The little deformed runt was tagging along behind him, dogging his steps. His powers weren’t much use for getting things set up-- well, he’d been useful for clearing out all the trash, first, but now he had nothing better to do than follow Skidmark around.

“First off, BLEEP you, that’s why,” Skidmark said, rolling Mr. Lucky between his palms. “Second, I ain’t most people. Third, that’s when the cops and the BLEEPing Protectorate is out looking for raves and parties and BLEEP like that. Nobody’s out on Christmas BLEEPing Eve, so nobody’ll come looking for us.” He looked down and started yelling. “HEY YOU STUPID BLEEP! BLEEP YOUR BLEEPING BLEEP! DON’T PUT THE FOOD WAGONS NEXT TO THE COKE TABLES! PUT IT NEXT TO THE HASH PIPES, FOOL! BLEEPing idiots, put the food on the far side of the place from the people with all the munchies, they get lost on the way to the food tables and end up eating each other.

“No, the blacklight posters go in the store on the BLEEPING FIRST floor, not the BLEEPing TOP floor! You think I want them acid trippers and shroom monkeys trying to FLY, land on a nigga’s BLEEPING HEAD? Yeah, come to think of it, throw some o’ them mattresses on the bottom floor under the guard rail just in case. I din’t pay for this place, I ain’t moppin no BLEEPin brains off no BLEEPin’ floors…

“And WHERE THE BLEEP ARE MY PORTA POTTIES? SQUEALER!!!”

“What??” Came a shout from below.

“You got them BLEEPing power lines hooked up yet?”

“In a minute! Trainwreck’s punchin’ some holes through to the city power mains--” There was a crunch and the sound of crumbling concrete. “We’re good!”

“A’ight,” Skidmark said, brushing dust off his nonexistent cuffs. “That’s me. Mister world class
“Party Planner.”

“Hey Skidmark!”

“What?”

“The food guy wants to know what to do with the pot brownies-- with the food, or with the drugs?”

“’s a good question. Wait a minute--” he stuck his head over the rail. “I didn’t get no bleepin’ pot brownies!”

“You didn’t?”


Skidmark growled to himself and returned to prowling, eventually tossing himself into a broken down old chair he’d brought in for a new “throne.” This last couple months had been hard. But tonight, tonight was going to turn things around. He pulled the silver briefcase handcuffed to his arm up into his lap and opened it up, looking at the contents the way other men would look at a lover. Six vials. Six.

After tonight, the Merchants were making one mother of a comeback. And when it was done, they were gonna tear that Skinwalker apart.

Taylor sat down on the couch next to her father. “Merry Christmas, Daddy” she said, handing him a package and giving him a peck on the cheek.

“And Merry Christmas to you too,” he said, handing her a package in return. It was their little tradition: one package the night before. The miniature Christmas tree had two or three more presents under it for each of them, that would be opened the next day. This first one though was still special.

He finished picking the package open-- he’d always done that, trying to keep the paper in one whole piece. It drove Taylor crazy, she’d keep urging him to “just rip it open already!” Inside was an old fashioned pocket watch, complete with a platinum chain. He wound it and listened to it tick.

“Hey, nice. Very classy,” he said. “I’ll be the envy of the dockworkers.” He’d always longed for something so classical and dignified. He was going to have to buy a waistcoat just to have a pocket for it.

Paper flew from Taylor’s hands in wild shreds. “ohhh,” she said, pulling out a set of tortoiseshell combs. “Oh these are beautiful. Though I don’t know when I would wear them...” she took them out anyway and, with a bit of fumbling and a little help from Danny, used them to pin her hair up. She looked at her reflection in the windowglass, beaming. Then for a moment she looked wistful.

“Wishing your boyfriend could be here?” Danny said, tugging on a loose lock of her hair. It hurt him how critical his beautiful little girl was of her appearance, but even at her lowest she had always
been proud of her long black mane of hair. The combs had been the perfect gift, he thought with pleasure; a perfect adornment for her lustrous crown of curls.

“Daddy--!” The words ‘he’s not my boyfriend’ rose to her lips but didn’t quite leave them. Instead she nodded. “He said he’d be here for New Years, though,” she said.

“I’m sure he wishes he could have been,” Danny said. He pulled another package out from behind the sofa pillow where he’d hidden it. “Which is probably why he dropped this off the other day…”

Taylor squeaked and grabbed the package. The paper vanished in a twinkling and she sat there, holding a lovingly bound hardback volume, titled in gold lettering. “The collected works of O. Henry,” she read aloud. She opened to the first page and a letter fell out.

“Dear Taylor;

You’ve spent so much time talking about your favorite authors, I figured I’d give you a chance to read one of my own. You’ll like his work; he was an original American classic.

I’m sorry I couldn’t come over for Christmas, but believe me, it’s for a good cause and it’s something I have to do. I want so much to show you what I’ve been up to, and I can’t wait until I can let you see it for yourself.

Till then, I’ll be thinking of you, and hope you’ll be doing the same.

All my best wishes,

Adrian"

“Oh that is so…what, what’s so funny?” Because Danny Hebert was shaking with silent laughter.

“Honey, he got us,” he said. “He got us both.” Taylor stared at him, mystified. “Let me ask; did Adrian give you any suggestions for what gift to give me?”

Taylor blushed a bit but nodded. “He spotted the watch at the Market and told me it’d be perfect for you,” she said.

Danny laughed out loud at that. “Well, I called him up to ask how you were doing at school one day,” he said. “I mentioned I was trying to think of a good gift for you, and he blurs out “tortoiseshell combs,” and then fumbled around saying it was because you were so proud of your hair… he even told me where I could find some classy old-fashioned ones like these…” He looked at her confused face. “Haven’t you ever read O. Henry, honey? Of all the classic authors, for you not to have read--” he chuckled. He pointed at the book. “Tell you what: Open that up to ’The Gift of the Magi” and read it for me.”

She obeyed, turning to the table of contents and finding the story. “One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty- seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas....”

She read on, and it became obvious to Danny when she started to suspect because the smile on her face started turning into a gleeful grin. When she got to the part about the watch fob and the tortoiseshell combs she laughed out loud. “That STINKER!” she said between gales of laughter.
“How did he pull this off??”

Danny chuckled till his sides hurt. “He probably got the idea when we both asked him for gift advice, and couldn’t resist the joke,” he said. “He is right though. The Gift of the Magi, the Ransom of Red Chief, the Last Leaf, the Cop and the Anthem, A Retrieved Reformation… his stories have practically become American folklore. There’s hardly a scriptwriter on the planet that hasn’t cribbed the plot from one of his stories. You probably have read his stories or at least heard of them, and just not known it.”

Taylor flipped through the pages, looking over the titles and the few illustrations to each story. “I can’t wait for you to meet him,” she said. “He’s a great guy, really.” A look of worry fleetingly appeared in her eyes. “Sometimes I feel like he wants to take the weight of the whole world on his shoulders.”

Danny sat back and smiled. “I’m sure he’ll turn out to be a great guy,” he said. “New Year’s is soon enough.”

Night fell. Adrian looked down from a nearby hilltop onto the Twin Pines Mall. There were mobs of people moving around in the normally empty parking lot, and lights were beginning to blaze up inside the building. How in blazes did Skidmark expect to hold this “rave” of his without pulling down the attention of every cop and cape in the Bay? This mess was probably visible from orbit! Not his problem, though. He pulled down his hoodie and hitched his backpack up on his shoulders. His goals tonight were a lot simpler than figuring out what was going on in Skidmark’s messed up brain. Get in. Take out the security. Clear out the crowds. Take out the capes. Pull in the cops. He recited this to himself like a mantra as he trudged down the hill.

For the first step, he was going in the easy way: through the front door. That’s why he was in his Human form. He’d worn some of the ratty clothes left over from his Goodwill raid, just some jeans and a hoody. They were clean, but scruffy enough to pass as normal for this crowd. Getting in didn’t look like a problem either. It wasn’t like Skidmark was setting up a velvet rope or anything.

Just as he reached the edge of the parking lot, something that sounded like several diesel engines rumbled to life. The sounds coming from the mall grew muffled and distant and the air began to shimmer. With a cracking noise, the building, the parking lot and everything in it vanished. Adrian cursed. So that was how he was going to pull it off. Squealer was the Merchant vehicle tinker, and she was notorious for at least two things; the ugliest brute-force vehicles anyone had ever seen, and cloaking devices that were almost obscene in how well they worked. It wasn’t unusual in Brockton Bay to see the Merchants making an escape in a getaway vehicle that looked like a garbage truck had mated with a tank, only to see it shimmer and vanish into thin air right on the street. Or worse, to be driving down what looked like a calm early morning city street and have one of Squealer’s vehicular nightmares appear out of nowhere right on top of you. Drivers in Brockton Bay had such nerves of steel they made New York cabbies look like sissies.

Apparently she’d hooked up one, or several of them to judge from the sound he’d heard, to cover the building. Someone might notice the abandoned building was missing, but noone in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve was going to go over and look to see what had happened, or even care that much. Well, perfect. That was just one more thing to deal with.
He ran forward, one hand out in front of himself, hoping it wasn’t anything more solid than a stealth field. He stumbled as the world began to grow wavy, but a hand grabbed him and pulled him on through. It was one of the Merchant guards, a gun slung across his back. “Better hustle, kid,” he laughed, mocking humor in his eyes. “You almost missed the party.” He gave Adrian a half-shove towards the front doors. A couple more Merchants were at the door, shaking people down and checking them for weapons (and probably for valuables, if he didn’t miss his guess.)

The crowd alternately pulled and shoved him forward till he was standing in front of a huge, burly black man, with bloodshot eyes and a paunch that made him look like a prizefighter gone to seed. He held out his hand for Adrian’s backpack. Adrian pulled it off and held it open; the guy roughly pulled it open further and looked inside. All he saw were some odds and ends; some meal bars, extra socks and underwear, some bits of junk that could’ve been anything, but obviously nothing that set off any alarms with the guy.

There was a reason for that. Adrian had stuffed his haversack down inside the ratty backpack, disguising it. After many long nights and painstaking labor, he’d managed to convert his useful-yet-limited one-pocked bottomless haversack into one with two. His weapons, costume, and gear were all in the second pocket, which the bloodshot-eyed guard didn’t know how to open. He grunted and let go of the bag. “You ain’t gonna party much without any cash or stash,” he said.

Adrian gave him a mocking curl of the lip back. “Like I’d tell you where I kept my cash OR my stash,” he said. The guy sneered back, but there seemed to be a little more respect in his bloodshot eyes for someone who wasn’t a complete fool. He shoved Adrian inside.

The first impression was crowded. The second was blinding. The third was deafening. The loudspeakers were pounding out something approximating music; it was hard to tell what, it was so loud all you could hear or feel was the thundering beat. There were lights, strobes, and even a few laser lights blazing in every direction. Bodies were pressed in everywhere, hanging from the rails on all three floors, trying to move to the beat or move against each other. There was a haze in the air, almost thick enough to be from a smoke machine. Adrian caught a whiff and immediately had to cast a decontaminate on himself to keep from getting an instant contact high.

The only clear space was the center of the open court, where a huge pool and fountain had been. The water was long gone and the fountain had been ripped out, leaving a six-foot-deep concrete pit, about fifty feet on a side. A crudely welded iron cage was suspended above it on chains. Parked directly to one side of the pit was one of Squealer’s creations. It looked like a porno from a monster truck rally. Most of it was cross between a six-wheeled, oversized humvee and a cherry-picker crane. High up in the basket was Skidmark, holding a big trash bag and wearing a Santa hat and coat. The drug king of Brockton Bay grabbed a microphone and yelled into it.

“WASSUP, BLEEPERS? HO HO BLEEPING HO!” He reached into the sack, pulled out a handful of dime bags-- some with pills, others with nuggets of weed-- and flung them out over the crowd. The crowd went wild, scrabbling for the free goodies, hands outstretched trying to catch them out of the air. Skidmark repeated the toss a couple of times, then emptied the bag into the air, tossing it away when he was done.

He let the crowd roar a bit, then signaled for attention. “ATTENTION, BLEEPERS!” he bellowed, making the speakers boom and whine with feedback. The noise faded to a dull roar. “IT’S TIME FOR A MERCHANT RAAAAAAAVE!” The crowd roared in approval.

Adrian took advantage of the noise. It was time to get to work. He slipped into the shadows of one of the ruined storefronts and hid behind one of the empty shelves. He shifted into worgen form and hastily donned his costume and gear, changed to his sabertooth panther form and disappeared. He
kept one ear on what Skidmark was shouting as he began prowling the perimeter.

“Now you BLEEPers, you’re asking me-- ‘Skidmark, you sexy BLEEPing BLEEPer, what have you got for us?’ And I’m here to tell you-- we got BOOZE!” A roar of approval answered that. “We got DRUGS!” Another roar. “We got HOES!” An especially loud animal noise of approval went up. “And tonight, for one night only-- we got THE CAGE MATCH!” Makeshift spotlights illuminated the concrete pit and the cage above it. Cheers resounded.

Skinwalker kept on the move, slipping from shadow to shadow. He didn’t have much in the way of equipment left. He’d blown most everything he had on the Cauldron attack and then some. What he had left he was going to have to make very good use of. Particularly he had the strobes and sirens of about a score of unfinished Alarm-o-bots, the last of his completed bots that had been serving as security at the Lost Workshop…. And some seaforium charges. A lot of seaforium charges.

As he arrived at what he considered strategic locations, he would decloak and plant one of the unfinished Alarm-o-bots. Any armed Merchant he stumbled across were swiftly dealt with; the fools were all facing inward, gawping up at their illustrious leader as he showered them with his profanity-laden speech. He crept up behind one after another, knocked them out, tagged them, and stuffed them in one dark uninspected corner or another, their hands and feet zip-tied and duct-tape over their mouths.

“For you BLEEPS who don’t know what the BLEEP the Cage Match is about, Clean the BLEEP out of your BLEEP BLEEP and BLEEP BLEEP ears and listen the BLEEP up!”

His primary goal were the emergency exits. There were guards inside and out at each one. Those he had no choice, it would be too complicated to quietly take them out. He sneaked up in stealth and planted the charges, and hoped they were smart enough to get out of the way when the balloon went up.

“BZZZT BLEEP BLEEPTY BLEE BLEEP BLONK A BLEEP BLING BLAPPY BLAPPITY BLINGO BLANGO BOING BLEEP EFFITY EFFIN BLEEEEEP!”

Skinwalker had to pause at that one. Dang.

“EFFIN BLEEPIN microphone shorted out on my tongue—aaow-- Anyway you BLEEPS, this is how you make your CHOPS in the MERCHANTS. You want in? You go in the Cage. Whoever comes out STANDIN’ UP is a MERCHANT. Yeah, you get the free decoder ring and all that BLEEP. You a scrub, you wanna get a PROMOTION? Get some better money, better BLEEEP and more BLEEEP with your BLANK? you go in the Cage with another homeboy who wants a promotion-- one that comes out standin up, gets his stripes! And the more matches you walk in on, the higher up you go!”

“Hey, we’ll even cut you a deal! You got a tab you runnin’ with us? Wanna clear it out? Survive a round in the cage and we’ll cut it by half! Take two an’ we’ll cut it again!”

The stealth field generators weren’t hard to find. They were up on the roof, huge ungainly things that looked like they’d been built out of diesel engines. It must have taken a ton of fuel to power a cloak that large. There were three or four merchants up their with submachine guns, passing a spliff or three and cursing their luck at having to stand out in the cold. He rolled the seaforium pots under each roaring, chugging engine and skulked back inside, sneaking down the enclosed stairwell. This was grim. If he went through with this, even with all he was doing, there was no guarantees.

Someone could be injured, maybe even mortally, in the chaos. These guys weren’t footsoldiers, though. They’d gone up a few ranks… trusted with weapons, given bandanas to mark their rank. They’d killed already, in the cage if nowhere else. These weren’t cute little comedy characters,
lovable drunks and wackystoners from some idioticsitcom. These guys were scum.

But could he even do this? If he HAD to, absolutely had to, could he kill?

It was then that he heard someone screaming, muffled and frantic. He looked over the rail; down below five guys had dragged a girl into the stairwell of the fire escape. Two were holdingher arms while a third smothered her mouth with a filthy paw. The other two were busy tearing off what little she was already wearing.

Something switched off inside him. He transformed from panther to worgen and vaulted the rail. He landed silently behind the two tearing at the girl’s clothes and seized both their heads in huge taloned paws. He brought their skulls together with all his strength.

Before their bodies had even slumped to the floor, his hands lashed out, smashing the heads of the two holding her arms against the concrete block wall behind them with a sickening crunch. The last one holding the girl didn’t have time to scream. Adrian reached around the girl, grabbed the grimy man by his neck, throttling him. He pulled him off her and whipped him by his neck overhand behind him. The rapist's plummet down the stairwell wasn’t clean; he clanged off the rails a few time on the way down before hitting the bottom floor with a wet thump.

The girl, thankfully, was too terrified to scream. She cowered against the wall, trying to cover herself as she stared up at him with wide, frightened eyes. He pulled his hoodie out of his haversack and tossed it to her. She grasped at it, pulling it to herself.

“Get out,” he said. “While you can.” Whimpering, she scurried past him, plunging out the exit at the bottom of the stairwell and into the cold night. There was no challenge by the guards that were supposed to be there. Fair odds those particular Merchants were the ones piled at his feet.

The would-be rapists, incredibly, were still alive. He could hear them struggling to breathe; one moaned faintly. Snarling silently, he trussed them up, zip ties all around and just enough Azeroth bandages and drops of potion to keep them from dying...the entire time gnashing his teeth so hard his fangs almost broke. Yes, oh yes he could kill. The question was whether he could hold himself back from it.

The answer was: yes. For now.

“But lemme tell y’all something NEW has been added!” Skinwalker heard that and quickly returned to stealth form, slipping back indoors. “New” was not good.

“Yeah. BLEEP yeah! There’s gonna be six GRAND BLEEPING PRIZE WINNERS this time.” Skidmark held up a silver briefcase and turned, showing it to the crowd. Skinwalker could see that it was cuffed to his wrist by a long steel chain. He’d mistaken that earlier for some bit of jewelry.

“Y’all know what this is?” Skidmark said. He opened the case, letting everyone see what was inside: six glass vials, each nestled in foam. They glimmered in the harsh light. “Magic in a bottle. The Genie’s lamp. You’ve heard the legends and the legends are true... Cape Juice. Powers in a bottle.

“We gonna pick six of you BLEEPs that does best in the Cage. One bottle each. Drink it down and get to walk the earth like a GOD!”

Skinwalker quickly shifted to an owl-- the mob never noticed; every greedy eye was fixed on the case. He fluttered up to a nearby decorative buttress and focused in on the case. For a creature who could spot a fieldmouse from a hundred feet up, it was an easy read. Yes, there it was: the Cauldron logo, etched in the stopper. They were real.
“SO LET THE BLEEPING GAMES BEGIN!”

That was all it took. Half a dozen would-be contestants pushed past the Merchant guards holding back the crowd and dropped into the pit. Knives, chains, and broken bottles came out. Down in the cockpit of her vehicle, Squealer hit a lever and the cage began to drop.

Skinwalker changed back and crouched on his perch. “I don’t think so,” he said. He pulled a remote control out of his pocket and hit the button.

All around the perimeter, sirens began to whoop. Red and blue strobes began flashing. “YOU ARE SURROUNDED! PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS AND PUT YOUR HANDS UP! SURRENDER!”

The response was gratifying. The crowd of drunks, junkies, partiers and wannabe rebels began screaming as if Leviathan himself had just popped out of the fountain. As one, the mob began pushing in any direction, so long as it looked like it was away from those lights and sirens.

Which happened to be, thanks to careful timing and placement, in the direction of the exits.

Skinwalker hit another button and the seaforium charges blew. With a deafening blast all the doors, fire exits, and loading dock shutters in the building blew outward and away, sending Merchant guards flying and leaving a clear path out into the freezing snow-blown night.

At the same time the four cloaking device engines chugging away on the roof suffered a catastrophic failure as their undersides were blown out through their tops. The aura concealing the building from sight and attention popped like a soap bubble and the neighbors for a mile in every direction were woken from their dreams of sugarplums by an eruption of light, noise, explosions and screaming.

For an added touch, batches of pandarian fireworks whistled into the sky, showering the area with sparks. “Let’s see the patrolmen ignore that,” Skinwalker muttered.

The mob poured out into the parking lot in every direction, fleeing where none pursued. Those that didn’t found themselves being pursued by six-foot-tall extinguisher bots. Skinwalker hadn’t quite perfect them though. They tended to keep dousing his forges, his candles, himself when he was asleep… they were sufficient for the job of laying down fire suppression and chasing the last of the junkies out. More than one stoner smoking a bong or spliff regretted not opting for the brownies instead as they suddenly found themselves eating a faceful of fire extinguisher foam.

It was at this point that Mush and Trainwreck made their appearance. They came thundering in, Trainwreck in yet another kludged together steam-junk suit of armor, Mush wearing the content of two or three dumpsters. They spotted him perched on the wall and came running, yelling.

Skinwalker gave it a five count. When the East wall was clear of any civilians, he pulled out another remote and flicked the “on” switch.

He’d not had resources to build everything he needed. he’d blown most of his stockpile on the attack of opportunity on Cauldron. There was no possible way he could have built himself a brand new army of six foot robots in three months, much less a week. But it was amazing the stopgap measures you could make when you had a gnomish shrinking or enlarging ray.

BOOM! The East wall… a late un lamented shoe store… exploded inward. In through the rubble came a gigantic Tonk, one of the caterpillar-treaded dwarven war machines of Azeroth. Its turret rotated, bringing its vastly oversized barrel to bear.

THOOM. The cannonball struck Trainwreck square in the chest. His suit’s arms and legs went
flying in all four directions and his torso, crumpled into ruin, hit the wall and tumbled to the floor. The limbless tinker lay there, cursing violently, trapped… and unable to run even if he could have crawled out.

Mush rallied, wadding together a boulder of trash and heaving it at the worgen. It missed by a yard, splattering against the wall and raining trash everywhere. Skinwalker wasted no time on him. A bottle of lamp oil arced across the intervening space, splashing over the cape and his trash-golem body. Right behind it was a ball of sunfire.

“No, wait--!” Mush screamed, trying to ward off the sunblast with upraised arms. It did no good. The oil soaked mass of plastic and paper and rotting gassy mung went up like a tiki torch. Mush ran screaming, shedding lumps of his burning body as fast as he could. He tumbled to the floor after a few hundred feet, falling down just clear of the burning mess, his tendrils smoking. Two Extinguisher-bots cornered him, spraying the burning waste and the burning cape with extinguisher foam.

And then there were two.

As the tonk continued firing randomly in every direction, raising dust and raining rubble, Skinwalker leaped from the flying buttress to the hanging cage, then from the cage to the arm of the cherry-picker. He climbed up it hand over hand, fast as a man could run on level ground, and leapt into the basket. Skidmark hadn’t stopped screaming a mixture of orders and profanities the entire time, but noone was listening. He turned and saw the worgen in the basket with him and nearly shat himself.

Skinwalker grabbed the chain to the briefcase and snapped it between his hands like a strand of twine. He grabbed the case just as Skidmark gathered his one scattered wit and hit him with his powers. Suddenly the floor of the cherry picker platform under Skinwalker’s feet turned slick as grease and some force shot him backwards and over the rail. He ricocheted off the cage with a crack- - he felt ribs break-- then he landed on the roof of the Tonk.

Bullets began spalling off the Tonk’s thick hide all around him. Hastily he pulled open the hatch in the eagle’s head cockpit and dropped inside, seconds before the cage dropped and bounced off his hull. A hasty Heal to his ribs was all he could manage at the moment; things were getting a little bit exciting.

Even though he shrank down to human form again there was little room in the cockpit. Most of the space was taken up with a gnomish gadget that pinged and buzzed and sizzled and went “vumm” every few seconds. This was his little kitbash solution to needing a full sized vehicle: he’d built a toy Tonk and then installed a gnomish enlarger inside. He’d kludged it from the blueprints for a World Shrinker Ray; Once activated, every so often it would send a pulse of “Enlarge” through the vehicle, keeping it at its current size. The extinguisher-bots had been treated the same way, with a quick squirt of enlarger ray. Unfortunately he didn’t have enough to build enlargers for all of them, so in another ten minutes or so they were going to smeerrrrp back to their regular toybox-ready size.

He gave the enlarger an uneasy glance. If that thing broke down, things were going to get a trifle cramped inside this Tonk.

Bullets pinged and whined off the Tonk’s skin. Apparently there were some loyal holdouts. Skinwalker wasn’t too worried about that, but they were liable to fish something out bigger, sooner or later--- something a lot larger than a .45 bullet banged violently against his hull. Speak of the Devil. It looked like Squealer had gotten at least one of the guns on her Hellmobile lined up on him.

As he recalled from canon, some idiot had sold this bunch rocket launchers at one point. He didn’t want to test his craftsmanship against that.
He looked down at the briefcase. Mission parameters had changed. This case was vital evidence, proof that could bust half a dozen conspiracies wide open. He had to get this fight out in the open and on his terms again. He grabbed the controls and spun the gun turret around til it was pointing straight into Squealer’s front grille, not ten feet in front of him.

He fired. With an almighty bang the bulldozer shovel Squealer had bolted to the front of her vehicle for armor was blasted off. It went flipping end over end to crash someplace on the second floor. The whole vehicle tilted sideways, threatening to tip over, crane and all. Even over the gunfire Skinwalker could hear Squealer and Skidmark shrieking and swearing. He took advantage of their excited distraction and threw the Tonk in reverse.

With a spray of gravel and a roar from the enlarged engine, the Tonk shot backwards and out the way it had come in. He roared across the parking lot, his treads ripping the asphalt. All around in every direction he could see police lights, real police lights, closing in on the abandoned shopping mall. All the more reason to get Skidmark, Squealer and their cannon-covered Helltruck away from here.

So far, so good: a moment later Squealer’s Helltruck rocketed out of the ruptured wall, bouncing on all six tires as it caught air leaving the building. The cherry-picker had been lowered down and locked, and Skidmark was riding in the basket like an elephant rider in a howda, screaming and gesticulating.

No, not just waving his arms, Skinwalker realized. Skidmark was laying down his power ahead of the Helltruck, making it go faster.

Skidmark had a power you’d probably expect more out of the gamer-nerd villains uber and leet: he could lay down patches of energy on any surface that acted like the booster arrows in Mario Kart, making anything that crossed them accelerate in the direction he laid out. He was hanging on the basket resting on the vehicle’s hood, using his free hand to toss down patch after patch after patch in front of the Helltruck’s wheels. In his other hand he was clutching a black globe of some sort-- it kind of looked like an eight ball. Was it something he needed to make his power work, Skinwalker wondered?

No time for that. The Helltruck was in hot pursuit, guns blazing like strobe lights, and it was closing fast. Skinwalker opened up the throttle and threw the Tonk in reverse, roaring out of the parking lot, crossing the neighboring road, and hurtling down an intersecting street. Backwards, no less.

He had three shots left. It was a residential district but Skinwalker had little choice. He lowered the Tonk’s cannon and fired. Squealer dodged as the road erupted. The second shot cavitated the road ahead of the Helltruck, but it bounced over the craters with its six fat wheels without a problem.

Then Skidmark laid down a streak of accelerator. The Helltruck rocketed forward and struck the Tonk with an enormous smash. When Skinwalker shook his head clear, he’d reverted to worgen form again. The hatch on his cockpit was gone, along with a good part of the roof, and his cannon and treads were wedged in the Helltruck’s mangled grille. He yanked on the controls; no go, he was stuck on the front of Squealer’s Helltruck like a reindeer on Grandma’s bumper. And they were STILL rolling down the road at breakneck speeds, his back wheels sparking off the pavement as the tread belt rattled off them.

Then the enlarger began to spark. “Oh, not good,” Skinwalker muttered.

He looked up and Squealer’s eyes met his. She saw his predicament. She gave him a leer fit for the Devil and tromped on the accelerator. The roar from the engine was like the end of the World coming.
Skinwalker looked over his shoulder. The street they were on ended at a half-mile paved pier. The half-mile pier ended in a rustic wooden pier. The wooden pier ended in the bay. They roared off the road and began hurtling down the pier, smashing signs and fishing shacks on either side the entire way. Skidmark was screaming like a lunatic, waving the black ball over his head. “We got ’im, Mr. Lucky! We got ’im now!!”

Skinwalker scrabbled at the controls. Brakes weren’t working. Engine wasn’t working. Pretty soon the Enlarger wasn’t going to be working.

The cannon was working. He grabbed the trigger and looked Squealer in the eyes again over the hoods of their conjoined vehicle. Her eyes went wide as she realized at the last second what he was going to do.

Could he kill?

If he had to.

“HEY SQUEALER,” he yelled. “TANK…YOU!”

And yanked the trigger.

Had the Helltruck not lost its front armor the story might have ended differently. But the shovel in the front was long gone, and the cannon barrel was wedged right up against the Helltruck’s radiator. The cannonball smashed through the engine block, through the cab behind it, through the dual engines behind that, and out the back of the vehicle, destroying everything in its path and engulfing everything else inside the vehicle’s armored hide in a cauldron of flame. Smoke and burning fuel and red hot steel erupted from the tail of the vehicle like the vomit of hell. The Helltruck came to a thundering halt, plowing to a stop just a few dozen yards from the end of the wooden pier.

But alas, even in the world of capes, action must equal reaction. The damaged Tonk and all its contents, including the briefcase full of miracle potions and one worgen, blasted free of the Helltruck’s grasp and went hurtling off the end of the dock. They hit with a mighty splash, and disappeared in the icy waves.

The sudden halt dismounted Skidmark from his steed. By pure luck he vaulted clear of his dead girlfriend’s burning vehicle to safety. He tumbled down the length of the dock, ending up on his hands and knees. For a wonder, he still had Mr. Lucky clutched in his hand.

“BLEEP,” he groaned, getting up off his bloody hands and knees. He looked back at the truck. It was gutted, the inside a raging inferno. “Squealer!” he shouted. For the first time in ages he showed some human feeling; he watched, stunned and bereft, as the truck and whatever was left of his woman burned.

“The briefcase!!” he suddenly screamed. He ran for the end of the dock. The wooden quay was already badly damaged and threatening to crumble into the water. He clung to the sinking post and tried, uselessly, to see where the briefcase had gone. It had sunk to the bottom of the Bay, apparently. “BLEEP BLEEP BLEEP it, those BLEEPING briefcases are supposed to BLEEPING FLOAT!” He screamed. He sank to his knees. “five… and a half.. million… bucks,” he moaned. Every last bit of operating capital the Merchants had left, and more. That’s what it had cost to get those vials. He was broke, he was in debt to people he didn’t even want to think about, the rest of the capes in his gang were down or dead, and his last hope of the Merchants pulling a comeback had just disappeared into the depths.

He held up the magic 8 ball and shook it, looking into its window. “Come on, Mr. Lucky. I need
“Come on, Mr. Lucky. It was you who told me about those vials, it was you who told me where to get them, all of this was all your plan, c’mon, you gotta have a way to get me outta this—”

The bubble-window remained dark.

“BLEEP YOU!” Skidmark screamed. “This is all YOUR fault, you TRAITOR!” He took the 8-ball and flung it out into the waves as far as he could. It barely made a splash. He turned in a circle, pulling at his scorched dreadlocks with his fingers. “What do I do, what do I do...”

The damaged dock sank a little further. Something sloshed in the water. Skidmark turned on his heel and stared at the water suspiciously. Something was moving around down there. He carefully lowered himself down onto the last few boards of the pier, squinting...

Not many people know anything bout Skidmark’s formative years. Largely because nobody cares. But it must be said that at one point he was an ordinary innocent child. And during those formative years, when he was about eight years old, his jackass of an older brother tricked him into going to the theater to see a new movie-- “Orca.”

This was one of the many would-be imitators that came out after the debut of “Jaws,” about a vengeful killer whale pursuing the sailor that had killed its mate and calf. It was corny, it was schlocy, it was hilariously awful. But to an eight-year-old Skidmark it had been a sleigh ride into mind-blowing terror that had impacted on him the rest of his life. He couldn’t even be in the same room as a Shamu plushy without having to make a break for another room.

So one can only imagine the depths of utter, mind-shattering horror that clutched his soul when a full grown bull killer whale erupted from the water below.

He had time for one chilling scream before that enormous mouth closed over him.

Several miles away, a man at a computer sat back and contemplated what he'd seen. He'd gotten a front row seat of the entire battle of the Twin Pines Mall, from the moment Skidmark had climbed aboard the cherry picker to the last few seconds of him shaking Mr. Lucky and screaming at him-- then a few seconds of rapid sky-ocean-sky-ocean ending in a splash, and darkness.

It had been what, three years ago now? That he had a stroke of luck and learned of the drug kingpin’s obsession with the plastic toy. On an impulse he'd had one of his agents steal the thing and replace it with one with a few technological additions, such as a spy camera and microphone and a specially made text screen that imitated a real 8-ball's liquid chamber. With this trinket he'd been able to not only spy on his rival, but to actually order him and his entire gang around. It had turned an annoying problem underfoot into a useful resource.

The footage of late had been particularly entertaining, as Skidmark had begun carrying his lucky 8-ball everywhere with him. Entertaining and enlightening. This new cape was versatile, eccentric and if pressed, ruthless. He demonstrated a startling range of abilities and at levels the resources in the PRT only guessed at. He also had a gift for insights into leveraging powers to their best effectiveness, if his little gifts to the Protectorate and the Wards were any indicator. He would make an extraordinarily useful asset, and a deadly liability. The only option for dealing with him was to recruit him, or eliminate him.

Coil turned away from his desk and leaned back, contemplating how he might accomplish either.
About a mile down the beach, a pair of Brockton Bay’s bravest, sitting in their squad car at the end of a short dock filling out paperwork, found themselves witnesses to an extraordinary sight.

“Oh Jesus Jesus JESUS help OH Lord JESUS Lord LORD OH GOD help...”

Plowing through the water, its head held high, was a killer whale. It swam past the end of the dock, water pluming in its wake.

It appeared to be dragging Skidmark of the Merchants in its mouth by his leg. The leader of the merchants was dressed in a sodden Santa Claus coat and, for a wonder, was not swearing. He appeared to be praying.

“Oh Jesus Mary and Joseph and Peter and Paul and Saint Jerome! ”

Apparently to anyone and everyone who he thought might be listening.

“Peter Paul and Mary! Earthwindandfire! Harry Krishna! Harry Kari! Harry Potter!!”

They got out of their squad car silently, unable to take their eyes off the spectacle. The whale was swimming in a wide figure eight, dragging its terrified toy around in the icy waves.

“HEAR ME ALLAH! SAVE ME BUDDAH! HELP ME KALI!!...”

Officer Charlie, the quicker thinking of the duo, reached in the window of the patrol car, honked the horn and flashed the lights. The orca stopped and stood on its tail; they had gotten its attention. Or perhaps it had been trying to get theirs.

“Oh Mister Rogers! Oh Kenny Rogers! Oh Bob Ross! Have Mercy on Me!”

The whale swam in closer to the beach. The two officers panicked when it began whipping its head back and forth; they’d both seen enough nature documentaries to remember seeing how a killer whale snapped the neck of a seal. They needn’t have worried; the orca wasn’t going for the kill-- it was just winding up. With a wrench of its head the magnificent sea animal flung Skidmark in a high arc towards the shore.

“OPTIMUS PRIME SAVE OUR SOOOUUUULS!!!!”

The leader of the Merchants landed on the cold, wet sand with a splat. He groaned in pain for a second, then got up on his knees, feeling himself over. “I’m alive. I’m ALIIIIIIVE!” he began laughing hysterically. He clung to the first officer who ran up, weeping and giggling and falling into a complete breakdown.

“You’re also under arrest,” Officer Charlie said, pulling out the cuffs and slapping them on the sopping wet junkie.

“That’s nice,” Skidmark said, nodding and smiling. Then he fell to the sand and curled up in a fetal ball, shivering and weeping and making blithering noises. When the PRT van arrived, they had to
carry him onto it on a stretcher.

Further on down, out of sight under the docks, the orca beached itself. Its mouth opened and it began making slow, painful retching noises. After several seconds of obvious pain, a silvery metal briefcase slid out of its mouth and onto the sand.

Once the blockage was clear the orca changed, shrinking down to the form of a bedraggled, badly battered worgen in a sodden, singed cloak. Skinwalker fished around in his haversack and pulled out a rune-covered stone. He squeezed it in his fist. A minute ticked by, then two. Glowing lights began to spiral around him. “Hope this works,” he groaned. Then he vanished.

He reappeared in the Lost Workshop a few feet above the stone floor. He hit it with a thump, eliciting more groans of pain. “Well, it worked,” he muttered to noone. Hearthstones, he had learned in his efforts to make one, were a lot more limited than in the game. Which only made sense. If they were as quick, reliable and efficient as they were in the game, Azeroth’s armies would have built strategies around them; having entire platoons set their hearth back at the base camp, for example. Or setting up a secure command network based on mail carriers Hearthstoning across the globe. Or they’d be a hub of commerce: even with as little as a single person could carry, being able to deliver anything across the globe instantly would make it well worth the investment. Alliance Express, heh.

But in reality they were slow to operate, difficult to make, and even more difficult to reset to a new location. In fact they were generally given as a gift on the birth of a child, and most people kept them set to the town of their birth their whole lives. Their primary purpose was to let the folks at home know you were still alive (the twin of the stone glowed so long as the wielder was still breathing) and… to let the mortally wounded return home to die.

That was not an ideal train of thought. He forced himself to his feet and limped, then crawled, then dragged himself up the stairs to his bed. He considered it a triumph that he sprawled atop it, rather than on the floor next to the stupid briefcase. One of the alarm-o-bots trundled up and tried to push a roll of bandages into his hand dangling over the side. “Thanks little buddy,” he mumbled. “Don’t think that’s gonna do the trick.”

He tried for a quick heal. It sputtered out. Then he tried for a slow heal over time. That failed too. An efflorescence?… nothing.

He was wishing to high heaven he’d taken alchemy. He’d be guzzling healing potions like they were Dr. Pepper right now if he had. This was bad. The pain was everywhere, inside and out. (served him right for swallowing a briefcase then puking it back up.) What was wrong?

He was a druid, blast it, why weren’t any of his healing and purifying spells working? He needed help. He could go get help… but how. He wasn’t a mage, he didn’t have a laundry list of places and ways to teleport someplace. Druids only had one real location they could port to.

….Where was it?

Even as he was sliding from consciousness he could hear alarm bells sounding. Alarm bells, right! “Alarm Clock,” he slurred. “Set Alarm for 9am, December 31.”

The alarm clock dinged. “Alarm set for morning, 9am, December 31,” she said soothingly.
Perfect. He didn’t want to miss his date.

Where was that place? He could get help there, couldn’t he?

Oh right. He clenched his fist and alien light swirled.

“Moonglade.”

He woke lying on a grassy slope, at the shore of a glittering lake. Trees vaulted overhead. The air was warm and redolent with the scent of green growing things. He heard fish splashing in the water and birds chirping in the trees.

He looked around as best he could without sitting up. “This isn’t Moonglade, is it?” he said aloud.

*Got it in one.*

He sat up and twisted around to see who was speaking. A glowing, humanoid form was sitting next to him with its back against the tree shading them. *Hello again. Glad to see you finally figured it out.*

“Agent?” Skinwalker said. “What the heck is going on? Where am I?”

Ah, I see I spoke too soon. Agent sighed. *Very well, I shall attempt to explain. I think I’ll start with the last question first. You attempted to teleport to Moonglade. Correct?*

“Yyyyyes, I kind of remember that,” Adrian said.

It’s an ability, indoctrinated into every Azeroth druid from their first day. A place to flee to in time of need… second only to the Emerald Dream as a place of sanctuary. It was your first, natural choice when in a state of distress.

However, the problem with that is that there is no Moonglade in this world. So lacking that locale, your powers defaulted to the next choice of sanctuary… attempting to reach the Emerald Dream.

“Attempted.” Adrian repeated.

*Good of you to catch that. To make it brief, this world has no Emerald Dream, either. The Titans who made Azeroth created it as a sort of… starting blueprint. A parallel plane of Azeroth that served as a baseline against which to measure changes or endeavours they made after a certain point. He paused. Coincidentally you’ll note that there’s no “robotic lifeforms” in the Emerald Dream. Which should tell you a lot about the Titans and others who claim that all life on Azeroth was originally “perfect” metal and stone, and that organic life was the result of a “Curse of the flesh.”*

“So what’s the real story?” Adrian asked.

*Several of the Titans had something of a … mechanical lifeform fetish. They ran around for a few thousand years, screwing up everyone else’s work and turning everything into metal and stone golems. The “Curse” is life returning to it’s proper state.*
“Makes sense,” Adrian grunted. “I noticed that for all their talk of “the perfection of iron” or “the weakness of flesh,” their women still had breasts. I don’t know about you but I think of anything more useless, unlikely or counter-productive than boobs made of rock.” he snorted. “I kept picturing their men getting together and weeping, “Ach, Ah remember when they jiggled...”

To his surprise, Agent tipped his head back and laughed. Now that was worth the price of admission.

“So if this isn’t the Emerald Dream, what is it?” Adrian said.

It is a small pocket dimension, unique to yourself, to which you can retreat in times when you are in dire need of restoration, Agent said. A sort of personal Emerald Dream. While you are here, you have one foot in the material world and one world in the extradimensional. It renders you somewhat... ghostly seeming back on the material plane, making you difficult to injure, influence or move-- but it allows your physical body to restore as if it were entirely here.

“And you are here because...?”

Because it is technically outside the normal material realm, so I am not breaking the rules by being here. His voice seemed smug. Of course I cannot do anything to help you back in the material world either, but we can at least chat... discuss things... offer advice...

“A loophole,” Adrian grinned. “Clever stinker.”

True, true. Agent’s demeanor turned severe. Of course you weren’t expected to urgently need this place for another hundred years or so. You really did a number on yourself.

“What?”

Adrian, when is the last time that you slept a full night? Or even half a night? How many weeks has it been, that you’ve been going to school all day, work all afternoon and then prowling through the night? How many nights have you spent in your Workshop, building and rebuilding and stockpiling?

“But I had to get ready--”

Not all at once! Not in one month, or three, or even twelve. Don’t get me wrong, you’ve set things in motion, many of them months or even years ahead of schedule... but you’re trying to accomplish everything at once, and it’s burning you out. It almost killed you. To say nothing of your injuries. You kept using heal after heal after heal, not taking time to rest and recuperate and let your body heal naturally. It ran your magical batteries down as much as your physical batteries and left you with a just-healed-enough body. And every time it was a little less effective. You’re not a video game character, you can’t just snap your fingers and heal instantly for free.

In addition to all those breaks, bruises, cuts and stabs and whatnot you got in your nightly excursions, that final explosion did a number on you, he added. You were within a few feet of the center of the blast wave, and it basically bruised your everything. Soft tissues, bones, internal organs. He looked over his glasses pointedly. Swallowing a briefcase didn’t help matters.

Adrian shuddered. It was only now that he realized what might have happened had any of the vials leaked.
No, you wouldn’t have Triggered, Agent said to his unasked question. Not even as a case 53. You flat out can’t. The vials would have just killed you. What would have been left of you would have looked like it hatched at Chernobyl. Agent put on his glasses. As it is, you’re going to have to spend quite some time in this state, recuperating.

“How long?” Adrian asked anxiously.

Don’t worry, only several days to a week.

“But--”

I’m sorry, I can’t be any more specific than that, Agent said. For now you need to sleep.

No, wait… It’s too close! I won’t make it in time-- Adrian tried to protest. But he only slumped down, too weary to speak, lying on the soft green grass.

Don’t worry. I’m sure we’ll get you out of here in no time.

Adrian heard no more.

“Three… Two… One…”

“Happy New Year, Brockton Bay!”

Taylor blew on her party horn, but it was only a halfhearted effort. They toasted the New Year with sparkling white grape cider in silent awkwardness.

Danny tried to think of something to say. “Pumpkin…”

“Don’t, Daddy,” Taylor said. “It’s okay. It happens, right?” She got up and headed for the stairs. “I’m gonna go on to bed.” She trooped up the stairs, leaving her father alone to watch the fireworks on TV and dwell on things.
Chapter 11

“The time is 10:30 AM, January 3rd...The time is 10:30 AM, January 3rd...”

Adrian woke. Sunlight was streaming down through the skylight onto his bed. Dang it. He rolled over, yawned, stretched, scratched his fur. Wow. He blinked in surprise. He felt... good? No, he felt great. He felt better than he had since the first day of his metamorphosis. He stood up and stretched again, twisting and flexing. Nothing ached, nothing was sore, he felt like he was literally brand new. “Holy cow, I should market this,” he muttered in amazement. “Emerald Dream day spa. Sleep your aches and pains away. I could make a mint.”

Then he bolted to the bathroom. There were consequences for sleeping for a week…

When he came back out he was purged, freshly hosed down and ready to go. (His “shower” was actually a circular cabinet lined with high pressure sprayers and a high power hot air blower. It was like cycling yourself through a car wash, but it took less than sixty seconds and hey, when you’re covered with hair....)

It had been a strange time in his pocket dimension. It felt like he had spent nearly all of his time there sleeping. Dream within a dream indeed. But quite a bit of it had been spent talking with Agent, getting advice on his powers, suggestions for his next course of actions, lessons in how to expand his abilities and skills. He was startled to learn that some of the things he had done were actual breakthroughs.

But now he needed to get cleaned up and dressed. Taylor was probably going spare wondering where he’d gotten to. But so long as he showed up in time for--

“The time is 10:30 AM, January 3rd...The time is 10:30 AM, January 3rd...”

He whipped around and looked at the clock. He grabbed it off the nightstand. “Oh no, no no no,” he said. “ARGH! I missed New Years. I missed New Years!! I promised her and I...” He banged his head against a nearby roof beam. “I should have sent an email, I-- I should have told her about-- No, but-- Ah. Crap...” He was going to have to crawl to make it up to her. He only hoped...

Ice shot down his spine.

“The time is 10:30 AM, January 3rd...The time is 10:30 AM, January 3rd...”

January 3rd. And it was nearly noon. No. Oh no no no no. NO!

Pigeons flew for their lives as a desperate worgen exploded through the skylight below them. He was dressed in all he had, a tee, some sweats and a hoodie. There was no time to try and clean his costume or assemble the last of his gear. There was no time for anything. Taylor was on a collision course with the single worst day of her life, one that could possibly destroy it.

And even running at top speed, he was still miles away from Winslow.

He transformed into his owl form and shot into the sky.
Taylor barely noticed the cutting remarks from the other girls as she made her way to her locker. For once, not because she was trying to ignore them; for once it was because she simply couldn’t care.

Adrian hadn’t come back.

At first, when he hadn’t shown up on New Year’s like he’d promised she’d been hurt. Then she’d thought about how he had been so distant, how he’d stopped calling, how he hadn’t answered his phone for a whole week, and she’d gotten angry. But then he’d not answered his phone on the first. Or the second. Or today. And he hadn’t been in class… and she’d gone from angry to worried. She’d spent the whole day thus far just bouncing from one of those three emotions to another without any rhyme or reason. Good night, was this what being in a relationship was like? How did anyone think like this?

“Hey Taylor… you feeling… not so fresh?” Madison taunted.

That snapped out of her funk. What had brought that particular barb on? Suddenly she noticed that all the other girls were giving the back corner where her locker was a wide berth. She got closer…and that was when she noticed the smell.

The smell coming from her locker. Like… rotting… she gagged. Something was oozing from the bottom--

Almost as if mesmerized, she reached out and flipped the catch. The door sprang open and she nearly vomited at what spilled out. Used tampons and… things… spilled out on the floor. Roaches ran out, scurrying everywhere. Female cries of revulsion and disgust filled the air followed by falsetto shrieks as most of the girls fled the wave of scuttling cockroaches as fast as they could go.

Taylor clutched her hands to her mouth in horror. No, this couldn’t be real, nobody would be this vile--

Three pairs of hands seized her and spun her around. She found herself facing Emma, Madison and Sophia. The expressions on their faces were uglier than she could have ever imagined. “Time for a little remedial solitary, sweety-poo,” Sophia said. She screamed and fought, but she was no physical match for Sophia, much less all three of them. As one the three of them shoved her backwards into the filth filled locker and slammed the door shut. She heard the click of a lock snapping shut in the latch.

The filth oozed up around her legs; she felt roaches and bugs crawling on them. “Oh God, please, don’t do this!” she screamed. All she heard was their taunting laughter as they started to walk away. They were leaving-- everyone was leaving!! “NO!”

No, wait, they saw the mess someone would go get a teacher or custodian-- except she realized: the only ones who had been there were the Trio’s hangers on. They had to have seen her stuff this filth IN here too… the horror grew on her as she realized the entire class was going to leave her in here, and tell noone.

She started to hyperventilate. Something in the pocket of her hoodie clacked against the wall of her prison. Hope dawned like an angel taking wing. Her phone. Her new phone, oh God bless you Dad’s-friend-at-work whoever you are… desperately, carefully, she eased the slick black rectangle out of her pocket. If she dropped it--
She didn’t drop it. She could have sobbed with relief as she brought it up to her face and used the thumbprint to activate it. Just as she started to dial she heard three sets running sneakers back in on the tile floor. Sophia’s voice rang out. “Dammit you idiots she’s still got the phone!” They ran up and banged on the door.

*Don’t you dare you bitch!* Emma snarled.

Taylor kept dialing. 911, no time for anything else. The dialtone purred once, twice, someone picked up—“Hello, 911, what is the nature of—” And then a spectral hand made of shadow and smoke passed through the locker door and grabbed for the phone.

Taylor shrieked and grappled with the hand for her lifeline. The hand was joined by a shadowy female face that snarled as they struggled. Suddenly the phone in her hand turned to smoke and slipped through her fingers. It vanished through the door. The smoky girl’s face went from a hateful snarl to a hateful smirk. “Nice try, bitch,” it said in Sophia’s voice, and disappeared.

Taylor felt her heart stop, her brain freeze. It was like the whole world lurched to one side as blood drained from her face. Sophia Hess was a cape. Sophia Hess was a cape. And there was only one cape in Brockton Bay that had shadow powers like that. She’d been all over the news for months after she’d signed on board with the Protectorate.

Sophia Hess was Shadow Stalker. A Brockton Bay Ward.

The girl who had made Taylor Hebert’s life a living hell was a hero.

Taylor blacked out.

---

Adrian hit the front steps of the school and transformed, not even breaking stride. He slammed the doors open and charged down the hall, in full-blown Worgen form. The halls were clear; it must be between classes. He saw the school security guard back around a corner, yelping into his walkie talkie. He didn’t care. He didn’t care if he was seen in this form or if anyone put two and two together or anything else. And nobody better try to stop him. God help them if they tried.

He heard someone in business shoes trying to pursue, shouting about security and halt and all that other good stuff. Well good luck Barney Fife. He skidded around the corner to Taylor’s cul-de-sac… the little dead end hall where her locker stood. Noone was there. He strode over to the locked door as patent leather shoes clackity-clacked up behind him and ripped the door open.

It was empty… save for Obie. He was lounging in the upper compartment looking bored as a mini-bot with only headlights for a face could look. Adrian felt a momentary wave of confusion. What? “Where is she?” he asked Obie. Obie shrugged.

“Sir! Step away from the locker and assume the position,” someone with a high reedy voice said. He turned around: standing behind him was a potbellied old man with a white mustache and wearing the uniform of a security officer. He had what looked like a can of mace and a taser leveled at him. To his credit he wasn’t shaking in the least, despite being old enough that a light breeze should have sent him tottering.
“Knock it off, Willoughby, it’s me,” Adrian said. Normally he pitied the old man for having such a shinola job as Winslow High security. But he did not have the patience to deal with the eighty-year-old senility victim, not right now.

Willoughby squinted at him, confused. “Me who?” He blinked his rheumy eyes. “...Adrian?” he said in surprise.

Crud, Adrian thought. Talk about a paper thin disguise.

Up behind him came two more security guards-- crap, if they spent as much on teachers as they did on rent-a-cops-- and Principal Blackwell. “Stop right there!” she shouted. “I don’t know who you are, mister, but you cannot go tearing through the school like this-- there are laws--”

“Oh, it’s all right Miss Blackwell,” Willoughby said, turning with a smile on his face. “It’s just--” A massive furry hand slapped, gently but firmly, over his mouth. He paused, then nodded his understanding of the unspoken request. “He’s, ah, someone I can vouch for,” he said. And gave Adrian a knowing wink. Good grief.

Adrian growled and clenched his fists. “This is urgent. I need to know where Taylor Hebert is, right now!”

Perhaps having the Protectorate and the PRT trooping in and out of her office had made Blackwell and her staff blase’ about capes. Perhaps they were just stupid from lead in the drinking water. But Blackwell of course decided this was the time to get officious with a seven foot tall werewolf. “I’m not going to tell some random cape off the streets where one of our students-- YALK!” she cut off with a strangled noise as Adrian grabbed her by her jacket and lifted her off the ground.

“I’m not asking, I’m telling,” the suddenly MUCH more frightening cape said, his eyes burning. “tell me where Taylor is N---”

*Locker.*

*Every student has a locker.*

*No, you fool, every student has two.*

*One for their classes, and one--*

“The gym,” Adrian said. “Oh I’m an idiot--” he dropped to all fours and raced down the corridor, disappearing around a corner before Blackwell and her security guards could move two steps.

Adrian hit the gym doors and flew across the floor, eliciting shouts and screams from the students idling their lunch hour there. He was halfway across the gym floor when something that felt like a steel pile driver fell out of the sky and slammed him to the floor. He slid across the waxed floor, stunned insensate…
A form, vast, polydimensional, incomprehensible.

A lesser part, descending--

Voices speaking one word in a thousand voices and ten thousand shades of meaning--

the offer made--

collaboration--

confusion--

ERROR--

DAMAGE--

Something at cross purposes, shorting out like a thousand circuits struck by a thousand bolts of lightning--

Adrian woke up, lying on the gym floor, tongue hanging out of his muzzle. “What--?” Brief memories of a vision of something giant, fractal… Taylor had triggered.

But something told him that something had gone very, very wrong…

“Taylor!” he bellowed, leaping to his feet. He crashed into the locker room door, dove inside, where was she, dear lord that smell? Sounds, moaning, crying, screaming, someone thrashing in a confined metal space… He followed his senses to the back of the locker room-- Oh Taylor, why do you always pick places so hidden from sight? He needed no clues to figure out which locker was hers; the reek alone was enough, even if there hadn’t been filth scattered on the floor. The door was shaking and rattling with her frantic efforts to be free.

He stood up, drew back and rammed his claws through the door. He flexed his fingers to get a grip and then ripped it completely out like he was tearing tinfoil. The locker spilled its contents onto the floor. There was an impression of flailing limbs, a tangled mane of luxurious black hair with a broken glass butterfly in it--

He caught her in the crook of his arm. “It’s okay, Taylor, I’m here Taylor, oh I’m so sorry, I’m so so sorry…” He looked down at her and his voice choked off with horror. She was writhing in agony as the bones under her flesh twisted and distorted, her fingers twisting into claws, the bones in her face and jaw pushing outward and sinking back, teeth warping into fangs…

Moments later a worgen running on three limbs burst out of the gym fire exits and began racing
down the snowy street, tearing through intersections and leaping over cars as if they were standing still. On his neck perched an Alarm-O-Bot with its siren and strobe light going full blast; in the crook of his arm was a girl writhing in pain. “Obie, Telephone!” he barked. Obie muted his alarm and pulled Adrian’s cellphone out of his backpack. The robot held the phone to Adrian’s ear. “MyPhone: Dial Danny Hebert.” The voice-activated dialer began ringing.

“Mr Taylor! I mean Mr Hebert! This is Adrian-- No time to explain--” he leaped over a stalled minivan and kept running. “It’s Taylor. There was a nasty incident at the school--- she’s Triggered. She’s been hurt, I’m taking her to the hospital. First General, close to the high school. Because I’m FASTER, dammit. I don’t know how bad it is, sir-- PLEASE, just listen! Get there as soon as you can-- I’ll call back when we arrive and the instant I know anything specific---” a sense of foreshadowing struck him and the last came out a little louder. “And for God’s sake DRIVE CAREFULLY, Dammit. She doesn’t need to wake up to TWO dead parents! End call!” The phone hung itself up; Obie stowed it in the backpack and revved up his siren again.

Less than a minute later the ER staff of First General nearly had the life scared out of them when a gigantic werewolf with a siren and police light on its head came charging through the emergency room doors. “Get me a Cape doctor,” he roared, “get me a cape doctor NOW!”

...And for God’s sake DRIVE CAREFULLY, Dammit. She doesn’t need to wake up to TWO dead parents! End Call!”

Those words echoed in Danny’s head as he navigated the Brockton Bay traffic. Every time his heart started pounding, every time he was tempted to slam his gas pedal to the floor and get to his little girl, damn the consequences, those words repeated themselves to him, all but rang in his ears. A more foolish man would have been wasting time being steamed at a teenage boy for speaking to him in that manner, but Danny wasn’t a more foolish man. And that echoing remonstration probably saved his life a half dozen times on his way to the hospital.

Every hospital in America had a Cape wing. Trigger events were still, statistically, rarer than lightning strikes. But every state had at least one team of Cape heroes, and at least a handful of rogues and yes, villains. All of them needed specialty care, both because of and to account for their unique needs and often impossible biologies, so any hospital of any reputability had at least one Cape medical expert on staff, and one or two rooms set aside in case of an unexpected arrival in the ER.

First General had a pretty good setup in that line… an actual full wing, a dedicated staff, and the added benefit of regular visits by Panacea. So they weren’t skimping on his daughter. The knowledge that she was in good hands, possibly the best of hands, was a small compensation indeed for the knowledge that his little girl had Triggered.

The moment that he had arrived, they had swept him up to Taylor’s floor and room. (How had they known? Was there a Thinker on staff?) He was confused when they fit him out with what looked like a full surgical outfit, including a surgeon’s cap and mask. Even gloves. The staff explained it was standard procedure with Cape patients and their family members, in order to preserve their secret identities. It was also a lot less obvious than having them walking around in a lone ranger mask and cape.

Secret identities…
Panacea had been waiting for him at the door to the Cape wing. She was wringing her hands and looking less than copacetic. “Mister H.T.?” she asked. He nodded; that was the code name that they’d agreed on for him down in the lobby. “I’ve already looked over H.T. Junior—” Taylor’s code name—“And… I won’t lie, it’s not good.”

His heart chilled. “What’s wrong with my baby girl?” he asked, his voice threatening to break.

“That’s… the problem. We don’t know,” she lamented. “I don’t know. I used my powers to examine her, and they’re just giving me—gibberish.” She looked frustrated, depressed, outraged, sorrowful, betrayed. “Her body is—it’s in a continual state of flux, morphing, the bones and organs constantly changing shape. Not in any way that interferes with their functioning, but the process is terribly painful. We’ve put her on a morphine drip, kept her unconscious to spare her the discomfort….” she clenched her fists in anger at her own impotence. “The closest I or anyone can figure out is that she triggered, and the trigger—failed halfway somehow. It’s a meaningless diagnosis I know—”

“You did what you could,” he said. The words tasted wooden on his tongue. “I’m glad you were here.”

“I.. came in as favor to a friend,” she said.

“Hello?”

The voice on the line was urgent, desperate with need. “Panacea, this is—well it doesn’t matter who I am--You’re the only one who could help—”

“I’m sorry sir, I don’t do requests…”

“Listen, we have a mutual friend--”

“I’m sure that’s possible sir, but…”

“He said to say ‘the seedling sleeps till spring.’”

Amy froze. “I’m listening.”

“I wish he was here,” she said quietly. She shook herself. “Your daughter is this way. I should tell you, she has—-a friend with her-- He brought her here and refuses to leave.”

“I know about him,” Danny said. “He’s…” he stepped through the door. There was his baby girl, lying on a hospital bed, morphine drip in her arm.

There sitting slouched on the floor next to her bed was a giant black werewolf.

“…A family friend,” Danny said. He was rather proud of himself; his voice only shifted octave once.
“Oh. Uh. Good.” Panacea backed out of the room. “I’ll just leave you alone. If you...need ... buzzer. Thingy. Yeah.” She pulled the curtain and closed the door.

The wolfman looked up. His eyes were a startling yellow. “Hello, Mr. Hebert,” he said hollowly. “I’m sorry we had to meet like this.” Danny had expected a rough, growly voice. Instead it was deep, warm and mellow, like James Earl Jones or Barry White. Women would melt at that voice.

Danny sat down in the visitor’s chair. Something toddled out from under the bed. It looked like the toy robot he’d seen her playing with once or twice. The wolfman… Adrian… looked down at it and half-smiled. “Don’t worry about him,” he said softly. “I warned him that if he made a peep I’d turn him into a can koozy.”

Danny felt like a jigsaw puzzle of revelations was coming together in his head. Or maybe tumbling together like tiles on a scrabble board. “You’re… you’re Skinwalker. Or whatever you’re calling yourself this week.” The tone was a little bitter.

“I did end up with a few nom de plumes along the way, didn’t I,” Adrian said.

“You...built him?” Danny asked, pointing at the little alarmbot.

Adrian nodded. “He was supposed to protect her,” he said. “He did a pretty good job-- till today.” The tiny robot drooped as if in shame. “It’s not your fault Obie. Those… three… did an end run around us.” Adrian closed his eyes, his ears laid back. “If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s mine. I wasn’t there for her when I was supposed to be--”

News stories over the past week flashed through Danny’s memory. “The Merchants,” he said. “The Protectorate was out there blowing their trumpet about how they did a mop up on the last of the group. But the eyewitness accounts, the info on PHO… they’re all talking about this one cape who hit them in the middle of a big, big recruiting party...”

“Sex, Drugs, Rape, Murder, Prostitution, Death Matches, and Rock and Roll,” Adrian said, flashing a peace sign.

“They said you tore them apart like a wet cardboard box.” Danny said. He could believe it. The wolfman in front of him had arms that would take three of his dockworkers to make.

“Messed ‘em up, yah.” Adrian said. He didn't sound particularly triumphant. "But got messed up pretty good in return. I had to go and hide, lick my wounds. That’s where I was all week. I was hiding in my lair in a sort of hibernation, recuperating from that last fight. That and the month long campaign right before it,” he confessed. He scratched his head. “If I hadn’t been so stupid...”

Danny looked him over, as if trying to read him. “How did you get involved with my daughter?”

Adrian looked at him. Suddenly he began to shrink, his fur thinning, his claws shortening, his muzzle pressing into his face until a young man of about sixteen sat in front of him. “I was like this when we met,” he said. “She doesn’t know yet about..” he waved his hand, indicating himself. Danny nodded. “First day at Winslow, some epic bimbettes were making her life miserable. I stepped in and tried to help out. Hanging out with her, giving some of the nastier ones the brushoff, and… just being her friend. We just sorta clicked.” More than I ever suspected I would, Adrian thought to himself. “But I couldn’t always be there. I knew they were going to try something the first day back from vacation, I just KNEW it, but I---” he clenched his fist and his jaw. He looked at Danny. In his human form his eyes were grey, Danny noticed. But flecks of gold seemed to appear the more intense he got.

He described what the Trio had done, how he had found her. Danny’s knuckles went white as he
clenched his fists around the arms of his chair.

“I kept my mouth shut about it, out of respect for her wishes, sir,” Adrian said. “But it’s gone too far. Those three? Their names are Madison Clements, Emma Barnes and Sophia Hess. They’re the bitch queens of Winslow and they think they can get away with ANYTHING because they’re popular, and wealthy, and because Emma’s Daddy is a lawyer…. And apparently the school believes it too.”


“Yes.” Adrian’s face went stony. “And… this part is bad, sir. Really bad. As in just telling you could get me arrested and thrown in prison till I’m old and gray if anyone found out. Or hunted down by capes and killed. But you have to know.

“Sophia Hess is a cape. Not just any cape, but Shadow Stalker-- the new team member of the Brockton Bay Wards. That’s why the school doesn’t do anything, why Blackwell ignores any of Taylor’s complaints and turns them around on her. They don’t want to lose the cash bonuses they get for having a Ward--- Mr. Hebert, no--”

Danny started to rise from his chair. He was going to… he didn’t know what he was going to do but he never got the chance. The wolfman was back and he’d grabbed Danny by the shoulders and forced him back down in the chair. “Mr. Hebert you absolutely cannot act on this information,” he said. “Revealing the identity of a Protectorate Ward is a Federal Offense. Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars. And that’s not counting what capes-- heroes, rogues AND villains-- would do to you if they caught you unmasking a cape. Do you get what I’m saying?” Danny struggled with himself, but finally gained control. He sat back in his chair and nodded, infuriated and ashamed.

Adrian sat down again. “That’s why I haven’t acted on it,” he said. “I know secrets that could shut down the Protectorate, the PRT and the Wards like I shut down that Merchant Rave, just by blabbing them on the internet or on the nightly news--- and I wouldn’t survive it. We can make them pay for what happened to Taylor, but we have to do it the right way.”

Danny sagged in his chair. “None of that matters now,” he said. He looked at his daughter; he saw her shift in her sleep as the bones in her neck and face slowly distorted. “None of that matters if Taylor isn’t okay. But what can we do? Panacea couldn’t help. Could your healing powers--?”

Adrian shook his lupine head. He got a brooding look on his face. He sat up and tucked his legs underneath himself in a lotus position-- much easier when you had canine legs, Danny thought. “What are you doing?”

“I’m gonna consult an expert,” Adrian said. He rested his hands on his knees, palms up, and closed his eyes. He opened one eye briefly. “Hold my calls while I’m out,” he said, and closed it.

“What--” Danny choked on the question. The teenaged wolf-man had slowly gone still as stone, and translucent as glass.

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Adrian’s paws hit the grass of his Emerald Dream with a thump. “Agent!” he shouted. “Agent,
where are you?”

Back so soon? Adrian spun around; Agent was standing behind him, leaning against a tree. I probably shouldn’t tease. I’ve been expecting you to pop back in any minute.

“Taylor,” he said breathing heavily as if he’d run a race. “Do you know what’s wrong with her?”

I’m afraid I do, Agent said. It is something that came out of left field, I fear, but I do know what it is.

“What is it then?” Adrian asked.

You do have the basic summation of how Shards work, are formed, choose and connect to their host, Agent said. Among other complexities, when a Shard finds a new host, it “consults” – or perhaps cribs notes from-- all the active shards in the immediate vicinity, to decide the powers of the subject. Take note, in alternate universes, even when Taylor is picked by the Queen Administrator shard, the capes in the immediate vicinity cause her powers to be wildly different from the Canon you know. The Queen Administrator shard might give her control over bugs-- or it might give her “administrative” power over local small-scale kinetic forces, effectively giving her incredibly powerful telekinesis.

“So what shard picked her this time?” Adrian said.

Hard to say, seeing as it was almost completely destroyed.

“What?”

Remember, it consults all the Shards in the immediate vicinity. Including Shadow Stalker’s, but also including yours.

“But I don’t have a real-- oh shiznit.”

I see you figured it out. You don’t have a real Shard, just a decoy. One meant to fool the Entities, Endbringers, et cetera. When the Shard connecting to Taylor tried to connect to you, it was like sticking a fork in an electric socket. Blew the thing to kingdom come. The little sputtery bits that are left are causing her painful metamorphoses.

“Can we, I dunno, disconnect it from her somehow?”

Agent shook his head. Not with this world’s current scientific level, I’m afraid. Even brain surgery to remove the Gemma and the Corona Pollenta just results in the power going haywire, running riot. And again, the rules of the Game prevent me from simply stepping in and plucking it out.

Adrian clutched his head in frustration.”What can we do??”

There is nothing WE can do. Something odd in Agent’s voice made Adrian look up at him. But there is something I can do, and I’m doing it now.

“What are you doing, Agent?” Adrian said, warning in his voice.

I’m offering her a deal.

“Wait, what?” Adrian said. He got up in Agent’s nonexistent face. “You mean like you offered me?”
Only in the most approximate sense, Agent said with a sort of psychic apologetic grimace. Since the accident with your decoy Shard--- they immediately fixed it so THAT won’t happen again by the way -- was the recommendation of The Rules Lawyers, they have ruled a default in my favor and allowed me to Sponsor a second operative like you.

But they are eliminating many of the advantages I had with you. They are insisting that I may offer no influence, offer no suggestions, advice or “insider knowledge.” Even the meta source of her powers must be uninfluenced. And she must make her choice in her CURRENT state of consciousness.

Adrian grasped the implications immediately. She could end up trying to save the world... in Brockton Bay... with the powers of Powdered Toast Man. “You mean Taylor’s going to have to live with whatever choices are made by her unconscious, drugged mind while in a dream state?” he asked in disbelief. ‘How is that even possibly fair?”

It isn’t. Agent said sourly. Why do you think I max out the point buy system? I am so sorry, Adrian. But it was the best I could possibly do for her.

Adrian swallowed. “Then I’d better not distract you.”

…If you wish, you will be allowed to observe.

Adrian thought it over, torn. He was reminded of a foreign game show where the parents had to watch in silence while their six year old child was offered a choice between a glamorous vacation prize... or a stuffed unicorn. Between a real car, or a plastic pedal car. It would be torment watching Taylor make all her choices without even being able to help. But... “It’d be hell to sit there in the hospital and not know,” he said. “Yes. I’ll watch. Put me in the audience.”

Excellent. The self-satisfied tone in Agent’s voice woke up Adrian’s suspicions. Agent, what--

Hush. Off we go.

The emerald dream swirled away. The Featureless Plane of Twilight that Adrian remembered assumed its place. Once again he was a formless dollop of faint white light. Taylor was there-- or what he assumed Taylor was, another white shapeless light like himself. Floating next to her was another, brighter light that could only be Agent. And in front of and above them floated a trio of white lights of varying shade. Adrian could only assume these were the Rules Lawyers. Adrian grimaced mentally and could only hope that the unfortunate choice of three lights didn’t make her think of the Trio, and send her off the rails in the middle.

Why is this one here? He could almost feel a finger point down at him. Terrific. A haughty, condescending, female voice, echoing in triplicate. The deck was already stacked, he could see.

He is a concerned party, Agent said. He is permitted to witness.

He may not intervene.
He will not, Agent assured them.

**Very well. Taylor Hebert, choose.** All around them, thousands of images appeared. Some were obvious images of places and things, others were abstract, some were incomprehensible. Adrian was confused. What was she choosing? Or was this like one of those online personality tests where what colors and numbers you picked described your personality?

Taylor’s light drifted away from Agent’s side. She circled for a moment, undecided. Then she flew in a straight line…. To where Adrian hovered. She floated before him, laughing like a little child.

**The choice is made,** Agent said in an almost bored tone.

Wait-- that is not-- But the choices had all vanished. They were replaced by others, these all seemed to be geometric shapes.

Argh, even if she were fully conscience these tests don’t make any sense! Adrian wanted to shout. This is unfair, a choice should be a CHOICE, not a lucky guess! But whatever allowed him to be here also kept him silent.

Choose. Once again, Taylor circled, as if looking through the options. Once again, she flew to him. “Him,” she said, in a voice that made him wish he could blush.

**The choice is made,** Agent said. He could have given Ben Stein a run for his money.

*I object!*--- whatever force decided these things did not care. Still more shapes, these three dimensional polygons, floated around them now.

**HALT. Remove the illicit influence before we proceed.** The demand was as haughty as a Queen.

**The rules state as a passive observer he may be present and visible,** Agent said. He was humanoid now, as were the Rules Lawyers and Taylor. You could see Agent was holding a book the size of a Chinese phone directory with the air of someone not afraid to start reading it.

**Very well then-- but under OUR terms.** Suddenly Adrian was a three-dimensional polygon, floating amongst the others. It was a most peculiar experience.

“Where did he go?” Taylor said suddenly. Her voice was high and upset, like a distraught child. “Where is Adrian? Where did you take him?”

**He is present. He is not to be part of these proceedings.**

“I want him back!”

**It is against the rules…!** The voice bluffed.

“I don’t care about your rules. This is MY dream, and I want ADRIAN!” Taylor stamped her foot.

**And once again, the choice is made,** Agent said, his voice as dry as a martini.

**Why-- you-- you card-sharpening-- little--!** The three lights became so agitated that one dissolved into a cloud, the second began vibrating like an agitated electron and the third became a cube.

Agent whisked over to where Adrian floated, comforting Taylor. **I’m afraid I’ve pressed our luck as far as I can,** he whispered. **But this gets us past the hardest parts. You’ve been a great help**
Adrian, but I think you’d better go.

And with that, Adrian woke up.

He smacked his lips and realized his legs were both numb and hurting like heck. “But I don’t even know what I did,” he mumbled.

Back on the Twilight Plane, the Rules Lawyers had finally calmed themselves. That takes care of that. There’ll be No more tricks, Agent, they said smugly.

None are needed, he said blithely.

A handful of pictures including a picture of Danny appeared before Taylor. Taylor reached out and touched it.

Why that one? The three lights asked.

“He’s my father. I love him,” Taylor explained.

What do you wish?

“To make him proud. To make him happy again.” She felt a rush of sadness. Danny smiled a lot more often than he did not long ago... but there were times when she caught him alone, and she could see the sorrow on his face, or the creases on his brow from his worries.

The pictures were replaced by others: buildings, cities, city streets. She picked several.

Why those?

“Because they remind me of home,” she said. “all of my home.”

And your wish?

“to make it better.”

The pictures changed one last time. It held dozens: friends, family, classmates, politicians, celebrities, heroes, villains. But two pictures riveted her attention. Shadow Stalker-- and Sophia Hess. She didn’t press them as jab at them hatefully.

Why these two?

“They’re the same person,” she spat. “She tormented me, abused me, nearly killed me... for
nothing! She’s everything I hate!”

**And your wish?**

Taylor turned her back on the images, fists trembling. She struggled to regain control of herself. Slowly her trembles subsided and her breath calmed... but her resolve firmed. “To not let her win. To outdo her, but also not let her break me.. or make me a monster. To be BETTER than her.”

**The final choice is made,** Agent said. His voice was filled with relief, happiness, satisfaction. **I look forward to working with you.... Hemlokk.**

“What in the hell was that?” Danny said.

“What?” Adrian said, rubbing his head. “Augh, gimme a hand up. Argh, my legs are numb. My feet are numb. My BUTT is numb!” Danny reached down and gave the worgen a hand up. It was a bit of a struggle to get him on his feet.

“You sat down, started doing yoga and turned into a ghost made of green glass! What the heck?”

Adrian staggered out from the curtain surrounding Taylor’s bed and found a water cooler in the room. He started pouring cups of water and knocking them back. “It’s called the Emerald Dream,” he said. “That hibernation state I told you about? Also puts me partway into a little pocket dimension. I recuperate faster there. It also lets me get in contact with that “expert” I told you about. Ugh, why is my throat so dry?”

“Probably because you snore like a warthog sucking mud through a hose,” Danny said. “But this guy. Did you reach him? Can he help Taylor?”

“He can and already is,” Adrian said. “Even showed me some of what he’s doing.” He shook his head. “but, the guy... he’s sort of an extradimensional being. ‘does not think like us’ sort of thing, despite all appearances. I don’t think I could explain what he was doing without a metaphysics book in one hand and an advance particle physics book in the other.” He shook his head again. “He needed my help for a bit, but-- what the results will be, I don’t know....”

“Daddy?”

The two men whirled around. Standing behind them was a smoke grey worgen female with a mane of lustrous, curly black hair tumbling down her shoulders. She was wearing a hospital gown, and had just finished pulling the needle of the morphine drip out of her arm.

“Daddy? What’s going on?” she said, hugging her arm and looking nervous and shy. “And... why is Skinwalker standing in my hospital room?”

Danny and Adrian gawked at Taylor. Then they gawked at each other.

Adrian was the first to speak.

“Memwhamaha?”
Chapter 12

Adrian and Danny stood there, staring at the Worgen girl in front of them. She hugged herself, looking scared and confused. “Daddy?” she said. “What’s Skinwalker doing in my hospital room?”

Adrian shook his head, realizing. He shifted, shrinking down to his human height and form. “It’s okay, Taylor,” he said, smiling and holding out his hand. “It’s me. I’m here. Everything’s gonna be all right.”

“Adrian?” Her amber eyes flew wide in astonishment and a smile spread across her face. Then the smile faded into hazy confusion. She took a step forward and stumbled.

Both men moved to catch her. There were no flies on Danny, but Adrian was just a touch faster. He caught her in the cradle of his arm before she hit the floor. He held up his hand in front of her face and began casting a Remove Corruption.

“Hey now—” Danny said warningly.

“It’s a purifying effect,” Adrian said. “I’m clearing the morphine out of her system.” Her eyelids fluttered as she started to wake.

“But the doctors—”

“Does she look like she needs a morphine drip, or like she needs a sobering up?” Adrian said. “She’s just transmogrified into a completely new body. She’s probably the healthiest person in this room right now.” Taylor came out of her swoon with startling swiftness. She sat up in Adrian’s arm, her eyes wide.

“Woof,” she said. “What the heck was in that IV?” She raised a hand to pull the hair away from her face, then froze. She spent a long second looking with wide eyes at her grey-furred, taloned hand. Then she started to shake.

“Taylor,” Adrian said. “Taylor!” Her head whipped around to stare at him eye to eye. “Taylor, it’s okay. It’s okay Taylor. Taylor, look...” Adrian lifted his hand-- his human hand-- into her view. She stared at it unconprehending. Then, slowly, it grew covered with black fur. The palms and fingertips turned into pads, and claws, semi-retractable talons, replaced the nails. The fur spread up his arm under his sleeve and up his neck, and suddenly his wolfen face was smiling into hers. “It’s okay, see?” The fur retreated and he was human again. “You’re still there, you’re still you. Look, try. Like me.” He took her hand in his and stroked her padded, clawed fingers. “Come on...”

Her ears flickered at the attention; noone needed to read lupine body language to see she was embarrassed. She looked at her hand and frowned; the pale gray fur retreated from her fingers, then her hand, then her forearm... then with a swift rush the transformation rolled over her and she was an ordinary human girl again. They shared a smile; his encouraging, hers relieved.

Danny cleared his throat. “Ahem.” They both started and looked up at him. Taylor squeaked as she realized that yes, she was human again; she was a human girl, dressed in nothing but a seriously drafty hospital smock, sitting in a boy’s lap— face flaming, she leapt to her feet and dove behind the hospital modesty curtain. “Where are my clothes?” she called out.

“Um, ruined,” Adrian said. “The locker...”

She stuck her head out through a gap in the curtain. “I need to change,” she said. She was wolfen
once again.

In spite of the deadly seriousness of the situation, Danny snickered. “It seems you did,” he said.

Taylor’s eyes crossed as she looked at her own muzzle. “What-- oh darn it!” she ducked behind the curtain again. “I didn’t even realize it!” she said, upset.

Adrian got to his feet, shifting back to his worgen form himself. Largely to hide the blush on his face with a layer of fur. “It’s because that’s your natural form now,” he explained cautiously. “You default to it.”

“What? No! That.. but… oh no.” Taylor’s voice seemed very small.

“Baby, are you okay?” Danny said. He started to move towards the curtain, but Adrian’s hand stopped him.

“Yes, yes I’m FINE!” she said firmly, if with a slight quaver at the end. “Just… give me a minute okay?”

“All-- all right,” Danny said. He looked over at Adrian, questions on his face.

Adrian leaned in and muttered in his ear. “Give her a minute,” he said. “If she’s anything like I was, a little self-examination is going on back there. It’s kind of a shock getting a new body, after all.” Danny gave a silent ‘ahh’ and nodded.

Behind the curtain, Taylor was giving herself the once-over. She looked at her hands, the palms and fingertips like footpads, the claws. She flexed her hands, extending and contracting them. The fur was light and soft; of course it was probably baby-new. She stroked her eartips, marveling at how they flicked and moved at the touch of her fingers; after a second she could move them about consciously. She wiggled them and giggled silently to herself.

The muzzle, that was a bit distracting. She kept seeing her own nose and crossing her eyes. She hoped she got used to it soon. Wet nose, long flat tongue, the fangs elicited a shudder. The face and mouth were more flexible and mobile than normal for a dog or wolf; it was probably how she was able to enunciate so clearly.

She ran her hands down her sides. Wow, slimmer waist, wider hips, holy cow she had abs! Bye bye poochy belly. She’d hated that thing; with her thin stick arms and wide mouth she’d looked like a frog standing on its hind legs. Come to mention it her arms were pretty well formed too, with some solid muscle on them. And her legs, dang. They were, what was the word, digitigrade? And again, she had paws rather than feet. That would take some getting used to. But she could feel muscles on them that would make an olympic sprinter green with envy. She looked down at herself--

“AGH!” She said, grabbing the twin mounds she found on her chest. “What the hell?”

“What, what is it?” Came alarmed voices from the other side of the room.

She realized what she was doing and let go of her boobs, face red hot. She stuck her head out and looked at Adrian, who was back in his wolf-man form and digging through his backpack without a care in the world. She squinted at him suspiciously. “Is there any particular reason,” she hissed, “That I’ve suddenly gone up to a C-Cup?”

The expressions that Adrian’s face went through were extraordinary to watch, especially on a wolfen head. “Why do you think I had anything to do with it?” he managed to splutter.
“...Yes,” said her father, his brows furrowing suddenly in suspicion. “Why DO you think he had anything to do with it?”

Adrian gave them both appalled looks. “What--” his brows suddenly tabled and his ears laid flat. “All the changes to your body, and the one you’re focusing on is your bra size,” Adrian said in monotone disbelief. “And blaming it on me.”

“I’m wanting to know why my daughter ended up as a suspiciously convenient female version of you,” Danny said.

He took a deep breath. “Look, before this stupid train of conversation goes any further, the basics are this; she Triggered. It went wrong, completely wrong. Most people don't know it but when you Trigger, the Shard-- the source of a parahuman's power-- sort of...” he waved his hands. "Sort of templates off of any other parahumans in the immediate vicinity. When Taylor triggered, the source of her powers tried to template off me. But I'm not LIKE other parahumans, my powers are innate and I don't HAVE a real Shard. It was like, like plugging an X-box cartridge into a Sega system... it shorted out and was damaged beyond repair.

“The... entities I spoke to offered to help, but they did it their way, by their rules. I dunno if it was pure chance, or they just decided to roll with a theme. But they ended up giving her a power set... similar to mine. And a body from the same species template as mine.

“My best guess? They gave her a new body that is both fully developed and at the peak of its physical prime. Kinda like what they did with me. I mean look--” he flexed his ridiculously huge muscles, Charles Atlas style. “Think this is normal for a sixteen year old guy? What you got is what you’d be naturally.”

“As a dog?”

“I betcha your human form is buffed up too,” Adrian challenged.

She looked suddenly thoughtful and disappeared behind the curtain again. “Holy cow,” her voice said almost reverently.

“So you’ve got a curvy, skinny, athletic body with big perky boobs, And this is a bad thing?” Adrian challenged her in exasperation.

“....No!” she admitted reluctantly. “Okay, fine. Good point. This is just... weird for me, okay?” she pleaded.

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.”

“...It’s gonna be hard to explain this... or these--” she jumped up and down a bit. (She noted to her amusement that Adrian's head, almost against his will, bobbed up and down as well)-- “next week in gym class,” she pointed out.. “‘What? These? Oh, It’s a new protein drink from California, uses a lot of coconuts,” she snarked.

Adrian shook his head (oh God please don’t let her father have noticed my head bobbing up and down) and snorted. “New, from the Hentai labs in Tokyo Towers,” he said in a radio announcer’s cadence, “Gainaxium! Also available in America as Twin Peaks formula--” he saw Danny’s warning stare. “Okay, shutting up now.” He laid his ears back and meekly returned to digging through his pack.

.... Hey, why don’t we have any tails?” Taylor pondered out loud.
“No idea,” Adrian said. “But it’s probably a good thing. Imagine trying to keep it clean. Or getting it slammed in doors all the time.”

“Ugh.”

Danny suddenly sat down, cradling his head in his hands. “This conversation has gotten too surreal. This conversation… this day… my life…!”

“Sir, I’d love to sit down with you and explain absolutely everything to you and Taylor both, and I will,” Adrian said. “But that’s going to be a two-hour lecture involving details on life, the universe, cosmic entities and alien races, the nature and origins of superpowers, and possibly every conspiracy and secret society on the planet, and I really don’t think we have time for that.” He pulled out a bundle of cloth and threw it to Taylor, who caught it one-armed. “Sorry, just a hoodie and some sweatshorts,” he said. I don’t think I got anything better in here.”

“What’s the rush?” Danny said cautiously.

“Sir, I think my secret identity is just about shot,” Adrian said. “I was sloppy. I’ve already made far too many mistakes, even before I was seen rampaging through the halls of Winslow High with Taylor in my arms. Crap, I was out there selling tinker gadgets, tinker gadgets with MY personal style, out in the Market. You’d have to be a moron not to connect the dots.

“If you want your daughter to have any kind of a normal life we’re going to have to move now. There’s a whole daisy chain of clues now leading between Skinwalker, and Adrian Smith, and her. We need to break the chain now, and get out of here without leaving a paper trail for anyone to follow.”

“This is a Cape ward, son,” Danny said patiently. “They protect Capes’ anonymity. They’re overseen by the PRT--”

“And that’s the problem,” Adrian said, glaring. “They’re going to be here any minute to try and strong-arm your daughter into joining the Wards.”

“The WARDS?” Taylor had finished pulling on the old sweats Adrian had given her. She stormed out from behind the curtain snarling. She had rolled the hoodie sleeves up to her elbows, and the shorts were so long and baggy they hung down to her knees like culottes. “Like HELL! That bitch SOPHIA is one of them!”

Both Adrian and Danny gave her startled looks. “We knew that but how did you?” Adrian asked. Taylor stood there with her shoulders hunched and her ears flat, arms crossed tight and looking both enraged and humiliated. “When they stuffed me in the locker, she reached through the door to steal my phone so I couldn’t call for help,” she spat. “Name three heroes in Brockton Bay who can turn into shadows and walk through walls, and the first two don’t count.”

“The sad thing is, that’s the thing they’re least to blame for,” Adrian snorted as he strapped his backpack on. “Blackwell sat on her teachers so they wouldn’t get “her” Ward in trouble, and the trained PRT monkey that was supposed to be holding Sophia’s leash wasn’t reporting anything to her superior officers like she was supposed to. I tried to drop dime on her but without material evidence they would have been climbing up my tailpipe instead of hers.” He looked ashamed. “I should have ratted her out anyway. I’m sorry, Taylor, I--”

She surprised the fool out of him by wrapping her arms around his bull neck and hugging him. “Don’t blame yourself,” she said. “Sophia, Maddie and Emma decided to be bitches long before you
showed up. It’s not your fault.”

Awkwardly, he returned her hug. The brief thought flashed through both their minds: \textit{He/She smells really nice…}

Danny cleared his throat again. The two broke the clinch, both looking so much like guilty puppies caught sneaking a milk bone that he had to fight the urge to pull his smartphone and photograph it.

Adrian cleared his throat himself. “There are good people in the Protectorate and the PRT. But even without Sophia, the PRT’s a mess. They’re incompetent, inefficient, and right now they’re rotten from top to bottom with spies… they’ve been infiltrated by at least one supervillain named Coil who thinks the Unwritten Rules are a cute fairy tale for little children. I \textit{did} manage to drop dime on \textit{him}, but God knows if they’re even close to cornering and rooting him out. Joining the Wards wouldn’t keep Taylor safe, it would endanger her life.”

“Oh dear God,” Danny said, covering his mouth and sinking into a chair. Finding out that the PRTs had a psychopath as a Ward was awful; finding out that the PRT itself had been infiltrated by a \textit{villain} was like finding out that your city’s police force was run by a white slave ring and the city hall by a drug cartel.

“But we’ve been here for hours,” Taylor said. “They’ll already have miles of paperwork and…”

“I’ve taken measures,” Adrian said.

The paperwork, transaction records, even the security footage for the Cape Wing of First General was all stored in one location: a glassed-in island protected by a security guard and overseen by a single fifty year old secretary named Gladys. There wasn’t need for much more; for all the capes that filled Brockton Bay, heroes, rogues and villains alike, the traffic in any particular Cape department was going to be fairly slow.

Gladys was proud of her security clearance, and rightly so. She did her job dutifully; Every file was properly annotated, Every record encrypted, every filing cabinet properly locked and unlocked only when she was adding or removing documents, every tape from the security cameras was sealed properly, every paper, CD, and DVD shredded on its expiration date and time right down to the minute. Noone, not even the guard, was allowed into her glassed-in little island with her, and the door was dutifully locked and unlocked by her own hand.

So perhaps she should be forgiven for her little slip up. It was a slow day, even for the Cape wing, with a grand total of one patient in the entire wing. So in a moment of idleness she had paused with the door to her island open--- just for a few moments--- while she chatted with the guard over something trivial. She had been so intrigued by the joke he’d been telling that she never noticed the three little jittery mechanical scorpions that scurried into her workspace right past her feet. They had climbed to the ceiling and waited.

The moment she had finished doing the data entry for one “T H” in room 219, and had opened the “H” drawer to drop in the paper copies, they made their move. One rappelled down on a silk line to drop into the filing cabinet. The second had gone for the day’s security camera tapes, while the third had raced to hide behind the computer tower at her feet. On a silent synchronized signal, they revved
up the buzz saw in their left claw, the drill in their right, and the taser in their tailtips, and struck.

Gladys had just turned back to her computer to tape a label to another folder when there was a shriek like an electric drill and the cabinet drawer she had open erupted. Shredded paper began fountaining in the air as the enthusiastic scorpion bot inside proceeded to turn everything from H to K into confetti. She gave a shriek of her own and whirled her office chair around to face the danger, only for loops of mangled security camera tape to begin unspooling into the air from under the counter. Then there was a loud ZAP, then a POP like a fuse blowing and her computer went black, wisps of smoke blowing out of the fan.

Then the drawer full of confetti caught fire.

Poor Gladys stood there with her chair tipped over, turning in a circle and screaming in shock. After a few seconds her decades-past safety training kicked in. She grabbed the fire extinguisher off the wall and opened up on the inferno boiling out of her precious filing cabinet. With a whoosh and a roar, her tiny enclosed office filled with clouds of fire suppressant fog. From the outside it looked as if the island had suddenly been filled with cotton.

When the smoke, literal and figurative, had cleared, it revealed Gladys standing in the middle of her lost little paradise, disheveled and undone, clutching her fire extinguisher and surrounded by shredded paper and plastic, extinguisher residue, smoke and soot.

The final cherry on top was that when the smog cleared away Gladys found herself face to face, on opposite sides of the glass, with Emily Piggot, Director of the ENE PRT. She was sharply dressed, for a surprise was using neither walker nor cane, had lost at least fifty pounds and was on the whole looking better and healthier than she had in nearly a decade.

Piggot raised one eyebrow and spoke into the intercom. “I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that you do not have the files on your most recent patient,” she said.

Miles away, Coil cursed as his feed from the First General Cape wing office went dark. He’d planted cable taps and keystroke loggers there years ago; they’d often proved fruitful. When he’d received word that Skinwalker had been spotted at the First General he’d opened the connection and begun downloading the files and records for the day. Before he even got the first few megabites something had shut the connection down. A quick voicemail to the security guard he kept on the bribe payroll revealed that something had gotten into the records office and utterly destroyed everything: files, video, even paper copies.

And judging from the garbled last-second burst, the little black boxes he’d clipped to the computer and digital feeds had gotten crisped, too. Blast. Another resource up in a puff of smoke…

Danny considered some of the outrageous things the boy in front of him had done, and the dozens more that he was suspected of doing. “I’ll take your word for it,” he said seriously. “But how do we
Adrian suddenly grinned, his tongue lolling. “By the front door. Be right back.” He shifted to human and trotted out of the hospital room. When he returned he was pushing a gurney with one hospital gown, and two set of scrubs... scrubs in the colors of the hospital staff, rather than the ones handed out to visitors. “Okay, Taylor, go human and suit up,” he said, tossing her the scrubs. He tossed Danny the gown, and then began donning one of the sets of scrubs over his clothes. “Okay, Mr Hebert,” he said, patting the gurney. “Hop on.”

Right behind him was Panacea, who stared in confusion at him and gawked openly at Taylor. “What, you--!”

Adrian turned around and put a finger to her lip. “Here’s the deal,” he said. “You help us save her secret identity from the PRT and leave without being spotted, I give you the whole lowdown on everything later. I’ll even let you use your biokinesis to scan me.” For a brief moment, leaves sprouted in his hair. The girl's eyes went round, then to Danny’s surprise she nodded in agreement.

“Okay, Amy? We’re going to pull a little misdirection. So we need a little delaying tactic on your part...”

Moments later, Piggot came striding up the hospital corridor with Assault and Battery in tow. She had been torn on whom to bring with her on this, but reluctantly had to admit that for all that he photographed well, Armsmaster couldn’t recruit a fat man to a pie eating contest. As aggravating as Assault could be, he and Battery were probably the most personable of the Protectorate and the best choice for meeting and recruiting new capes...or even balky rogues like Skinwalker.

They sidled past a pair of orderlies wheeling an older patient down the hallway and approached the room where Skinwalker was watching over the girl he’d rescued. Piggot cringed inside; a trigger event caused by a bullying incident. It was not common knowledge-- and the PRT tried, with varying levels of success, to keep it that way-- but a Cape’s powers were heavily influenced by the nature of their Trigger. Bullying as a Trigger could produce powers that were pretty ugly... Take Aegis: the leader of the Wards had allegedly been triggered by bullying, and his power was essentially the ability to have his body brutally maimed and still survive. The boy spent the better part of any given week looking like a gruesome mutilation victim. It gave a certain unpleasant insight into the psychology of those who had suffered such abuse.

“Remember,” Piggot said over her shoulder. “We’re here to offer this girl a place on the Wards; to offer it as an option to get help for her... condition. Hopefully due to the apparent bond he has with the girl we can persuade Skinwalker to join as well, in order to provide her with emotional support.”

“Got it,” Assault said. “Exploit the little sick girl to blackmail the rogue into joining. Owgh.” It wasn’t hard to tell when Battery’s elbow had given Assault’s ribs a reminder.

“Not here,” Battery hissed. To Piggot she spoke aloud. “Are they certain about the girl? Her power is...”broken” somehow?”

“That’s the most detailed explanation they’ve come up with,” Piggot confirmed. Good night, a ‘broken’ Trigger. Of all the horrors she’d imagined in her life... Powers were strange, powers were
unpredictable, they were often counter intuitive, many of them were harmful or destructive or detrimental to use for various reasons, but they at least worked. Functioned in some internally consistent fashion. Even Case 53s had powers that gave them some sort of utility, to counterbalance their deformity. The idea of powers that did nothing but make the wielder suffer as they malfunctioned was terrifying. “Which is why the facilities of the PRT are probably her best bet, regardless.”

“Selling point,” Assault admitted. “Even if her powers are worse than useless, helping her will be good for the PRT’s karma.”

Piggot suddenly stopped. The door to the girl’s room was standing open, and there was a darned cold breeze blowing through. Not bothering to knock she walked right in. Panacea was standing in the middle of the room, staring at the wide open window with a look of surprise on her face. “Director Piggot!” she said upon turning and seeing them. “I… good to see you again, I suppose. Despite the circumstances…”

“What’s going on here?” she snapped. She could see the hospital bed was empty, a discarded IV stand next to it, the digital monitor on it beeping its complaint of neglect. “Where is the girl that was brought here?”

Panacea motioned to the window. “I’m afraid she and her friend… left,” she said. “Just before you arrived.” Piggot noticed a few downy feathers on the floor, drifting about in the breeze. Assault went to the window and looked out-- rather pointlessly, Piggot thought; the Skinwalker had a knack for disappearing into the sky in his owl form. Battery examined the bed and the IV. “She was on a morphine drip?” she exclaimed. “I’m amazed she could find her own feet, much less walk out of here. Or… fly. Or whatever she did…”

“She demonstrated a rather quick recovery, in case you didn’t guess,” Panacea said, a trifle sarcastically.

“With a power you described as ‘malfunctioning?’” Piggot said pointedly. Panacea just shrugged and spread her hands.

“Do we try to find her?” Battery said uncertainly. The girl had fled. Skinwalker had sent some of his toys to destroy her paperwork before it could even be filed, much less read. It was clear that neither of them wanted her identity known. Trying to trace her identity down without her even having committed a crime could be seen as breaking the Unwritten Rules.

Piggot sighed. “We’ll probably find out who she is anyway,” she decided. “We still have to investigate the trigger event, and Skinwalker left a trail of big muddy pawprints leading from here all the way back to the school. A giant werewolf rescues a girl from a bunch of bullies? Hell, her name is probably gossip all over that school.”

“They’re probably miles away by now. We’ll find them later.”

Considerably less than a mile away, Adrian and Taylor trundled the gurney with Taylor’s father out of the Emergency Room doors. Once they were all out of sight between two ambulances, Danny dismounted and they all shucked their scrubs. Taylor shifted to her worgen form, as did Adrian; the fewer people who saw their human identities the better. “Okay, that worked. Next step?” Danny would deny it to his dying day, but he was starting to enjoy this.

“You need to go back to work and pretend nothing happened,” Adrian said. “If anyone asks, tell them Taylor got food poisoning or something and they sent her home. Taylor and I, we’ll be going to my place to lay low-- don’t worry, I got security out the wingwong, she’ll be safe there.
“Leave work early, grab some tummy medicine-- just to leave a paper trail. Then go to this address...” Adrian wrote out the address of the warehouse that concealed his Lost Workshop. “Just ring the bell, I’ll let you in.

“Then we’ll all sit down, and I’ll explain… well, everything. And a little bit more than everything. I promise.”

Danny had started looking a little suspicious when Adrian started talking about ‘back to his place,’ but he suppressed his Protective Father genes and nodded. “It resembles something like a plan,” he joked. “I’ll see you soon. Be careful baby.”

“You too Daddy,” Taylor whispered giving him a hug.

Danny started to go, but then looked back at Adrian. “If you end up having to lose ‘Adrian,’ what should we call you?” he half-joked.

His response was a half-smile. “Call me Bayleaf.”

Danny nodded, and trotted off to find his pickup in the parking lot. Taylor watched him go, then turned back to Adrian. “So how are we--” she yipped in surprise. Standing where Adrian had been was a snowy white reinder with an ornate harness and sparkling ornaments hanging from its antlers. “Adrian?” she said in disbelief. She shook her head and corrected herself. “Bayleaf?”

Bayleaf gave her a wink and knelt down. Cautiously she climbed onto his back. “Some of the weirder stories on PHO are starting to make sense,” she said to him. He got to his hooves; she grabbed hold of the peytral around his neck and held on. “Well, Giddyaaaaaaaaaap—!!!” He reared up, then shot out onto the street in a thunder of hoofbeats.

There would be more than a few Brocktonians who would catch a glimpse of a werewolf woman on a white reindeer riding through the snowy streets, whooping and cheering and occasionally howling with glee as she raced on by.

The typical response in Brockton Bay was to shrug and suppose it meant it was a Tuesday.

“Welcome to the Lost Workshop.”

Bayleaf had seen a lot of things that had warmed his heart. But nothing had ever made it melt quite like the expression of childlike wonder on Taylor’s wolfen face when she saw his workshop for the first time. She stood in the center, turning in place, her eyes sparkling as she took it all in. “It’s like a wizard’s toy shop!” she said, laughing.

Bayleaf supposed it would look like that. To one side stood the furnaces, one glowing with orange flame, the other with blue. The anvils stood between them, surrounded by tools. On the other was his main worktable, where a cornucopia of trinkets, parts, tools and oddments were scattered. Toys and bots scurried around her feet, and what looked like a zeppelin made out of paper pattered past, just overhead. There were shelves where his finished products and projects were stacked, and a rack of mason jars glowed, gleamed and sparkled with dusts, shards, essences, and elemental materials from far outside the normal limits of baryonic matter.
Around the walls were potted plants, vines that climbed and twined up the walls, yet seemed to somehow fade out of existence as they grew, leaving behind a glowing silhouette of their tendrils and leaves. She stroked one leaf with a padded fingertip. “What on earth…”

He shrugged. “Just some decorative plants I picked up at a flea market,” he said. “I spilled some strange dust on the potting soil by accident and got, er, this. They’re pretty and keep the air fresh, and they don’t seem to need much sunlight so I kept ‘em.”

Off to the side, his (still singed, salt-stained and filthy) costume hung on an old store mannikin. Past it was another set of shelves and racks… of the various weapons he’d built, yet hadn’t had the need or the nerve yet to bring out. A standing cabinet was dedicated to the healing and first aid items he had left. She looked at those with a peculiar expression on her face, one of half-remembered familiarity. “I would have expected more healing potions and the like,” she said for no obvious reason.

“Not in my skillset, unfortunately.” Bayleaf realized there was some important information that he hadn’t been yet made privy to. He sat down on a nearby work stool; she saw his expression and did the same. “Taylor,” he said, keeping his voice smooth and even. “What do you remember from your Trigger event?”

She looked wounded-- the memory of what had been done to her was little less than a day old, the psychic wound raw and bleeding. Anger and grief mingled on her face, and not a little fear. Then she looked puzzled, confused. “I remember the locker,” she said slowly. “I remember Sophia reaching through the locker to steal my phone…” she half rose. “That cow still has my phone! She--”

“We’ll get it back later,” Bayleaf said with grim certainty. “Later. Right now, go on…”

“Raugh!” Taylor’s snarl of frustration was impressive in her worgen form. She visibly reined in her temper and sat back down with a huff of air. “…I remember being so frightened, so angry, so horrified that a hero would do something like that to me-- to anyone--” Her throat worked and tears pooled in her wide amber eyes. Wordlessly Bayleaf pulled a bit of cloth… a loose ‘magic bandage,’ actually… from a corner of the table and dabbed at her cheek. She smiled as she took it and wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “I.. it was all so monstrous I just blacked out.”

“And then…?”

She creased her brows, trying to remember what came next, then looked surprised when she realized something DID come next. “I had a dream, or a hallucination or something-- this huge… thing was dropping down out of the sky, it was big and small at the same time and it was saying words that were hundreds of words at once, making offers, promises…” she suddenly shivered as she realized that she’d read stories about people making deals with the Devil that sounded awfully similar. “And I accepted, and it touched me and it reached out and touched others… I couldn’t see them but I saw the lines, the bridges connecting them--

“And then something went wrong. It was like the huge floating thing grabbed a power line or something. Parts of it started exploding and it was screeching like, like ten thousand microphone feedbacks-- then I woke back up still in the locker, only now I was in pain, it was so much pain and I could feel my bones twisting and breaking inside me and I--”

She started shaking. She clasped her hands over her face and began to weep. Bayleaf tipped off his stool and stumbled to her, wrapping his arms carefully around her. She buried her face in his chest, sniffling and weeping.

After a few minutes she quieted. “And then you came,” she said. She huddled up against him, her cheek lying against his breastbone. “Scared the life out of me when those claws punched through the
door. But then you ripped the door away and light came in, and then you were carrying me in your arms… I was still in so much pain but you were so warm and strong and your… your fur was so soft and you smelled so nice and even though I was hurting I felt so safe--”

Her ears flicked back in that way he was beginning to associate with her blushing. She pulled away from him and he-- reluctantly-- let go. He still stayed close though; she made no effort to push him away further. “And then we were in the hospital everybody was running around, and they stuck that morphine drip in my arm, thank God for that, and then… and then…”

“And then…?” he led in, giving her an encouraging grin.

“And then I had the weirdest dream,” she said. “It was a trial. Only it wasn’t. It was a game show, and I was a contestant. There were three glowing things there, being the emcees or the judges or both-- and there was another person there, another glowing thing, and it kept whispering suggestions to me and doing things that made the judges angry for some reason—I think… I think he was supposed to be my Agent, or something. Like for an actor?” She didn’t notice him twitch at her choice of words. “And they kept asking me to make choices: words, pictures, symbols, and none of it made any sense, but you were there and I was so relieved, I kept choosing you because I trusted you the most. I, I guess I won, or something… And the one tricky light who was my agent said something to me and I woke up.”

“What did the Agent say?” he pressed.

At his words she suddenly sat up straight and began rattling off words like they were memorized. “Worgen Female, Subtlety Rogue level Max Level, Alchemy and Jewelcrafting Max Level. All talents, standard and gathering skills inclusive.” She blinked and shook her head. “Why did I say that?”

“That clever sonuvagun,” Bayleaf muttered. “A post hypnotic suggestion. He wanted to let me know your stats, so he gave you a little hypnotic message-in-a-bottle to go off when I used that phrase.” He looked at her, musing. “A rogue, huh? Dang. That’s going to make things interesting…”

“Hold on, Post hypnotic?” Taylor said, confused. “And “he” who?”

He sat back down on his workstool and took her hands. He took a deep breath. “Okay, this is going to be a lot to take in, but--” A buzzer went off and a nearby lamp blinked. “Ah crap. Looks like your Dad is here… probably better if I explain this all at once. Gimme a sec…” He left the room and returned with Taylor’s father in tow. Taylor had to wonder if she had looked the way he did. He looked twenty years younger, like an awestruck fanboy and like a little boy who had just found the coolest tree fort in the world.

“…An old workshop from the railyard over a hundred years ago,” Adrian… Bayleaf… was telling him, obviously reciting the history of the place. “It fell out of use, they built up around it until it was completely hidden from view and then forgot about it.”

“You own it?” Danny asked.

“I will… I plan to set up a dummy corporation to buy it-- once I figure out how you make a dummy corporation.” He motioned Danny to one of the more plush seats in the workshop. Danny sat down, still rubbernecking. “We were just getting to the nitty gritty of explaining, well, all this. So now that you’re here I’ll take it from the top.”

Bayleaf sat down in another chair and turned it so it was facing between the two of them. He started to speak, then stopped. “You know what? Wait a minute.” He got up and stalked up the stairs to the
second floor. When he returned he had a laptop and a camcorder on a tripod in his hands. He plugged them in and set them up so the camera was standing between them, pointed at his chair. He clicked the “record” and sat down as the infamous little red light came on.

“I figure I’m going to be explaining all this a LOT in the near future,” he said with a faintly dry hint of humor. “So a little one-time recording will make things easier. I’ll edit it later, maybe do a PowerPoint Presentation...”

He sat back and coughed, and even looked a bit awkward at being in front of a lens. “Okay, to start with, you should know I’m not from around here. Really, really, REALLY not from around here...”

While the clock ticked by and the day waned, he explained everything to them. About Agent, and the others of his race. About the Game they played and some of the rules as he understood them. About Azeroth or at least a quick summation, and about how he’d been selected to go to Earth Bet.

Then he explained about the origin of superpowers on Earth Bet. He explained the Entities, about Scion, about Cauldron, about Coil and the PRT and their agendas how they all tied together. He explained, with a great deal of guilt, how Taylor’s Triggering had gone so horribly wrong-- how Agent had finagled (and Bayleaf suspected, paid dearly) for a second-chance offer for Taylor, and now SHE was an Actor for the Game, and one of probably only two people on all of Earth Bet who didn’t derive their powers from a Shard.

They sat in silence after he finished. He turned the camera off and saved the digital file to a thumb drive. “You’re handling this better than Faultline’s crew did,” he said, trying feebly to joke. “At this point they’d already started on their second bottle of vodka.”

Danny put his hand to his head and sat back. “Give us a minute,” he said. “It kind of takes a minute to adjust to being told the secrets of the Universe.”

“Don’t think like that,” Bayleaf pleaded. “Please, just don’t. If the Universe all really sucked, then what’s the point of living?

“I don’t know about you but I take great comfort from the fact that there are Beings out there OTHER than those Space Whale things, Beings like Agent that on our side and who want us to win, and who’ll scrimp and cheat and undercut the rules just to stack the deck in our favor.

“You know what I see when I’m out there? I see a lot of evil and hurt and pain. I see people being as rotten and wicked as they possibly can to each other and to themselves and spitting in the face of God.

"But I also see a skinhead help a little kid over a pothole in the road. I see a hooker give her trashy fur coat to her skinnier, poorly dressed friend so she won’t freeze. I see a hobo splitting his last sandwich with a stray dog, and an ABB kid walking his hundred year old granny to the store so she won’t trip and fall. I see some hell’s angel biker who hasn’t darkened the door of a church in years going inside to pray for a dying friend. Every day I see people doing things for one another, some little spark of good, and sometimes I think: I think maybe I’m seeing just the tiniest little bit of what the good Lord saw when he looked down, saw how wicked and lost and sinful we are and still said “These people are worth dying for.”

“And I’ll be damned if I don’t at least step up and say that this world and these people are worth FIGHTING for.”
The Heberts were stunned speechless. But maybe he saw something in their eyes: a touch of respect.

“I’m sorry,” Taylor said meekly. “It’s just so big--! How are couple of, of dog people supposed to save the world from SCION?”

Bayleaf was about to protest that Scion had blind spots, weaknesses, limitations; that they could get help, the greatest minds--- that in other timelines he had been defeated by even less powerful heroes than themselves; that in one timeline even an unpowered, perfectly mundane school security guard had managed to save the world…

Instead he sighed and said: “That’s what we have to figure out. Before I arrived, events were aligning that a young Cape would Trigger right about now who would eventually bring about Scion’s death. But my presence has disrupted things so much that those events will never play out--”

Taylor’s breath had caught in her throat as he said those words and she made the intuitive leap. “It was me, wasn’t it,” she said faintly. “I… I was supposed to Trigger with the power that would end Scion.” She looked sick. “Instead I… Oh, God no.” She looked at him, her eyes filled with horror and disbelief. “Why did you interfere?” She said, shaking her fists at him as her voice rose to a shriek. “WHY DID YOU INTERFERE??”

“I had to--!”

“You doomed our world! Why couldn’t you have left it alone and let it happen--”

“BECAUSE NINE TIMES OUT OF TEN YOU LOSE!!!” Bayleaf roared, rising to his feet, his hackles bushed out. Danny and Taylor cringed back in their seats. “Because NINE TIMES out of TEN you LOSE,” he repeated, ashamed at his outburst, exhausted from the emotional effort it took to expose this awful fact. “The way the original timeline unfolds, unfolded, will unfold in countless universes, the margin between victory and defeat is INCHES. And those inches are rarely on the right side of the line.

“The powers you manifest with, that you were supposed to manifest with, weren’t enough. It takes a mile long chain of threadbare circumstances for your powers to become… upgraded into something that can let you fight Scion, much less defeat him. And every step of the way you and others and everyone you love suffers. Tragedy after tragedy, loss after loss, death after death by the thousands, till it culminates in the final battle, the Golden Morning, when you kill Scion-- and your victory celebration consists of being lobotomized with a BULLET.”

“And worst of all? Even in the unaltered timelines where you win, trillions die. Yes I said TRILLIONS-- there are hundreds of Earth-alternates just in this one little dimensional pocket. Scion destroys God knows how many of them in the process of battling you. And half your own reality becomes uninhabitable.

“THAT’S why I interfered,” he said. “That’s why Agent’s race sends out Actors. That’s why Agent, my Agent, literally went into hock and bent every law his people know to the breaking point to put me here, and to buy you a second chance. To screw Fate over, and find a path to victory that beats the odds... and isn’t powered by the soul of a tormented child to work.”

He straightened. “But even if you threw all that out, I’d still be here. I’d still try to help you, Taylor, and I’d still have tried to save you from that Hell in the locker. Because there’s one tenet Agent has that I definitely agree with: the fate of one is shared by all. You ever hear these idiots talking about “minority rights?” Well the smallest minority is ONE. And if you don’t fight for the rights of the individual-- for the FATE of the individual-- against all comers, you’re fighting for nothing.” He drew a breath. “I may have agreed to come here to try and save a world, but in the end I would have
come just to try to save you.”

Tears were running down her face again. She came to him arms outstretched and crawled into his lap. “I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I’m sorry…”

“Don’t be,” he said, patting her back. “Don’t be, okay?”

Danny watched with a terrible pang in his heart. She’d gone, not to Danny but to Bayleaf for comfort. He’d known this day was coming some day, but still, seeing his little girl turn to another… bittersweet at best. “So our next move?” he said.

“For now, the big stuff, we've got about five to ten years,” Bayleaf said. ”More, actually, thanks to some steps I've already taken. But for the immediate future? We try and find out how much of our 'secret identities',” Bayleaf snorted, “are still left, and if we can patch them up. We have a day or two if we all call in sick, Taylor and I can hide here, but we’re going to have to move fast…” he brooded for a minute. Then he got a cunning, plotting look on his face. Danny suddenly felt worried. He hadn’t seen an expression like that since his favorite cousin had come up with a plan for swiping his dad’s car keys so they could drive into town for a couple of twelve-packs of beer… when they were fourteen.

“You got an idea, I'm guessing,” Danny said warily.

“Yeah. But… I’m going to have to bring in a couple of friends on this.” Bayleaf rubbed his chin and gave Danny a sidelong glance. “Tell me, Sir-- have you ever watched an old black and white movie called ‘Gaslight?’ “
Early morning rolled in. Bayleaf was up early; he’d slept on blankets on the workroom floor while Taylor took the upstairs bed. He’d woken hours ago, grumbling with an aching back, hit the can and the shower and was trying to cobble together something resembling a breakfast for two out of the contents of his larder and minifridge. It was more camping food and quicky-instant eat-right-now stuff than a proper meal, but fruit, boxed pastries and some bottled Starbucks would have to do for now. Lucky break, he had a package of sausage and another of bacon. He threw both on the griddle and put it on top of one of the forges. If Taylor was anything like him she would be craving protein something fierce.

Taylor came trooping down the stairs, her hair frowzy and her fur rumpled. He was impressed; he would have expected her to take time to adjust walking up and down stairs with digitigrade legs, but she handled them with grace. Well, as much grace as a 5 AM wakeup would permit. “Bathroom?” she mumbled, looking sheepish.

And darned cute, standing there, rubbing the back of her leg with one foot and her shoulder peeking out of the collar of her sweatshirt like-- whoa, kemosabe! He quickly turned his attention back to the bacon and sausages. “Through that door,” he said. “Towels in the cabinet if you’re looking to shower.”

“Tha—Haaahaanks,” she yawned, yawning till her fangs all showed and her tongue curled. She staggered into the bathroom. A few minutes passed and he heard a flush. His head came up. Whoops, he’d forgotten to warn her about--

A deafening canine shriek told him he was too late. “Ahh WHAT THE HELL YAIK--”

“Bidet!” he shouted, smothering a laugh. It was built into the toilet and went off if there was weight on the seat when you flushed.

“Why the hell do you have--”

“FUR!” He thought it a succinct explanation.

“Eugh, fine, but does it have to be FREEZING? ...YEEK!”

“Would you rather it was WARM?”

“Eugh. Point.” She didn’t sound happy about it, though.

Another minute passed. Bayleaf dished up the bacon and sausage on a spare plate and set them on the, well, relatively clean end of the worktable. “What the heck’s up with this shower?” she said in confusion.

He stopped and got an evil grin on his face when he realized what she was in for. “Just step inside, close the door and push the button,” he said.

“Push the button..?” He heard the sliding door on the cylindrical shower stall slide shut. Three… Two… One…

FWOOSH.

“AYEEEEK WHAT THE HELL AGH PFFHLT AGH YOU JACKASS AGGH!” Taylor yelled
and swore as she was hit at every angle with hot soapy water by a dozen high pressure embedded sprayers.

The water stopped for a minute and she continued to express her opinion of Bayleaf’s morals, stature, and ancestry while the accused stood in his workshop, staggering with silent laughter as he fished out the cutlery. “Better scrub up while you can,” he managed to shout. “The rinse cycle starts in a second!”

“What the hell is this??”

“I’m a Cape, I get all sorts of filthy! Grease and mud and God knows what all else gets in my fur. It takes a lot to get it out! The soap in the water is shampoo, by the way.” She didn’t answer, only muttering foul imprecations for several minutes. He suddenly found himself blushing as he tried not to imagine her lathering up.

“You didn’t tell me about any of this on purpose, didn’t you you AIEEEK!” She was cut off by the rinse cycle.

“Be ready for the dryer,” He managed to gasp out.

While Taylor was busy being attacked by her shower, Bayleaf’s cellphone rang. He popped it out of the recharger and accepted the call. “Adrian, is that you? This is Aisha! Oh man, Adrian, I’m so sorry I screwed up-- I took a skip day yesterday, I didn’t even know what happened--”

“Aisha?” Bayleaf asked in surprise. “Aisha, slow down, what are you talking about?”

“Young girl Taylor! I told you I’d watch her back but I wasn’t here yesterday-- and The Three Bees got her. It’s awful, Adrian, it’s bad. I’m so sorry--”

“Aisha... AISHA! It’s okay. Taylor’s okay, she’s with me.”

“--But how, everyone saw--”

Inspiration struck. “Aisha, Taylor’s fine, but she and I need your help.”

Aisha stopped. “...What kind of help?”

Bayleaf rolled the dice. “The same type of help your brother could probably use.”

There was a short, deep silence on the other end of the line. “How do you know about that?” Aisha hissed.

“The same way I know a lot of things. Cape stuff.”

“Cape stuff.”

“I’ll lay it out for you. Your brother and his friends are getting tangled up with some really nasty operators and don’t even know it. You help me out with this, I’ll help you pull your big dumb brother’s butt out of the sausage grinder.”

“Okay, I help you with YOUR ‘Cape Stuff,’ and you’ll help me out with MY ‘Cape Stuff’?”

“That’s the idea. Deal?”

Aisha’s voice started sounding amused, the way it did when she thought something was going to be FUN. “Okay, I’m in. What you need me to do?”
“All right. Go around to all the teachers. Tell them that Taylor’s out with food poisoning today, and I asked you for her to pick up all her assignments.”

“Got it.”

“Here’s the important part: if anyone talks about what happened yesterday-- the locker, the Cape, anything, especially if they mention Taylor-- look at them like they’re crazy and tell ‘em you saw her yesterday at lunch. You didn’t speak to her but she was looking kinda queasy. Then I called you today to pick up her homework. Doesn’t matter who asks you or tells you. Deny, deny, deny. And if they ask about me, you saw me floating somewhere around school, you don’t know for sure...”

“Oh I get it,” her grin was audible. “Gaslight ‘em, right?”

“Well, well, somebody’s cultured.”

“Get bent. Don’t worry about it. I’ve been blowing smoke up my teacher’s skirts since I was six. You give me enough time I’ll have half of ‘em swearing they spoke to you and shook your hand themselves yesterday.”

On with his contributing to the corruption of a minor. “Great. I’ll call you later to tell you where to meet us.” He hung up. Just in time to hear the buzzer and the sound of the drying cycle start up.

She must have heard his warning this time because there was only a brief whoop, followed by silence. The roar of the dryer went on for some time; she must soak up more water than he did with that long mane of hair.

The blowers finally stopped. There were a few more seconds of silence, followed by a “YAIK!” of surprise. What now? “You’d better hurry and get dressed; we’re gonna have visitors soon and WAGH!!” He nearly jumped out of his skin when the bathroom door opened and a hairball walked out.

It was Taylor. She was wrapped from armpit to thigh in one of his big fluffy beach sized towels, and every single hair on her body was sticking straight out. Her fur was poofed out in a fuzzy corona, and her normally loose tumbling locks were frizzed out into a fright wig. She stood there stiff shouldered, glaring at him and looking like the world’s angriest giant Pomeranian.

Bayleaf lost it. He collapsed on the floor, howling with laughter. He tried to pull himself to his feet; it was no use. Every time he looked at her and saw the expression on her fuzzy-wuzzy face he lost it again. He eventually ended up half-draped over the edge of the worktable, weeping with laughter.

There was a buzz and the bolts on the back entrance disengaged. Taylor’s father came in, a suitcase in one hand and several bags of takeout in the other. “Taylor, I brought-- Taylor?? What the hell happened to you?” He stopped in his tracks and dropped everything to the floor.

Danny stood flabbergasted at the sight before him; his daughter-- at least he assumed the giant fuzzball was his daughter-- standing there in a towel looking like she was about to quite literally bite someone, and Bayleaf the hero hanging off the edge of the table, laughing like a hyena.

He said the first words that popped into his head. They were the wrong ones. “You look like the Sheepdog that ate Seattle,” he blurted out.

Bayleaf nearly passed out.
After a great deal of time locked in the bathroom with a set of brushes and combs (brought with the suitcase of clothing) and a great number of sincere apologies, Taylor graciously rejoined the two barbarian, uncouth men in her life at the table and they broke their fast. “So I hit the drive thru at Fugly Bob’s on the way, because I figured after everything yesterday you HAD to be starved,” Danny was saying. “Then I thought it over and went through the drive through again and pretty much tripled my first order.”

“Good call,” Bayleaf mumbled around a mouthful of double cheeseburger, glancing over at Taylor. Despite being the most petite of the three, she was (no other word for it) wolfing down the food in front of them at a genuinely astonishing rate. She had already destroyed her share of the burger order, was tearing into the bacon and sausage, and was making inroads into both Danny and Bayleaf’s food as well. She looked up, licking her fingers, and flicked her ears down in a lupine blush.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Bayleaf chuckled. “You should’ve seen me my first day. It’s a good thing I can turn into a walrus and snag a few fish in a pinch.”

Danny nearly choked on his burger. “You-- you’re Wonder Walrus?” he managed to cough out. He started banging on the table with his fist as Taylor started whacking him on the back. Airway cleared he roared with laughter. Taylor was laughing too, staring at him in disbelief glee.

“I’m several people apparently,” Bayleaf said with a doggy style grin. “But yeah, Wonder Walrus.”

“You nearly ended up owing me a pair of pants,” Danny said, pointing in accusation.

“Why?”

“Cause I dang near crapped them laughing when you gave Armsmaster that- that walrus smooch!” Danny laughed.

“He’s a terrible kisser by the way,” Bayleaf quipped, his face deadpan. Danny nearly quit breathing, he was laughing so hard.

“How many secret identities do you HAVE?” Taylor asked.

“Let’s see. This form, I’ve been called Skinwalker. There’s Wonder Walrus,” he chuckled a minute. “and some of the folks at the hospitals call me the Giving Tree. Some folks are talking about the Night Owl, and there are quite a number of drug dealers in jail right now who tell each other horror stories about the Tiger Demon. My human form has my old human name-- Adrian. But… under it all, I think of myself as Bayleaf.” He gave her a smile.

Her jaw was hanging open. “You’re all of those?” she said. “How many forms do you have?”

Bayleaf actually had to stop and count on his fingers. “About eleven,” he said. “There’s a couple I haven’t tried yet. Oh, and I forgot that at least one little girl thinks I’m one of Santa’s reindeer.” He smiled at that memory. Then his smile turned a little wicked. “Of course Armsmaster probably thinks I’m either the Devil incarnate or punishment from God…”

Danny started chortling again. “Why do you pick on him so much?”

“One, in the original timeline he caused Taylor’s fall into villainy,” Bayleaf said sourly. “She stopped Lung on her first night out as a cape--”
“LUNG?” Now it was Taylor’s turn to choke. Lung was an asian cape who led the ABB. He transformed into a humanoid dragon when he fought, and the longer he fought the stronger and tougher and more incendiary he got. He’d fought Leviathan to a standstill, in a battle that sank the island of Kyushu. The idea of even seeing Lung in the street and doing anything but run like a madwoman the other way sounded like insanity. “How--?”

“Bug powers.”

“Bug powers?”

“Bug powers. You sent a swarm of black widows down his shorts. He lost his junk when Armsmaster stuck him full of a tinker tranquilizer without asking you what you’d done first. Shut off his regeneration for a while and…. ”

“Nyergh.”

“Anyway, Armsmaster took the credit for your bust. You were so disillusioned that you wanted nothing to do with him or the PRT or the Wards, so you stayed rogue. You went undercover in the Undersiders and… went native.”

“That’s a lot to pin on just Armsmaster,” Danny said. “I mean, jackass move, yes, but--”

“He also nearly got her killed by Leviathan,” Bayleaf interrupted.

“…What.” Danny was suddenly a lot less sympathetic.

“The spotlight hog actually tried to arrange a solo fight between him and Leviathan when Leviathan attacked the city,” Bayleaf said. “He had some new secret weapon and a plan to make himself the number one hero in the country. Taylor got caught in the middle. She saved an Endbringer shelter full of innocent people when Armsmaster’s halfassed plan naturally went off the rails, and they both got half-flattened in the process.

“Then the sonuvabitch exposed her secret identity in the cape emergency hospital as revenge.” Bayleaf jabbed savagely at his ketchup cup with a french fry.

“What??” Danny said, rising to his feet as if he intended to go punch the armored tinker in his bearded chin personally. “No, wait… this isn’t the same Armsmaster--”

“Well, he’s not gotten that bad. But he’s still the same humorless, insecure, spotlight hungry jerk he was in the baseline. He’s peaking out as a Tinker and a Cape, career wise, and he’s getting desperate to grab the brass ring one last time.

“’Swhy I torment him so much. I’m trying to break him of that. I figure if he wants to be in the spotlight so much, I’d make sure he was there as much as possible-- as the stone-faced butt of every joke I could think of.” He smirked around a mouthful of fries. “Plus, it’s fun.”

Taylor was looking at her hand, shifting it back and forth between worgen and human. “Will I be able to change into as many forms as you?” she asked.

“Um, no,” Bayleaf said. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and got up. “We don’t have the same powers.”

Danny and Taylor looked at each other, then back to Bayleaf. “I think we both thought that your, ah, friends gave Taylor a copy of your powers,” he said.
“Oh no,” Bayleaf said, shaking his head. “We both got our powers-- and our forms--- from the same setting, but we’ve got two different powersets. I’m a Druid…” he picked up an apple and juggled it in one hand. “But she’s a Rogue.”

“Aren’t you both technically rogues right now?” Danny said.

“No, not like the PRT means it,” Bayleaf snorted. “And isn’t that a cute little semantic headgame trick. Rogue. Make it sound like even a person with powers who just sits at home doing nothing is a dangerous outlaw. Watch out, we got a runaway off the plantation!”

“Anyway. Rogue, in Azeroth terms means someone with training and powers in stealth, infiltration, and melee fighting with quick, vicious takedowns. Um, basically a sort of super-ninja.” he picked at the apple in his hand. “Oh, uh, Taylor, would you get that knife off the rack there?”

Taylor got up and pulled down the knife he’d pointed at. It was actually more of a dagger, nearly a foot long and wicked-looking. “Got it,” she said, turning around.

“Think fast!” The apple came whipping through the air at her head like a fastball.

Swipp Swipp! “Hey, what did you do that fffff…..” Bayleaf pointed down. Taylor looked. The apple was lying on the floor at her feet, neatly sliced into four sections.


“How did I YAIK!” Her yelp of terror was only to be expected. One does that when a roaring werewolf leaps at them from across the room. Just before Bayleaf’s claws reached her, there was a bang and a puff of blue-black smoke and she disappeared… only to instantly reappear in another puff of smoke directly behind him and deliver a perfect roundhouse kick to his kidneys. He went down with a crash, sprawling on the floor and groaning in pain. He rolled to his feet, clutching his back.

“Owgh. Sorry, Taylor honey, it was the only way I could think of to…” he blinked. Taylor was looking at him with wide eyed terror, the knife held pointed at him in her shaking hand. “Oh, whoa, honey, I’m so sorry I scared you that bad, I swear I wasn’t going to hurt you… whoa.” As he had been speaking she had stepped backward and slowly faded from sight. “Taylor?”

“I-I’m sorry,” the empty space said. “But holy shit you have no idea how scary that is…”

“Taylor,” Bayleaf said with a doggy grin. “Look down at yourself.”

“Honestly, men,” the empty space said. “It’s always boob jokes with… omigosh I’m invisible!”

“And you just teleported, too,” Bayleaf said. “And if I remember right, Subtlety Rogues-- which is what you are-- can disappear instantly, render people unconscious with a single strike, throw blades with pinpoint accuracy, generate clouds of smoke that blot out a sizeable area, and are natural masters of knife combat… oh, and can disappear into a “shadow state” for short periods that heals their wounds and makes injuries they cause more damaging. Cast mystical “poisons” on their weapons that make people sluggish, or heal more slowly…. And a few other things too.” He shrugged. “Super Ninja.”

Taylor slowly faded back into visibility. “Aww,” she said. “I tried to make it last longer, but…”

“Too many people focusing on where you were, I guess. It also sorta poops out a few seconds into combat... takes too much concentration to maintain. So there’s that.”
“That was… amazing,” Danny said, his eyes dancing with excitement. “I can’t believe it, my daughter is Nightcrawler!”

“Who?” Taylor said. “And eww. What kind of a cape is named after a worm?” You could almost see a little bit of Mr. Hebert’s childhood die in his eyes. Bayleaf turned away and bit his lip to keep from laughing.

“But why a Rogue?” Taylor went on. “I’m sure there were other powersets that were… better for our mission.”

“It’s not what you got, but what you do with it,” Bayleaf said. “And as to that, well. Do you remember any of the questions the Judges in your dream asked you?”

“Yyyyyes,” Taylor said, putting a clawtip to her chin as she thought. “They asked me what I thought of my world. I told them I wished I could make it better. They asked about Dad…I said I wanted to make him proud and… and happy again.” she shot a look to her father, who just smiled at her. “And they asked me about Sophia, of all people.”

“I told them the truth. That she was my enemy. They asked what I wanted to do about her.

“I said I wanted to beat her. I wanted to win. I didn’t want to let her break me or make me a monster. That I wanted to be BETTER than her.”

“That’s probably it right there,” Bayleaf said. “She’s your rival. You want to outdo her—be better than her. So they gave you the powerset that most closely matches Sophia, or rather Shadow Stalker. Just so you could beat her at everything, even her own game.”

Taylor felt a wicked smirk growing on her lips. “I think I LIKE that,” she said.

“How about ‘Rogue?’” Danny said hopefully. “As a name, I mean. No, that would be terrible, wouldn’t it.” He looked crestfallen.

Bayleaf chuckled. He walked over and patted Danny on the shoulder. “Marvel Comics has gone to its well-deserved rest, Mr. Hebert,” he said. “Just let them rest in peace.”

“I’m going with the name I told the Judges,” Taylor said firmly. “If nobody else likes it, tough.”

“What name was that?” Bayleaf asked.

She looked at him with determination in her eyes. “Hemlok.” She paused. “With two K’s,” she added, feeling a bit silly.

A corner of Bayleaf’s mouth quirked up. “Works for me,” he said. He pulled out his phone and started dialing. “Now it’s time to call in some help, if we’re going to save both our secret identities.” He put his phone up to his ear. “Hello, Amy?”

It wasn’t half an hour later that Bayleaf was standing on the loading dock of the abandoned warehouse, freezing his currently furless butt off and waiting for his guests to arrive. To his surprise, the first one there was Parian. A taxi pulled up to the end of the street and a young woman dressed in
a skirt, heavy winter coat and with her head muffled in a scarf got out. She trotted down the alley to where Bayleaf waited and smiled at him with dark eyes. “Hello again, Adrian,” she said. “Or should I say Skinwalker?”

He sighed. “Thank you for coming, especially on short notice,” he said. “I know how you hate leaving your shop.” He gestured towards the open shutter. “Come on inside, get comfortable--”

Anything further was interrupted when two girls dropped out of the sky. The flying one was a platinum blonde, and in fashionably scuffed jeans, crop-topped festive sweater and ugg boots, was definitely underdressed for the weather. The girl in her arms on the other hand was bundled up like an eskimo in a thick plush coat that reached clear to her toes. “Did you have to fly so fast, Vicky? I like to froze my face off,” she was complaining.

“It’s bracing! Good for you!” Vicky said.

Bayleaf growled in exasperation. He should have expected this. “She insisted on coming, did she,” he asked Amy, nodding at Glory Girl.

“Sorry,” Amy said. “She found out I was going to see-- a friend-- and she squeezed the rest out of me. Then I couldn’t get her to butt out.” She seemed a little miffed, though Bayleaf suddenly found himself wondering if it was at her sister or at him.

“I suppose it’s only fair you brought some protection along,” he said grudgingly, facepalming. “I haven’t given you much reason to trust me yet--”

“You got THAT right, Mister Shapeshift Rogue,” Vicky said, interposing herself between Amy and Bayleaf and jabbing him in the chest with rather painfully her finger. “You tried to pull a fast one on my sister--" jab “and I don’t care for that.” Jab “I don’t know what you’re up to, inviting her out here all alone--" jab jab “ But I’m watching you, buster, and I erk!”

Bayleaf had reached up and grabbed her hand in his fist. His suddenly clawed, shovel sized fist. He’d gone full worgen between one breath and the next. He took a moment to enjoy the expression of growing alarm on Vicky Dallon’s face as she found herself struggling harder and harder to pull her hand out of his grasp. She pulled free finally, but it took an unsettling amount of effort. His smile was an inch from her nose and ALL teeth. “A one-ton deadlift is kiddy stuff on my scale, little girl,” he said. “I flip pickup trucks one-handed for fun. So don’t try throwing your weight around with me.”

“You’re Skinwalker?” She yelped at the top of her voice.

“Say it a little louder, sister, I don’t think they heard it on Captain’s Hill,” Bayleaf snarled in exasperation under his breath. “Get this through your pom-pom brain, prom queen, this is about somebody’s secret identity. UNWRITTEN RULES stuff. I’ve got three people here, counting myself, who are trying to keep every villain in Brockton bay from finding out their names, addresses and favorite ice cream flavor before the end of the week, so I’d greatly appreciate it if you kept your mouth shut!”

Wide eyed, Vicky nodded till her ponytail bobbled. He hadn’t collapsed her forcefield but he’d come close. That was enough to get the message across. He released her and quickly shifted back to his human form. “Lets get inside before someone stumbles along and sees this little circus,” he grumbled.

He looked apologetically at Parian. “This could risk your ID. I can understand if--”
She held up a gloved hand. “I’ve come this far, I want to see all this out,” she said. “Besides, I owe you greatly for those miracle materials you gave me. They’ve meant a sea change in how I do business.” The end of her scarf suddenly slithered around through the air around her. “Not to mention how safe I feel out in public.” Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

“You’re PAR—UMPH!” The scarf suddenly elongated and shot across the loading dock to wrap around Vicky’s face, silencing her. Vicky tried to rip off the cloth, to her alarm it didn’t even stretch.

“Sorry,” Amy said as she ran her hand down her face. “She’s a fan...”

“In, in, in, before your sister invents a whole new kind of Collateral Damage,” Bayleaf said, ushering them through the open shutter and slamming it down behind them.

“Pfuh, the heck is that scarf made of?” Vicky said when it finally peeled off. Parian ignored the question. Bayleaf stopped in the middle of the warehouse and took a calming breath. “Amy, Parian, I appreciate this. The people inside and I… we’re going to be trusting you with a lot. Our names are just the start of it. A lot of it will be dangerous to know. If you want to back out, now’s the time to say it.”

None of them said anything. In fact all three young women crossed their arms impatiently. “Okay, I just had to say it.” He led them to the back of the dusty building and slid the plywood panel aside, revealing the hidden entrance. “Entre’ vu.”

Amy started to enter, but Vicky stopped her with one hand. “I’ll go first,” she said. “Just in case wolf-boy here has any surprises planned,” she gave him a defiant look. She ducked in. “Oh how nice, a hole in the wall,” she snarked as she disappeared from sight.

A moment later a reverent “oh wowww” echoed out. “...Holy crap there’s two of you?”

Amy cocked an eyebrow at him. Bayleaf just smirked. She and Parian stepped through and inside; Bayleaf followed, dragging the plywood back in place behind himself.

“I have to say,” Parian said in admiration. “I find myself having workshop envy.” She was seated in one of the comfy chairs, her scarf and heavy coat set aside for a light silk headwrap and domino mask. Bayleaf was kind of relieved she’d opted to leave the doll mask behind. That thing was creepy.

“Thanks.” Bayleaf said. He looked abashed. “Amy, Vicky, I’d like to apologize for that scene outside--”

“Don’t bother,” said Amy over her shoulder. “Frankly it was worth the price of admission to see someone make Vicky shut up for a second.”

“Get bent, sister dear,” Vicky said sweetly.

The Dallon sisters were still well into the “Gawk and poke” stage of their visit. Amy was over intensely examining the arcane plants, while Vicky was more or less playing with the bots and toys wandering the floor. “Oh look Amy, it’s so cute!” Vicky gushed, holding up one of the workerbots. The agitated little bot was squeaking and kicking its feet.
“Please don’t bother those, they’re busy running errands,” Bayleaf said with a sigh.

“Errands like what?” Vicky asked.

“Like collecting scrap to make more workerbots,” he said. “I’m down to these three guys, a few sabotage bugs and Obie after that Merchant raid. Speaking of which—” he looked around.

“Out in my truck,” Danny said. He was busy setting up a digital projector. “Little nut nearly gave me a heart attack this morning. I left him in there. No offense but you’re not exactly in a good neighborhood.” Taylor’s father had no mask. After much debate they decided that full disclosure with the people they were asking for help was the way to go.

Amy let go of the leaf of the semi-invisible plant and sighed. “Okay. So what is this all about? And when do we get those explanations you promised?”

“Explanations?” Vicky said.

“I told you about the Giving Tree,” Amy said to her sister.

“Oh, your plant Case 53 friend.”

“Right. Well I’m at First General the other day and I catch this guy—” Amy jerked a thumb at Bayleaf-- “breaking into the linen closet and stealing some scrubs. When I try demanding an explanation, he sprouts leaves at me and promises to explain everything that’s going on. Well, I’m here and I’m waiting.”

“I am here because I owe Adrian here a tremendous favor, at the least,” Parian said. “I was told that it involved himself and a friend; I am assuming he was referring to his wolf ladyfriend here.” Taylor hunched up a bit in her chair at the attention.

Bayleaf ran his fingers over his scalp. “Okay, answers. I’ll start at the reason I called you all here. The other day, Taylor here manifested. Thanks to a screw-up on my part, to multiple screw-ups, she’s in danger of having her secret identity exposed to the world. Mine is too, but that’s secondary. Basically, I’m asking you to help me put toothpaste back into the tube and secure her secret identity again.”

“I think maybe you missed it,” Vicky said, crossing her arms under her chest and standing behind her sister’s chair in a cocksure pose. “But we’re from New Wave? We kinda gave up secret identities as a bad idea, ages ago?”

“And I also know how it worked out for you,” Bayleaf retorted. Amy and Vicky both flinched at the blunt reminder of their darkest time as a hero team: one family member who’d lived the New Wave principle had been killed in her own home, on her own doorstep, by a low-level thug who wanted to make a name for himself. Retribution— by the villains, no less— had been swift and brutal... but the damage had been done. Bayleaf didn’t even blink at Vicky’s angry glare. “Vicky, this isn’t about her and I being able to go shopping without being bothered by paparazzi. We’ve got reasons, life and death reasons, for trying to keep our masks.”

“Then why not let the PRT handle it?” Vicky said obstinately. “They do that whole ‘scrub the scene’ thing for new capes, especially if they join the Wards-- oh what?” she snapped. Because Bayleaf and ‘Hemlokk’ were both shaking their heads.

“Just watch the video, young lady,” Danny said, a touch sternly. Parental authority mode activated. “You’ll get your answers.” He hit a button on the laptop next to the projector. The projector lit up, throwing a rectangle of light on a bare patch of wall.
Bayleaf sat down next to Hemlokk, who leaned into him. She passed him a bowl. He looked down into it in surprise. “Popcorn?”

“You had some packets in your supplies,” she said impishly, handing him a bottle of cola.

Up on the projection, an image of Bayleaf walked onscreen. He sat down in an overstuffed chair and addressed the camera and whomever was behind it.

“I figure I’m going to be explaining all this a LOT in the near future,” he said with a faintly dry hint of humor. “So a little one-time recording will make things easier. I’ll edit it later, maybe do a PowerPoint Presentation...”

He sat back and coughed, and even looked a bit awkward at being in front of a lens. “Okay, to start with, you should know I’m not from around here. Really, really, REALLY not from around here...”

A slow hour crawled by as the Bayleaf on the projector talked, and answered questions, and more questions after that. When the video ended, the three young women Bayleaf had invited were staring at him, and each other, with obvious horror. “This can’t be true,” Parian said. “It can’t possibly!”

“It isn’t,” Vicky said, her face thunderous. “This is garbage.”

Amy was shaking her head, looking distressed. “It makes too much sense, Vicky--”

“Too much sense?” Vicky exploded. “We’ve got a couple of Cape loonies who are claiming to have insider knowledge about a gigantic alien conspiracy involving the PRT, the Protectorate, Coil, Scion, some mysterious ‘Cauldron’ group, giant space whale things, and just about everybody except Fugly Bob himself… based on information they got from another group of aliens and oh yeah, they’re aliens themselves! This is crazier than that poofy-haired guy on the History Channel!” She lifted her own hair over her head in pantomime of the notorious ancient alienologist.

That brought Bayleaf up short. Of course they’d want proof. He cursed himself mentally. Agent had warned him that this was the reason so many Actors kept mum about their origins, or their information sources… it could be harder than proving Fermet’s last theorem to prove they were telling the truth. Getting dismissed as a loony or locked up as one was a good possibility if you bungled it.

“Well?” Vicky demanded. “What kind of PROOF do you have?”

“Well you could go to the Palanquin and talk to Faultline and her crew,” Bayleaf said dryly. “Cauldron spooked so bad when I told Faultline the truth that they dropped Contessa on our heads and tried to kill us all. I’m sure they can tell you the eyewitness account—assuming you can find them that is. They were planning on packing their bags and disappearing into the boonies until everything was all over one way or the other.”

This put her on the back foot, but she rallied. “So why haven’t these Cauldron guys attacked us right now?”
“A couple of reasons,” Bayleaf said. “For one, Hemlokk and I are a sort of blind spot for thinkers, due to our extrauniversal powers. For another, I’ve been taking precautions. I managed to kludge together a little trinket that causes a similar problem for thinkers, and scattering them about by selling them as decorative wingdings.” He reached over and picked up one of the little arcane shard “firefly jars” from one of his shelves. “For a third, I think I pretty well ruined their day when they popped open that portal and I threw a portal of my own into their living room… I express mailed them every bob-omb, landshark, sabotage bot, mini-tonk and seaforium charge I had in my stockpiles. They’re probably still cleaning up.”

“Convenient,” Vicky sniffed. Hemlokk bristled but Bayleaf patted her arm.

“It’s okay, she has a point,” he said. “I could show you the Cauldron vials I captured from Skidmark, but not only would that be begging for trouble, it wouldn’t mean anything to you. Without force feeding them to someone, they’re just bottles of colored liquid.” He thought a minute. “I do know more than just the… um, the Cauldron conspiracy, let’s call it that. A lot of details that…” he darted a glance over at Amy. “If I tell them, I could hurt a lot of people. In a personal way…”

He looked horribly guilty, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “The need is too great,” he muttered. “And this needs to come out anyway, or it’ll never be fixed.” he stared at the wall, thinking.

“Vicky,” he said slowly and carefully. “Amy is… addicted to your powers.”

As he spoke Amy first felt her heart freeze. --NO! He knew! Somehow he knew that Amy was….

It was Amy’s deepest secret, and her most terrible shame. She was Vicky’s sister. Her adopted sister, but still her sister. But… ever since they both reached about the age of twelve… Amy had been finding herself having… feelings. Indecent feelings for Vicky.

It had been slowly ruining her life. All she could do was pine silently. All she could feel around Dean, Vicky’s boyfriend, was seething envy. And now Skinwalker was going to reveal it--!

And then the second part of his sentence registered and suddenly everything made sense. In addition to Glory Girl’s personal forcefield, which made her conditionally invulnerable and gave her super strength, she had an Aura-- if she was in a good mood, you adored her. If she was angry or afraid, you were intimidated and afraid of her. She could increase it’s power greatly, putting people in a lovestruck stupor or in paralyzing terror. But despite training constantly and being constantly reminded, it was almost impossible for her to keep it turned entirely off…

“What? No,” Vicky stammered. “I’ve got it under control. And besides my family’s immune--”

Bayleaf shook his head. “Your blood relatives are immune,” he corrected her. “Maybe. Even your boyfriend Dean Stansfield is pretty much immune-- because he’s Gallant, and his emotion-sensing and blasting powers make him super resistant.” the others shot him shocked looks at revealing Gallant’s identity so cavalierly, but he pressed on. “But your adopted sister isn’t. And you’ve been unknowingly bombarding her with low level love-me radiation since before she hit puberty.”

“This is bullcrap!” Vicky said, raising up off the floor. “You’re just making up random stuff and hoping you hit something! Admit it!” Her aura flared; everyone in the room cringed back, save for Bayleaf and Hemlokk, and even they flinched a bit. “Amy, tell him this is… Amy?”

Amy wasn’t listening. She was curled up in her chair, her hands over her face. It was obvious to anyone, even oblivious Victoria Dallon, that she knew Bayleaf was telling the truth.
For a moment Vicky’s aura flared even higher-- then she flew off across the workshop, her own face in her hands, and hovered in a corner, refusing to look at anyone.

Bayleaf leaned over and put his hand on Amy’s shoulder. It was a dangerous move; Amy’s power wasn’t healing, it was biokinesis. She could turn him into a blob of protoplasm if she was ever upset enough. But he risked it. “Amy, this is NOT your fault! It’s not Victoria’s fault either! It just happened! You’re both victims of a, a, an accident of circumstance. Murphy just got the drop on you two is all. But now that you know about it, you can try to start and fix it.”

Amy sniffled. “If only it was that easy,” she sobbed. Bayleaf scrambled for a tissue but Danny got there first. She took the entire box and started mopping her face.

“Even if she could fix brains,” Vicky said hollowly, not moving from her corner, “she can’t fix her own….” she kept her back turned to them. “I… I screwed up my sister’s brain--”

“Not true,” Bayleaf grunted.

“What? That my power-- lesboed my sister’s brain?”

“iieee wwwouldn’t phrase it THAT way,” Bayleaf said, rolling his eyes and scratching his head. “But you didn’t mess up her brain. Just muddled up the brain chemistry a while. Figure out a way to block your aura and eventually it should go back to normal.” He suddenly snapped his fingers. “But we could fix it faster if we could get her power to work on herself.”

“How?” Amy asked, more than a little sarcastically.

“Come on,” Bayleaf said with growing enthusiasm. “There’s got to be at least one cape out there with the ability to duplicate powers, or borrow them temporarily, or--”

“Hey yeah!” Vicky turned around and flew back to them. “That’s a great idea, it… oh no, no, it still wouldn’t work,” she said, deflating. “Ames’ power doesn’t work on brains.”

Bayleaf said nothing. He just stared at Amy. Hard.

Vicky shot a look at him, then at her sister, then back at him. “Oh come on! Amy… AMY!”

Amy hauled off and punched the werewolf in the chest. “Why are MY secrets the one you’re blabbing all over, huh??” she exploded tearfully.

“Probably because yours seem to be the ones that are hurting you the most by being kept,” Danny said solemnly.

Vicky looked at her sister in confusion. “Why…?”

“Because I don’t dare TRY to fix brains, Vicky!” She said angrily, her face blotchy. “If you screw up fixing an arm or a leg you get maybe a scar, or something. You screw up fixing a brain, you could screw up someone’s MIND. Or erase their memory. the tiniest little change and they’re really not THEM anymore!”

This time the long sigh of frustration came from Parian. “You silly girl,” she said to Amy. “Hasn’t anyone given you any actual instruction in medicine?” This surprised Amy so much she simply stared at the tailor, openmouthed. “ I didn’t think so. Let me guess; your natural abilities made any actual book learning seem redundant, so nobody really bothered. All you’ve learned is secondhand, from hanging around doctors and from maybe a book or two you read.
"And here’s a better question: how many neurosurgeons do you even talk with when you’re doing your rounds as a healer? How many people with brain damage, or who are recuperating from brain damage, do you even talk with much less examine? Next to none, I bet. Because after all, everyone knows that the great Panacea, alas, cannot heal brains… so your fears and lack of knowledge have become self-reinforcing. At best, maybe some lecture by some addle-minded old philosopher who droned at you about how changing the brain 'destroys the person that was,' or some such drivel.

Amy huffed. "So how do YOU know anything about it--" even as she was having flashbacks to a series of lectures she'd been given by a rather old, more than slightly Powers-phobic and rather addle-pated old curmudgeon once her "healing powers" had been revealed to the world.

Parian laughed. “I’m a college student, and my parents were obsessed with raising an overachiever,” Parian said. “The medical track was just one of a few they tried to push me onto. But I think I’ve gotten more of an education in things like medical ethics and brain surgery than you have gotten in your whole life as a cape.

“Panacea, people undergo brain surgery every day using methods infinitely cruder than your power--scalpels, forceps, needles-- to remove clots or tumors, repair injury. Do you believe they have all had their “selves” destroyed or corrupted? That they have somehow lost their souls?”

Panacea looked confounded. “I...”

Parian shook her head in pity. “Yes, people often suffer changes in personality, loss of memory or function, but that is because of damage, the relative crudeness of our surgical methods. And any victim of a brain lesion or a tumor or an aneurysm would tell you it is far better to live with some minor side effects of a cure, than to live with a sick or injured or dying brain.

“Has your power ever ‘flubbed’ a healing of any other organ? Have you ever given in to your imagined “dark side?” No? Then why don’t you trust it? Why don’t you trust yourself? You’re not being ethical, you’re being self-defeating out of ignorance and fear. And that’s a more terrifying nightmare. Because then the only time you’ll cross that self imposed line, even in great need, even when it’s the right thing to do, will be when you’ve been pushed too far and you ARE out of control. Like a person who refuses to touch alcohol, then goes on a demented drinking binge the very first time they give in and try it.

"Someone, somewhere, taught you to hate and fear yourself and to see yourself as a monster waiting to happen. And may heaven have pity on them when the price for that sin comes back upon them.”

Everyone else was listening, openmouthed. Bayleaf finally looked up at Hemlokk. “Dang, she’s good,” he muttered.

“That’s… I gotta think about all this… ” Amy said weakly. Vicky put a comforting hand on her shoulder. To Bayleaf’s relief, Amy didn’t flinch away. Maybe, just maybe he hadn’t ruined the two sister’s relationship.

“What else do you know?” Amy demanded. “You’re holding back, I can see it on your face. No. Let him speak. Better to… better to get it all out,” she said.

“Um, anyway… I’m hoping this one will actually help right away. Amy, I can tell you why Carol--your mom-- isn’t... close to you.” He took a deep breath. “Back when New Wave was starting out there was this villain called the Marquis. He had a form of biokinesis. A bone generating power.” At the word ‘biokinesis’ Amy stiffened.

“He was New Wave’s number one enemy, their nemesis—Carol Dallon’s especially. Truth be told,
Mrs. Dallon was probably terrified of him. He defeated them over and over…”

“Till one day they finally got the drop on him, cornered him at his own house. In the battle he was distracted by trying to protect something in a closet from all the collateral damage. The New Wave heroes assumed it was some sort of weapon, so they attacked it-- Marquis threw himself in the way. He was injured, knocked out. They wrapped him up and handed him over to the cops.

“But it wasn’t a superweapon or a secret stash or an escape pod or anything like that. It was a little girl. His daughter.”

Someone gasped.

“New Wave... they felt guilty for taking a father away from a little girl, so after a lot of arguing, the Pelhams and the Dallons decided that they’d adopt her. She ended up with the Dallons.” He looked at her, deeply sorry. “I think that you can figure out the rest.”

“My… my father was the Marquis?” Amy said, She looked a little faint.

“That’s why Carol has so much trouble being close to you,” Bayleaf said, his ears low and his eyes sorrowful. “She can’t help looking at you and seeing the man who terrified the life out of her all those years ago. And she’s become convinced that ‘bad seed’ myth is true, that you’re in danger of becoming a monster like him. You triggering and getting powers-- biokinetic powers-- just made it worse.

“That’s why she’s so distant. That’s why she’s suppresses you using your powers, forced you to limit yourself to healing….even though it’s driving you out of your mind with sheer drudgery.” Several people shot him surprised looks, but he pressed on.

“That’s why she guilts you into doing hours and hours and hours of miracle healing without even the compensation you’d get for running a french fry machine. Don’t give me that look! We pay doctors and surgeons and nurses and even orderlies and candy-strippers get compensation. Why the hell are YOU supposed to be a free goodie dispenser? Even a whore gets paid.” That certainly made several people jerk back. “And… it’s why you’re so afraid of your powers. Carol Dallon trained you to be afraid of them. Day after day for years, in a thousand little ways. Not even aware she was doing it, probably.

“How to fix that? I dunno. Probably years of family counseling. And you’re going to have to confront her about it, and there’ll be a huge ugly explosion and fallout and arguments and drama fit to choke a soap opera. But… at least now you know why. And you can choose for yourselves how to fix it.”

He saw the expression on Vicky’s face. “Don’t believe me still?” he said sadly. “Go on. Call your Mom. Say one sentence to her, just one. Ask her what was in the Marquis’ closet.”

As if hypnotized, Vicky pulled out her cell phone and moved off a short way for privacy. She dialed. “Mom? I’m sorry to call you right now. But this is important. I mean really important.

“What… what was in Marquis’ closet?”

There was a brief silence. Then a loud angry voice could be heard coming over the phone. “Mom, it doesn’t matter who-- Mom, will you stop shouting?” The voice on the other end of the line was now shouting and screaming. “No, Mom, I’m not-- Mom, will you listen to me?? Will you just---” there was a crunch and a tinkle of falling plastic bits. Vicky had crushed the phone in her grip. “Dammit,” she said. Her voice was cracked.
She came back over. Her face was haunted. “Now do you believe me?” Bayleaf said sadly. “Now do you believe that I have ‘knowledge from outside time and space?’ About the Endbringers, the PRT, Cauldron, everything?”

The Dallon sisters were beyond crying, it seemed. They were somewhere between tears and sheer emotional exhaustion. “You know, I was kind of expecting a supervillain with a secret lair full of deathtraps or something,” Vicky joked weakly. “That would have been easier.”

Danny sighed and rubbed his head. “It’s been a day for drama,” he said. “A week for it.”

“Are there any other deep dark horrible family secrets you’d like to drag out of the closet for us?” Vicky asked Bayleaf with a sarcastic smile on her face. She nearly fell out of the air when Bayleaf got a pained look on his face. “MORE??”

“Well, I--” Hemlokk was perched on the arm of his chair: she reached over and clamped both hands around his muzzle. “Mrmph!” he said, rolling his eyes over and giving her an aggrieved look. The laugh everyone got from that broke the building tension. Amy was the last to stop giggling. It was good for her to have that laugh. The poor girl looked like she’d been run over by an emotional truck.

“I’m calling Aunt Sarah,” Vicky said. “--oops. Uh, Amy?” Vicky looked sheepishly at the workbots sweeping up the remains of her phone.

Amy pulled out her own cellphone and handed it over. “Try not to smash this one?” she said. Vicky grabbed it and started dialing. “I ought to carry a bunch of burner phones on a bandolier,” Amy said dryly.

“I get the feeling you two may need a place to crash,” Bayleaf said to Amy sympathetically. “Things are going to be a little mental at both your family’s houses, I suspect. You can stay here if you like--” He snapped his fingers. “Or better yet…” he fished a key out of his pocket. “I have a little one-room walkup still. It gives me a second mail address, which is useful. It’s cramped but it’s someplace to go. Hemlokk and I have to stay here… She still has trouble controlling her shift and the neighbors there might notice a six foot tall werewolf girl coming and going.”

“Why are you helping us out?” Amy asked. “And yeah, I’m a mess cause of what you told us--” she wiped her face. “But I got it together enough to know that you’re trying to help. So why?”

He gave her a lopsided smile. “End of the world in ten years, if we don’t fix things,” he said. “We’d better darn well start helping one another now, if we want to survive.”

“And as to helping out each other,” Parian said. “Perhaps we should get back to why you asked us here in the first place.”

Bayleaf sighed. “Okay, to begin where OUR problem starts,” he said, tilting his head to Hemlokk. “Hemlokk-- Taylor-- is a student at Winslow High. For just about two years, she’s been a victim of a bullying campaign by three students…”

“So you showed up, began tearing through the school yelling for Taylor-- by name,” Amy repeated. Bayleaf nodded, ears drooping.
“You ripped apart her locker, thinking she was inside it—then realized she must be in her gym locker, and rampaged your way to the school gym—just in time for Taylor’s trigger event.”

Bayleaf nodded again. He slouched down in his chair.

“Then you ripped apart the OTHER locker, got her out, and then were seen fleeing the scene with a girl more or less matching Taylor’s description tucked in your arm.”

Bayleaf slouched more. “Eeyup.”

“Straight to the hospital.”

“I made sure to destroy all the records,” Bayleaf said sullenly. “Paper, computer, video tape, everything.”

“I know,” Amy said, a trifle aggrieved. “Poor Gladys...”

“That should have cut off the trail,” Amy went on. “Except for the fact that a female werewolf was seen riding away from the hospital on a reindeer. The same reindeer that paid a visit to the PRT just before Christmas? Handing out gifts made with your particular look and style?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that any reindeer bearing gifts made by myself was seen at the PRT…” He began reciting. Taylor cuffed him on the back of the head. “Ow.”

“The same sort of things he’s been selling on the Boardwalk and at the Market,” Parian said. “Which makes things easier for that part, actually.”

“How?”

“Paperwork,” Parian said simply. “And one thing I know from being a businesswoman, it’s paperwork. That still leaves the lockers, and the school, and a couple other things,...” She saw the look on Bayleaf’s face. She hadn’t known him long but she was already learning to recognize that smirk. “For which, you have a plan,” she finished.

“It depends on a few things. How well do you work in furcraft?”

It was a dark and stormy night. It was a port town; every now and then the night did that. Winslow High was empty, its lights dark and its doors locked with the very best padlocks and bicycle chains welfare-state money could buy. The teachers and principal and staff were at home snug in their beds- or snug in the bottom of a bottle of bourbon-- enjoying their rest after a long hard day of making sure the next generation was just smart enough to repeat whatever it was told, and just dumb enough to think that made it well-educated.

It was just about the time that the street lights surrounding the school succumbed to the distant lightning and flickered out, that a lone pickup drove slowly past, slowed to a halt, then resumed its travels. Someone watching carefully might have noticed five dark figures darting from under the tarp in the back of the truck, over the fence, and up onto the dark unlit roof in that time, though few would have seen and fewer would have cared.
Five figures spread out on the roof. Three took lookout, one at each corner— one of them hovering slightly, one with a scarf that floated about her without any breeze, one with a distinctly jittery step to her walk; one went to examine the access door to the roof; one was at the ventilation ducts, feeding something that bleeped and wriggled its little arms and legs in through the grate.

About fifteen minutes after Bayleaf let his small team of bots loose in the ductwork of the building, he got a beep over his headphone signaling the all clear. That meant the little mechanical saboteurs had found, and disconnected, the wires for the school’s burglar alarms. He waved for the others and they all joined Hemlokk at the rooftop door. She had a few bits of wire between her teeth and a look of disgust on her face as she fiddled with the door lock. There was a click and it swung open. She spat the wires into her hand and tucked them into her fanny pack. “This school has all the security of a can of Pillsbury biscuits,” she said as they crept down the stairwell.

Bayleaf’s throaty chuckle greeted this proclamation. “Okay, Hemlokk, you’re our safecracker and computer gal,” he said. “You take Blackwell’s office. Glory girl and I will hit the gym; Parian, you and Panacea will handle the Trio’s lockers. Once we hit our targets we’ll meet in the cafeteria and go from there. Everyone got it?” Everyone nodded. “Everyone got their cellphones?” Everyone tapped the buttons on their headgear. Bayleaf had dipped into his bankroll (after his sales, his occasional beachcomblings and the loot he had taken from drug dealers and other criminals under cape Asset Forfeiture laws, he had quite a phat stack) and gotten a round of smartphones for everyone— ones cleverly made so that they could be held in hand, worn on a wrist mount, or mounted on the side of the head with a special strap and used like a GoPro camera. They had plain mounted headcams beat hollow.

“Let’s go!”

They split up at the bottom of the stairwell and scattered.

(Earlier that day)

“The point of gaslighting isn’t to just make the target doubt the one thing you don’t want them to see,” Bayleaf said. “That just underlines what you’re trying to hide, like screaming “ignore that man behind the curtain.” The point is to make them doubt their own perceptions, about big things, small things, random events. People are naturally forgetful and inobservant. If you make them AWARE of just how inobservant they are, they’ll start to debate whether what they remember, or what they see NOW, is the correct version.”

(Now)

Hemlokk barely had to try to pick the lock on the office door. She slipped inside and seated herself behind the secretary’s desk and booted up the computer. The password was readily available on a post-it note stuck to the underside of the keyboard. She quickly pulled up Sophia, Madison and Emma’s files. “P1 and P2, I have the numbers,” she whispered into her phone.

“We copy, H, what are they?” said Parian.

“315, 322 and 326, combinations 11-33-22, 14-14-15, and 12-01-21. Move to these lockers instead...” she typed them into her phone for good measure.

“Got it. We’re good.”

Hemlokk took a few moments to switch the trio’s names in the files to the currently unused lockers and combinations.
“H, this is B and GG. Your new gym locker is A-12. Enjoy.”

“Got it,” Hemlokk said, updating the appropriate file.

Hemlokk was tempted to go utterly amuck, but she remembered Bayleaf’s cautionary warning: for this to work, they had to be subtle. She stuck to the plan, and proceeded to play with the calendar program.

Last night she had discovered that this particular calendar program had an annoying hidden feature: it could change weekly schedules on a prescheduled basis. For instance if you had meatloaf scheduled for lunch on Tuesday on the weekly calendar, the program (if told) could consult the hidden master schedule for updates and move meatloaf to lunch on Thursday once a certain amount of time passed.

Hemlokk put in a command line that simply moved all Blackwell’s future appointments up by one hour… then after 24 hours, moved them back. Then to do the reverse in the next cycle. It was programmed to do this every 24 hours for the next two months.

Blackwell lived and died by that schedule. The fact that her own copy would never agree with the one in the school computers would drive her mad.

Hemlokk hummed happily as she contemplated her work. Then she took a few minutes to reverse the order of the drawers in the filing cabinets, and then moved all the items on Blackwell’s desk three inches to the left, and all furniture in Blackwell’s office three inches to the right.

“So why did you come along?” Parian asked Panacea. “You aren’t exactly a front line kind of girl.”

Panacea sighed. “Well, once “GG” heard the plan she was all “I am SO in,” so I figured I’d better come along and keep Collateral Damage Girl from setting off the fire alarms or something.”

Parian giggled at that. The two were preoccupied with breaking into the lockers of the Bitches Three, stealing the contents, and then moving them into new ones, padlocks and all, one floor up or down from their current ones. Madison’s locker had been an especial pain, since the girl had plastered the inside of the door with vomitously cute stickers. Panacea had come up with the slick solution of modifying one of the bacteria on her skin to eat glue. One fingerprint and the entire batch of stickers peeled away in a single sheet. A quick smear of a different bacteria and they had a fresh coating of glue, and stuck it inside the new locker door.

They finished carefully putting everything back in the lockers the way they had been in the old ones (pictures taken with the camera helped.)

In Sophia’s locker though they had one more item to include. A slim, sleek black rectangle that was a perfect duplicate of the first phone Taylor had owned-- and lost.

Almost, because it really only was meant to LOOK like a functional phone. It did only certain things. It was nigh indestructible. It played flashy graphics on its screen if you fiddled with the buttons. It played Taylor’s favorite ringtone. Most importantly was the third feature. Azeroth had a certain “lost mail” spell adventurers would cast it on items they didn’t have the time or room to carry. The object would disappear into the twisting nether. After a certain amount of time, the object would pop out of
the twisting nether and appear in the caster’s mailbox, ready to be claimed. Bayleaf had managed to kludge together a similar spell, almost from first principles, and cast it on the phone. Now, whenever it was lost-- or hidden, or thrown away-- it would reappear a random time later, somewhere near or on the owner’s person, and begin playing a cheery ring tune (Taylor’s favorite, coincidentally) as loudly as it could. The owner being whoever first picked it up after it was activated.

Parian put it on the top shelf of Sophia’s locker and activated it.

“What about you?” Panacea asked.

Parian couldn’t help giggling again. “I grew up on a steady diet of eighties teen movies,” she confessed. “Better off Dead, One Crazy Summer, Revenge of the Nerds, The Breakfast Club, Sixteen Candles--- I’ve ALWAYS wanted to be involved in a wacky teenage underdog hijinks plan.”

Bayleaf and Glory Girl quickly made their way to the gymnasium and to the girl’s locker room. Not quickly enough, in Bayleaf’s opinion: Glory Girl apparently felt the urge to comment-- aloud-- on anything and everything she saw in Winslow.

“Ehr. Ma. Gerd. I cannot believe you have to go to school in a DUMP like this!” she said for the sixth time in ten minutes. She looked around in horror at the graffiti on the stained walls. Lord only knew what she would have thought if she’d ever seen the student body.

“Neither can we,” he muttered. They found the locker quickly enough. It was still torn open, and stained from its former vile contents. There were police “do not cross” tapes still up. Apparently the PRT had been here, going over everything with their little tricorders or whatever they used at Trigger sites. Glory Girl made a gagging noise as she stared at the locker.

“They filled it full of--?” she said.

Bayleaf nodded. “At least they picked up the loose stuff.”

“And then locked her inside--?”

She hovered there, staring for a long minute. “People suck,” she said finally.

“They certainly can,” Bayleaf said. He tore the tapes down. “Let’s get to work.”

Some rough work with a mop and a bucket of cleaner pilfered from a janitor’s closet cleaned up the worst of the stains. Then without ceremony Glory Girl twisted off the hex nuts holding the locker in place and pulled it out of its slot. With a loud screeching and crunching she crushed the desecrated locker into a wadded-up ball.

Bayleaf glared at her till she had finished making her racket. “‘Stealth’ is just a vocabulary word for you, isn’t it,” he said.

“Um, oops?”

Bayleaf sighed and pulled what appeared to be a miniature locker out of his haversack. Brockton
Bay did have a few more schools that had been shut down and abandoned ages ago as city funding dwindled; raiding one for a few things, like, say, a couple of lockers sufficiently battered and rusty to match the rest of Winslow’s décor was simplicity itself. He set the shrunken steel box on the floor and used the Gnomish shrink ray to unshrink it to its proper size. A bit of work putting the hex nuts back on and putting the locker number in place, and it was done. “H, this is B,” he said over the phones. “Did you switch gym locker numbers yet?”

“Oops.” there was a clattering of keys. “My old number right? Right. Done.” Bayleaf was already sifting through the contents of the coach’s office. He found the locker assignment sheet and meticulously changed the number for Taylor Hebert to the empty locker she now claimed.

“What do I do with this?” Glory Girl said, tapping the mashed locker with her foot. Bayleaf gave her a look, and pointed the shrink ray at it.

Smeeerp.

He pocketed the marble-sized lump of metal. “Come on, we gotta go do Taylor’s school locker next...”

Willoughby yawned and shuffled down the hall of the school, flashlight beam wobbling around the floor. Late night guard duty. At a school. What a waste of money and time. Well, if they wanted to pay him time and a half to spend all night alternating between walks around the school and napping in front of the camera monitors, fine by him.

The security cameras were out again. Black and white pieces of crap, fifteen years old if they were a day, all it took was a little rumbler rolling in off the water and they conked out. Eh, whatever.

He came around the next corner and found himself facing two figures in black. One was a girl, and was hovering off the ground. The other was a giant male wolf man, hunched over one of the lockers with a screwdriver. They both froze and stared at him with wide eyes.

Willoughby squinted. “….Adrian? That you again?”

“….Uh. Yeah.”

“Cape stuff again, I’m guessin’.”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“….You didn’t break nuthin’, did ya?” Willoughby said, with just a hint of suspicion. No sense letting these young whippersnappers get cocky.

“No sir. In fact we fixed a couple of things.”

“Oh. Well, all right then. Be sure and lock the door behind you when you leave.”

“Yessir.”

“See you later.” Willoughby walked off.
Glory Girl and Bayleaf looked at each other. A silent consensus was reached; they tightened the last screw, grabbed their tools and bolted.

The day was proving vexatious for Principal Blackwell. Nothing was going right. She’d had several brief meetings scheduled today, but every one of them had been an hour late. At least according to the times she remembered her secretary noting down… yet three appointments in a row showed up at the wrong time, throwing everything off the rails. They of course had gotten angry with her, claiming that they were here at the times she had said, but that was nonsense.

Then she’d gone and checked the schedule on her computer. They were all wrong. Then she’d checked the secretary’s computer. Then she’d checked her own again, and the times were what she recalled.

She was having fits finding anything in her own office too. She could have sworn the A through D files were at top, but instead they were at the bottom. She didn’t remember switching them, but who else would?

What was most annoying was that she kept barking her shins on everything for some reason. And she kept forgetting where things were on her desk. She’d reach over for her pen or her coffee cup and miss it entirely two or three times before she looked up and saw where it really was.

She wasn’t still hung over was she?

There was a knock on the door. “Enter!” She barked. When it opened she nearly swallowed her tongue. Standing in the doorway was someone she never expected to see darken it ever again. “What-- What are you doing here?” she said, half rising out of her chair.

“Oh, I missed yesterday and I was told I had to give you this written excuse,” he said, giving her the fakest puzzled look she’d ever seen. “I had a plumbing leak at my apartment and I had to stand around all day watching to make sure the plumber didn’t steal the toilet, or something.” He gave her a half grin, as if he thought it funny. “Had the plumber and the landlord sign the bill.”

Both signatures were from his landlord, a fellow Bayleaf had come to call “Mister LiesForBucks” in his head. The guy was an ex-con with an eclectic mix of less than legal but highly useful skills, as well as a highly flexible set of ethics. He was perfectly willing to do a little forgery for a fast fifty. (Ironically he also did a little plumbing on the side, so the receipt was technically legit.)

She gaped at him like an outraged flounder. “I-- you and the Taylor Hebert girl-- the day before--” Bayleaf could guess the source of her momentary tourettes; the Unwritten Rules again. The Unwritten Rules meant she couldn’t just scream for security and accuse him of being a Cape, not unless she had visible evidence of him being a cape right in front of her. As in Superman’s-open-shirt kind of immediate and visible. Pouncing on an underage Cape and forcing them to unmask was a one way ticket to trouble town.

“Taylor? What about Taylor?” Adrian frowned and looked out the door. “Taylor, did something happen yesterday?”

Taylor Hebert’s head popped around the doorframe. “What? No, I had to take a half day,” she said.
“Food poisoning.” She held up a paper. “I’ve got my doctor’s excuse...”

“Jimmy Hoffa Loaf, huh.” he said.

Taylor shook her head. “Chipped Beef on Toast.”

“Ahh, good old Troll Snot on a Shingle...” Adrian said, as if reminiscing fondly. “Yum yum.”

Taylor let out a brief snort of laughter.

“We have footage of you two!” Principal Blackwell announced triumphantly, suddenly remembering the security cameras.

At that precise moment Willoughby stuck his head in. “Miss Blackwell, I finished erasing and recycling the security tapes,” he said. “Could we please get some new ones? These things’re older than Methusaleh...”

“I never told you to do that!” Blackwell said, turning a little green. The PRT investigators were going to be furious when they came back. “I told you to hold onto the week’s tapes for the PRT--”

“That’s not what it says on the memo I got,” Willoughby said, looking down at a printout sheet in his hand.

It was the return of Flounder Woman. “Uh,” Adrian said. “Taylor and I got classes; we’ll just leave our notes here with the secretary...?” The two students dropped their notes on the counter and fled.

What the hell had happened?

After a few moment’s gasping like a dying trout, Blackwell gave up and picked up the notes. Then turned and barked her @#$^@ shins AGAIN.

The Terrible Trio were many things, most of them unprintable. But one thing they had never been before was jittery. The day before yesterday, everything had been going great. They’d stuffed that little toad Hebert into her gym locker, locked her in and made a break for it. Clean getaway.

Then things had gone wrong, fast. Sophia had stopped and started swearing. “The phone!” she said, and gone racing back. They’d come back and seen the faint light of the glowscreen through the slots on the door. “You idiots, she’s got the phone in there with her!” Sophia had snarled, and she’d obviously panicked because she’d phased out and reached through the door to grab the phone, right in front of Madison. It had been a serious “oh crap” moment; Emma knew Sophia was Shadow Stalker, but Madison didn’t. Hadn’t. This was epic trouble; one of the things Sophia had pounded into Emma’s head was that you could never ever know for sure if someone would blab, and for all Madison was brilliant at lying her cute little face off to teachers, she was a gossip and a half. Maddie could make all SORTS of trouble for the Trio just by being her bubble-brained self.

Sophia had grabbed the phone and they’d bolted. Maddie had been yammering and stammering OMG you’re a cape, you’re shadow stalker how long have you known Emma, and Sophia had been snapping at her to SHUT UP you little idiot, when disaster two had struck. Sophia had been striding
along in those big long legged strides of hers trying to get as much distance from the gym as possible when suddenly she’d stumbled and faceplanted, going straight down like a ragdoll.

Madison let out a little shriek, and for an instant Emma thought that Sophia had stroked out or had an aneurysm or something. But before she could move to check on the athletic black girl, Sophia had woken up and scrambled to her feet, holding her head and swearing. “What was that?” Emma asked.

“That was--” Sophia’s eyes went round. “That was a Trigger Event,” she hissed.

Emma’s head jerked back. Sophia couldn’t mean she’d had a-- then she remembered. It was one of those weird Cape things Sophia had told her about; When someone had a trigger event, every nearby Cape got knocked out for a second.

And there was only one person in the school who could possibly be having a Trigger Event right now--

“Oh,” she said. “Oh son of a biscuit eater.”

“What’s going on?” Madison pleaded.

“Run,” Sophia said. For the first time since she’d known her Emma heard FEAR in her voice. “We gotta get out of here now, just RUN--”

None of them got to run a step. Before they could even react a werewolf-- eight feet tall, larger than life, dressed in nothing but the over-stretched rags of a sweatsuit, went tearing past them. In its arms, Emma saw a girl: a girl covered in filth and writhing in pain, with a flowing mane of black curls she would have known anywhere…

And then… nothing. A van of PRT field agents had shown up, gone crawling all over the girl’s locker room, taken photos and readings of the locker, Taylor’s school locker, the monster had ripped open first, taped everything up with yellow police lines and then left.

Taylor Hebert had Triggered. Taylor Hebert had TRIGGERED. The one person in the world who had every reason to hate their guts and to want to rip those guts OUT with her bare fingers was a Cape now. And as if that wasn’t enough, the single most dangerous Rogue in Brockton Bay was her boyfriend.

And nobody knew where they were.

The three of them had waited all that day, and the next, for the bomb to drop. Nothing. It was telling on them. Sophia was keyed up like an agitated jungle cat, snarling and lashing out at everything and everyone. Madison was screaming and jumping and shadows.

And Emma? Emma felt like someone on Death Row.

Emma had once been Taylor Hebert’s best friend. She and Taylor had grown up together. But then during the summer after Taylor’s mother had died, Taylor had gone off to camp to try and get away from her memories, leaving Emma alone.

Then Emma and her father had been carjacked by a bunch of ABB initiates who decided the way to earn their colors was to carve up a pretty white girl’s face. They’d dragged her from the car, pinned her against the door, and had argued back and forth whether to cut off her nose or put out her eye… She’d fought back-- and Shadow Stalker had swooped in from above and saved her.
Then Shadow Stalker had unmasked to her, told her she was strong, become her friend. And when Taylor returned, all Emma could see was weakness. She hated her for that, for being weak… for reminding Emma that she’d been weak once too.

So, she betrayed her best friend, and became her worst enemy. Emma had turned the first two years of high school into hell for Taylor, punishing her for her weakness. Only now when it was too late was she realizing that Taylor was stronger than Emma had ever been, because Emma had done things to Taylor that, had they been done to herself, would have shattered her… and Taylor never broke.

Until now. And wondering what had been made out of Taylor when the pieces came back together was absolutely terrifying.

Today was also proving confusing. They couldn’t get into their lockers. When they’d gone and complained at the office, the secretary had pulled up the file and confirmed their, quote, “actual” locker numbers. They had argued till they were blue in the face that the numbers were wrong, that they’d had their current lockers ALL YEAR-- but the block-faced woman behind the counter had stubbornly insisted that they were on record with different lockers. Fuming, they had returned to the hallway where their “correct” lockers stood-- and the combinations worked. Everything was inside; even the decorations Madison had put up inside hers. It was absolutely bizarre.

“Okay, what. The heck,” Sophia said. She stared into the depths of her locker as if she expected to threaten answers out of it. Then she noticed the cellphone sitting in the upper compartment of the locker. Mesmerized, she reached out and picked it up-- and nearly dropped it when it began playing a cheery little ringtone. *Dweedle deedle dee.*

She tried to answer it. She tried to hang up. She tried to turn it off. It was only when she was about ready to start banging the thing on the wall that she noticed the inch high letters scrolling on the screen:

**PROPERTY OF TAYLOR HEBERT**

Hastily she did the only thing she could think of: she stuck her hand through the wall and dropped it down inside. She sighed in relief as the tinny jingle disappeared down inside the hollow spaces of the building’s structure. “Okay, what the hell is going on??” she demanded.

Emma had a stroke of genius… or maybe paranoia. “Come on,” she said, taking off at a fast walk.

“Where are you going?” Madison asked.

“This isn’t the only locker we need to check on.” Emma said over her shoulder. It was the only explanation she needed to make; the other two hustled after her. They got down to the hall where Hebert’s locker was, turned the corner and nearly had triple coronaries.

Standing there in front of her perfectly whole and undamaged locker was Taylor Hebert. She was dressed in her usual outfit; an oversized hoodie big enough to hide in, jeans and junk-brand sneakers, camouflage for social cowards. Her hood was down and her hair was trailing down her back. There wasn’t a mark on her.

Madison screamed. Taylor nearly jumped out of her skin. She slammed her locker door and spun around. “WAAH?… You three?” Her face dropped into a neutral, defensive mask and she glowered at them through her enormous glasses.

There was a loud thump. Madison had fainted. Neither Emma nor Sophia had bothered to try and
catch her; they were too busy shifting their stares back and forth from Taylor to her locker and back. Taylor started backing up, her eyes flicking back and forth between them and their unconscious friend on the floor. “Look, I don’t know what you three are up to but I’m not putting up with it today,” she threatened. “Touch my stuff this time and I’ll get Blackwell on you if I have to camp out in her office to do it. I mean it--” she beat a hasty retreat around the corner.

As soon as she was out of sight, Sophia was standing in front of the locker, patting the door, looking for flaws beyond the usual chipped paint and rust. “This thing was trashed, I saw it,” she muttered. “It looked like Hookwolf had got mad at it.”

Madison sat up. “Wha happened?” she whined.

“You fainted, Maddie,” Emma said.

“Why does my head hurt?” Madison said, clutching her head where it had hit the floor.

“Probably because hollow things bruise easier,” Sophia snarked. “I’m gonna take a look--” She went shadowy and started to stick her face through the door to look inside.

FZZT.

Sophia went stiff and toppled backward, falling flat on her back. Her hair was singed.

“You Sophie?!” Emma said in alarm, kneeling beside her.

Sophia’s eyes opened. “...Again?” she said plaintively.

Emma got up and went to Taylor’s locker. She slipped a strip of metal out of her purse and fiddled with the lock; it snapped open in a moment. “How’d you do that?” Madison blurted.

“Oh please,” Emma scoffed. “Watch a Youtube video already, Mads.” She pulled the door open. It wasn’t hard to figure out what happened. The inside of the locker door was covered with festive Christmas wrapping paper featuring dancing snowmen and the words “HAPPY HOLIDAYS.”Trimming the door was a string of battery powered Christmas tree lights. Several of the bulbs at about face height were blackened and charred.

Madison peered in over her shoulder. “What kind of lame-o decorates their locker like this?” Emma just stared at her. “Whaaaat?”

*Dweedle deedle dee.*

Sophia’s bookbag began playing a cheery ringtone. All three of them froze and looked at it. Sophia sat up (twitching a bit from her little jolt earlier) and opened the bag. Inside was a familiar glossy black rectangle with a glowing screen scrolling the words

**THIS PHONE IS PROPERTY OF**

“What the hell?” Sophia jammed it into the floor this time. They all stared at the spot in the floor where the phone had disappeared for a moment as if they expected it to reemerge. Sophia shook herself. “Let’s get going, I don’t wanna deal with any crap from any of the teachers,” she said.

“Yeahh….,” Emma muttered. They beat a hasty retreat down the corridor.
The PRT agents who arrived after lunch for their followup were not happy. Not happy in the least. The security tapes they had requested had been “routinely” erased. The school Principal was of a mind to be a pain as well, quibbling with them over being “an hour late,” and taking an eternity to shuffle through her files to find the information they’d requested on the students who owned the lockers. Which turned out to have the wrong information to boot.

Then they’d gone to examine the locker of one “Taylor Hebert” that the Principal claimed the attacking Cape had ripped open. It was in pristine condition… not as if it had been repaired but as if it had never been damaged. The lead PRT agent was starting to get a headache; he had photographs from the agents on the scene showing the locker ripped apart like a sardine can. The gym locker was the same way-- after he got done reading the dithering Principal the riot act on letting anyone into that changing room.

Then the “abducted” student and her “suspected abductor” turned out to both be in the school, taking their regular classes. Questioning the students and staff was proving a futile exercise too. While a number of students claimed to be eyewitnesses of the Trigger, or of the wolf-man tearing through the school with a girl in his arms, the stories were typically erratic… and while the event took place before noon, several of the teachers absentely recalled that Taylor Hebert had been in school till well after lunch and had come down with a case of food poisoning. One student told how “Taylor’s Boyfriend” had called her and asked her to pick up class assignments for them both, since they were both missing school….

Forget the security guard’s testimony. He was about a thousand years old and had a memory like an old LP-- full of scratches, skips and a tendency to jump from one part of the record to another if you bumped it too hard. If he had witnessed an actual Trigger event, then he’d filed the memory somewhere back in a mental room dating to the roaring Twenties.

They took one last shot; they sent in their female member to examine the gym locker and to confront the Hebert girl and maybe get some answers. Agent Jones marched into the locker room just as the girls were suiting up for class. “Miss Taylor Hebert,” she said formally.

A bespectacled girl peeked from the far back corner of the locker rows. She was seated on a bench, tying her sneakers. “Here?” she said timidly.

Agent Jones looked over the locker the Trigger event supposedly took place. Inwardly she was seething; the entire room was supposed to have been cordoned off and untouched, and here were teenage girls all over the place, throwing their sweaty clothes around… though as for preserving evidence, there didn’t seem to be any. The ruined, filth coated locker the first response crew had photographed and given the once over was now indistinguishable from the lockers all around it. She tapped it with her baton. “Miss Hebert, is this your gym locker?” she said.

The girl looked baffled. “No, my locker is here.” She pointed to the open locker she was seated in front of and spoke slowly, as if explaining something to someone simple. “Where I’m sitting. And my clothes are.”

Agent Jones pressed her lips together and sighed through her nose. Teenagers: sarcastic little bastards. “Was it yours two days ago, then?”

“No, I’m on the assigned chart for A-12, not A-1,” Taylor said. “It’s on the permanent chart, ask--Coach!” she shouted over her shoulder. “What locker was I assigned? The PRT lady wants to
The girls’ coach could be heard grumbling and digging through her files. “A-12, as you well know, Hebert,” she said. “It’s been that way for years.”

“Is that correct?” Jones asked the other girls in the room. Fortune was smiling on the Gaslighting team: few of the girls had been present the day of the locker incident, and none in the locker room when it happened. And like any other normal person, they didn’t waste time paying attention to what lockers other people had. The general response to the question was traded looks and shrugs.

“But according to the report the first agents filed two days ag….” Jones closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. “Forget it. Obviously a mistake.”

“Officer Jones?” Taylor asked, her brow creased. “Two days? Why did you wait so long to come back and investigate?”

“Because everyone is over at First General going out of their minds trying to figure out what the hell happened there,” Jones said tersely. “That and they’re running around the Twin Pines mall—what’s left of it—figuring out what happened THERE. Place turned into a freaking war zone and nobody noticed till it was halfway over. OR they’re running around to the hospitals, freaking out because some biotinker has been planting “healing trees” in the hospital greenery… In short this week has been a complete bughouse.” She heaved a sigh. “Anyway—thank you for your time.” She turned around and marched out of the locker room.

A moment later Sophia and her backup duet came in. “Fashionably late again, Hess?” the coach barked. “I think we’ll be starting your day with a few extra laps on the track, then. You too, Clements, Barnes.” Madison and Emma commenced whining. Sophia didn’t even seem to hear her. She was staring at the A-1 locker with a barely suppressed expression of disbelief. “Hess! Did you hear me?” the coach barked again.

“But…” Sophia waved her hand at the A-1 locker. “How—”

“I don’t know what your problem is today, Hess, but you’d better put a hustle on, or I’ll double the penalty laps till you do!”

_Dweedle deedle dee._

Sophia stared at her bookbag like a live snake had crawled out of it. “Answer it already Hess! Then turn it off!” The girl’s coach had never been a pleasant woman and she was rapidly building up a head of steam.

_Dweedle deedle dee._

“One of the other girls hissed. Sophia flipped open her backpack; there was the cellphone yet again. To the utter mystification of her classmates she picked up the phone, walked to the nearest window, opened the window and threw the phone out with all the savage fury she could muster. She slammed the window shut and stomped off to her locker, radiating an unspoken threat of death to anyone who questioned her actions.

Taylor crossed her fingers. Blackwell was confused. The school staff was confused. The Trio was confused. The PRT seemed confused.

Now all that was left to wrap up Operation Gaslight was the last move, by Bayleaf and Parian.
Adrian set up his pushcart in his rented spot at the Market, along with a little infrared heater, and settled in. The Lord’s Street Market may have been seasonal due to its open-air setup, but even in the depths of winter there were a few diehard holdouts who kept their little stalls open and their cash registers ringing. He had just started the battery powered toys on their repetitive little dance routine when the rumble of two motorcycle engines filled the air. Armsmaster and Miss Militia came rolling in. They parked, dismounted, and came striding over with the air of someone with serious business to deal with.

Correction, Miss Militia came striding over with the air of someone on serious business. Armsmaster came striding over with the air of a smug small town cop in a 1980s movie who thought he was going to teach someone a lesson or three about AUTHORITY. “Mister Adrian Smith?” he said. Aaaaand there was the cambot, swooping around to get a wide angle shot of all three of them with Armsmaster in the foreground.

“That’s me,” Adrian said with a hesitant smile. “Something I can do for you two?”

“We have some questions for you concerning your possible associations with the Rogue Cape known as Skinwalker,” Armsmaster said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Adrian’s smile froze. He got up from his folding chair and motioned them over to the side, stiffly. “Can I have a word with you two?” Armsmaster reluctantly moved to follow while Miss Militia stood back and kept watch, his camera hovering close by. “Could you leave the camera somewhere else?” Adrian added impatiently. “I don’t appreciate the invasion of privacy.”

“The cambot is for legal and investigative purposes and contains a live feed to--”

“Fine, have it your way.” Adrian was suddenly right in Armsmaster’s face. “Are you trying to get me killed, you idiot?”

Armsmaster barely resisted the impulse to put the boy in an arm-bar. Or rather his armor did: he’d expanded on his social interaction “cheat sheet” program to warn him of serious possible faux pas. His HUD flashed a red warning against it at the last second that putting an unarmed civilian in a submission hold would look rather bad to anyone watching at home. “I am trying to conduct an investigation into the actions of a Rogue Cape--” he said sternly.

“And did you stop to think that maybe tromping up to me out in public, bellowing like a foghorn about how you want to know how I know this Skinwalker guy, might get someone’s attention, you retarded robocop?” Adrian snarled. “There are skinheads, junkies and ABB punks out there looking for this guy, looking for a little payback-- and you’re out here practically putting a spotlight on me, fingering me as being tied to him!”

“You’re not in any danger if you speak to us or the PRT,” Miss Militia interjected from where she was standing.

Adrian snorted. “Why, because all the rapists and killers and sociopaths in Brockton Bay took a Boy Scout oath?” he said to her. “I’ve already had people wearing gang colors sniffing around, asking for answers, flexing their muscle if I say no… Those Unwritten Rules of yours work great-- if you’re a Cape. It’s a little different down here on the street!”

Adrian ran his fingers through his hair, making it stand on end. “Look, I don’t know the guy. I just
take orders from him.”


Adrian looked disgusted. “Mail orders, you dope. He likes my stuff. Every now and then he puts in an order for like a dozen of my toy tonks or my little robot toys… sometimes just for the cases. I’m guessing once he gets ‘em he stuffs his Tinker tech stuff inside them. Sometimes he even has some stuff he lets me sell for him on consignment, little bits and bobs and stuff, jewelry, desk trinkets, things like that. Here, look...” He went back to his pushcart and opened up the inside. A cash box and papers were inside. He pulled a bill of sale out and handed it to them. It was an order for twenty alarm-o-bot piggy banks. “He pays by cash, has a third party pick up his completed stuff or drop off stuff to sell, and the most I see of him is the signature at the bottom of the paper. Strictly business, and only so much of that.”

Armsmaster took the receipt and looked at it. It was amazing how much sour disappointment he could project with just a bearded chin. “We’re sorry about disturbing you then,” he said stiffly. “If we could possibly have access to any record--”

Miss Militia stepped between them, putting up a hand to silence Armsmaster. “We apologize,” she said. “But we are investigating a separate but parallel incident from a few days ago, and are trying to follow all leads.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get that,” Adrian said, untensing a little.

“We’d appreciate it if you stayed in contact with the PRT or its representatives,” Armsmaster said. The unspoken You’d Better hung in the air. “I think we’re through here for the moment--” he reached over to stuff the paper back into the depths of the pushcart’s compartment.

“No wait, DON’T--!”

“BUTTHEAD DETECTED, BUTTHEAD DETECTED!”

A klaxon and red alert light went off, and with a loud FOOMP Armsmaster’s entire right side was doused in foam. He stood there, croggled, as Obie came waddling out of the depths of the pushcart, lights flashing and siren wailing.

“BUTTHEAD DETECTED ATTEMPTING TO STEAL FROM THE CART! CALL THE AUTHORITIES! BUTTHEAD DETECTED!!”

“Halt! Stop! Deactivate! Stand down!” Adrian yelled. The alarmbot finally stopped shouting and stood still…. Its strobe kept turning at low level, all the same. Adrian stood there with his hands in his face. “He, uh, heard I was having trouble with threats and thieves,” he tried to explain. “So he rebuilt this one to… well. Yeah. This.”

Armsmaster was standing with his arms akimbo, blobs of foam all over him, sticky strands running from his hands to his chest to his arms and down to his legs and… essentially everywhere. He looked like he’d been dunked in marshmallow filling. “Yeah, I think Skinwalker was trying to make his own version of containment foam,” Adrian went on. “It isn’t quite… um. Yeah. It washes off with soap, so if you ride through a car wash it should--”

Miss Militia made no move to assist. She was laughing too hard. She was draped over the back of her Harley, laughing so hard she was crying.

A squawk came over the CB style radio on her bike. (She kept it even though she had the standard issue earbud. She felt having bulletins come in over a CB on occasion gave her a more authoritative
impression, and it also made it easier to make excuses for bailing out suddenly.) “This is Kid Win, Shadowstalker and Aegis reporting in. We have spotted Skinwalker, over.”

Miss Militia grabbed the mike (what’s the point of having toys if you don’t play with them?) and responded. “Kid Win this is Miss Militia, please repeat?”

“I repeat, we have Skinwalker in line of sight. He and another cape are engaging some criminals attempting a convenience store robbery, over. One of the criminals appears to be a cape with-- some form of blasting power, electrical sparks he can control….Shall we assist?”

“No, remain in position and observe, we will join you shortly.” She suppressed a sigh; she could already imagine Shadow Stalker throwing a hissy over being kept out of the ‘action.’ She hopped on her bike and kickstarted it. She switched to her earbud. “Can you give us an ID on the second cape?”

Armsmaster was stickily mounting his own vehicle.

“No, but-- it looks like a female version of Skinwalker,” Aegis replied over the line.

“Repeat?”

“A female version of Skinwalker,” Aegis said. “A werewolf girl.”

“With a slammin’ silhouette,” she heard Kid Win remark. “Oh crap, did I say that over the--”

“You horny nerd” came over the commlink in Shadow Stalker’s voice.

“We’re on our way,” Armsmaster cut in. His own engine thrummed to life. The two of them roared off down the street.

It was only two or three blocks over, but even in that short time it was all over but the shouting. The first two crooks were down and being guarded by the female werewolf, while the male--Skinwalker-- had just closed range with the Blaster. Armsmaster and Miss Militia arrived just in time to see Skinwalker give the spark-flinging Blaster a jabbing thrust to the chin with his staff, knocking him cold. The worgen moved quickly, zip-tying the downed criminal by the hands and feet.

“Skinwalker!” Armsmaster shouted, waving a hand to signal him. The wolf-man looked up and regarded him with glistening yellow eyes. Then before either Protectorate cape or the Wards on the nearby roof could react, they leapt up to the side of the building and climbed their way up, swift as geckos, their claws leaving little chips in the stone facade. They dove up over the edge and onto the roof and disappeared.

Aegis and Kid Win glided down to join them. “Should we follow?” Aegis asked.

“They’re long gone by now,” Armsmaster said in disgust. He oozed off his bike. “Let’s settle for securing these perps.”

“Man, I kinda wanted to talk with Skinwalker,” Kid Win said. “I can get it if he doesn’t want to join the Protectorate, but why doesn’t he want to at least hang with us?”

The sneer in Shadow Stalker’s voice was deep and cutting. “Cause he knows we’d see he wasn’t half as hot as he thinks he is if he did,” she said.

“Because he has priorities,” Miss Militia corrected. She was crouched over the prostrate crooks. When she stood up she had a piece of paper in her hand, with writing in big block letters:

MAYBE AFTER YOU’VE CLEANED HOUSE
“...You’re right,” Armsmaster said. “Priorities. Before we spend any more effort chasing Skinwalker down, we need to concentrate on getting the fox out of our own henhouse. Everything else gets put aside. We focus on Coil.”

He stood there, hands on hips, dripping slightly. “Uhh,” Kid Win muttered to Miss Militia. “Is there a reason Armsmaster is covered in Oreo filling?”

Breedle-deedle-dee.

“AAAAARGH!”

“Honestly,” Parian said. “I only intended to make them leap a few rooftops. The store robbery was just blind coincidence!” She was holding a bottle of pop and a slice of pizza and sitting in one of the Comfy Chairs in the Lost Workshop. Next to her on a couple of folding chairs were two neatly folded stacks of cloth, leather, and fake fur… the deflated and inert cloth “puppets” she had animated to imitate Bayleaf and Hemlokk.

“Well it certainly worked,” Bayleaf said. “I’ve never seen anyone look as confused as Armsmaster did when that report was called in.” He chuckled and bit into his slice of pepperoni. “Of course that could just have been getting sprayed with that foam...”

“The PRT stopped by the Dockworker’s Association offices,” Danny said. “They were seriously confused to find out I had spent the last day and a half at home tending my sick daughter.”

Aisha cackled. “Did the teachers really insist they’d seen you, Taylor?” she said. “All ‘cause I picked up your homework and dropped a bug in their ear? Dang, I may be a black girl but I’m queen of the Snow Job!” She did a little victory dance in her seat.

There had been a bit of uncertainty about introducing the non-cape girl to the circle. But Bayleaf had insisted, and had pointed out the girl had helped them pull off Operation Gaslight with such success. So she had been welcomed in. “And Blackwell. What did you DO to her, girl?” the ADD-typical girl said to Hemlokk. “She’s spent the last two, three days trippin’ over things and just looking confused as hell.”

“Nothing much,” Hemlokk said smugly. “I just moved everything in her office about three inches to the left...”

“Oh, that old gag,” Danny chuckled.

“And everything on her desk three inches to the right.”

“Ooh, nice added twist,” Danny saluted.

“Aaaaaand I may have stopped by Gladly’s classroom and done a little of the same to him,” she said with fake innocence.

“Yes, but will anybody notice?” Aisha quipped. “That man has been lost at sea since the Carter Administration.”
“Well, everybody,” Bayleaf said. He raised his pop bottle in a toast. “Blackwell is confused, the school staff is confused, and the PRT is confused. I’d say Operation Gaslight has been a roaring success!” Everyone applauded.

“Hear Hear!”

“Now comes the hard part.” Bayleaf was suddenly serious. “This was just the first block of the Jenga tower. Shadow Stalker has to be dealt with. She’s a lot more dangerous than anyone thinks. Enough that Cauldron was willing to put a psychopath on a team of teen Capes because they thought her powers might be “useful.” That alone is enough to send chills down my back. So she has got to GO.”

“I haven’t told any of you this yet, but part of the reason I brought Aisha in is because her big brother is Grue, leader of the Undersiders.” There was a mild commotion at this. “He’s being played for a stooge and a fool. The Undersiders are on Coil’s payroll and don’t know it-- and the one who does know, Tattletale, can’t do anything about it because Coil has a gun to her head. They have got to be pulled out of Coil’s grasp.

Then Coil has to be dealt with. Permanently. If that is fumbled we face Echidna. If THAT gets fumbled, the Cauldronborn”-- Bayleaf’s name for the heroes, villains and rogues that had been dosed with Cauldron’s potions-- “will go off the rails. If that happens, our chances against the Endbringers drop through the floor. If we handle the Endbringer attack poorly, the Slaughterhouse Nine will find Brockton Bay a cakewalk…. And if we don’t deal decisively with the Nine, especially with Jack Slash-- the end of the world gets triggered DECADES early, when none of us are prepared for it.”

Aisha spoke for them all. “So what kind of chance do we have?” She said, fidgeting with her fingers in her lap. For once she looked serious.

“Better than you think. Parian, my sources tell me that your power-- your ‘true use’ of your power-- makes you an effective threat against Behemoth. I don’t know what it is, and neither do they. But it exists. If you can figure it out.” This statement startled the dressmaker so severely that she nearly dropped her plate. “Aisha, your brother’s darkness powers stop all forms of light, including radiation. That makes him another one effective against Behemoth.

“Panacea, I have a plan that might, just might, enable you and me together to cure Echidna and get the Travelers out from under Coil’s control. Trickster is one of Simurgh’s TykeBomb--” this made several more people nearly drop their plates or drinks. “But there may be a way to fix that as well.

“Vicky, in the other timeline your forcefield actually stood up to a blow from Scion.”

“Holy carp.” Glory Girl muttered.

“I know of at least two Capes who are able to get past the Endbringer’s invulnerability and actually kill them with a well-placed shot, if they know about it and where to aim. And in every reality, Scion has an Achilles heel.. we just have to find out what it is. For now, that means buying as much time as we can, and removing as many of the nasty, small-potatoes players from the board that will hinder us.”

“You mean ‘small potatoes’ like Jack Slash and the Nine?” Amy asked sarcastically.

“Amy, the only reason the Nine persist is because Cauldron has been keeping them alive. They’re all the same wet meat as the rest of us. Mannequin is just a brain in a box. Shatterbird is a sniper’s wet dream-- that cloud of glass she flies around in just makes her that much easier to put in crosshairs. Siberian isn’t invulnerable, she's a projection: kill the fat little man in the white van following her
around and she disappears in a puff of nothing. Big bad scary Jack Slash is a baseline human who can project cutting edges and can mentally “stab” at your insecurities. Bonesaw’s just a little girl—she’s a biological horror but that’s nothing a hot enough flamethrower or blast of sterilizing radiation can’t cope with. In biology versus immolation, biology loses. Even Crawler could be eliminated by a powerful enough incendiary.

"Haven’t you wondered why the US government doesn’t just drop a MOAB down Jack Slash’s shorts and call it a day? Because Cauldron, in their infinite wisdom—” here his snort turned into a snarl—“has decreed that the monstrous suffering of tens of thousands of innocents is less important than how useful Jack Slash and his playmates MIGHT be for their Master Plan of ‘Punch the Space God In the Face.’"

“Our enemies are NOT omnipotent, they are NOT invincible. They’re… nasty little brats playing at being God, who think they can’t be touched,” Bayleaf said. He couldn’t help but think of Gray Boy-- the vicious little psychopath who’d trap people he tortured in bubbles of time ‘for all eternity’ and was effectively immortal and indestructible because his shard instantly repaired any damage by “rebooting” him from the past. He’d died all the same. His victims still suffered in their time traps; chalk up another thing on the “to do” list.

He was going to have to visit Labyrinth, see if she could take him on a scavenger hunt for shards of Time… he shook himself, bringing himself back to the present.

“We have all the power we need to defeat them. ALL of them.”

“More importantly you have the knowledge,” Danny Hebert said. “Where to find that power, how to use it. You’re starting the game a dozen moves ahead. The trick is going to be maintaining that lead.”

“That’s the nice thing, though,” Parian said. Everyone looked at her curiously. “Something I noticed from Bayleaf’s story. He may have been given a ridiculously huge lead, or a ridiculously small one, depending on your outlook. But in spite of everything that lead keeps getting bigger.

“And I notice that it’s not just because he’s following some brilliant, cunning Path to Victory like Cauldron is. It’s because each step of the way he tries to do something right. Something Good. Even when it looks in the short term like a setback.”

“Even if it was, I hope I’d still do it anyway,” Bayleaf said soberly. “We don’t just have to survive, we have to be worthy of surviving. And people who stomp on little people and blame it on the ‘big picture,’ well-- they’re not.”

“Do the right thing, and it’ll all work out?” Vicky suggested.

“Do the right thing, even when you can’t see the way;” Bayleaf said, as if reciting something from an old memory. “Have faith that God will see it through to the end-- even if you won’t.”

Danny held up his bottle. “Here’s to doing the right thing,” he toasted soberly.

“To Doing the Right Thing,” everyone chorused, clinking pop bottles together.
“So what’s our next step, Beerless Leader?” Aisha asked.

“For now we’ve got a lull in the action,” Bayleaf said. “We got some small moves to make-- the Trio needs to be dealt with; the Undersiders, and so on. But even before that--” he paused to crack his knuckles. It sounded like popping chestnuts. “-- we gear up.”

“Parian, I want to commission you. Taylor needs a whole new wardrobe. Skin out. All Azeroth materials of course.” Parian let out an “oh” and started looking over her new project.

“OmiGOSH a whole wardrobe by PARIAN!” Vicky almost shrieked. She would have started bouncing up and down too if she hadn’t already been floating off the floor.

“What??” Taylor said, eyes going wide in surprise. “I-- I can’t accept something that EXTRAVAGANT--” she looked at her father. “That’s just too much, it--”

“You’ll HAVE to accept, unless you want to spend all your time exploding out of your clothes,” Parian said. “Your lupine form is at least a foot and a half taller than your human one, and your other measurements get a little boost too.” Taylor’s ears flicked madly. “So you either spend your life wearing a tent, dressing in stretch body stockings, or ripping apart your new favorite blouse every time you have to transform.”

“She’s right, little Owl,” Danny said, pinching her eartip in amusement. “And call it a hunch but I don’t think many of your old clothes even fit your human form now.” Taylor groaned and nodded. It had been an uncomfortable few days. She’d had to resort to baggy sweats and tee shirts-- and taping down her new boobs.

Uh, Parian,” Bayleaf paused and his ears flicked in a canine blush. “You do handle, er, foundation garments..”

“BAYLEAF!” Taylor covered her ears in her hands.

Parian laughed. “I can, yes. Like you said, skin out. Don’t worry, Taylor, we’ll kit you out in everything you need.”

“Wait, why would Parian’s outfits be better for this kind of thing than regular stuff? Am I missing something?” Aisha asked.

“Thanks to a little donation by Bayleaf, I can make Azeroth fabrics now,” Parian said. “Clothing made with it is not just durable, strong and tear-proof, it’s also self-resizing.”

“Self resizing??” Vicky’s eyes gleamed.

“NO! No no no no,” Amy said, holding up her hands as if holding Vicky back. “No. You get clothes made out of this stuff and you’ll be face down in a chocolate cake every night because you don’t have to worry about ‘fat pants’ anymore.” A chorus of laughter greeted Vicky’s theatrical pout.

“Actually, I also want to commission at least one uniform for everyone,” Bayleaf said. “Even Aisha and Danny.” The two look surprised at this.

“Heavy on protective properties, I’m assuming,” she said.
Bayleaf nodded. “a replica of their current look, or something they can wear underneath their regular clothes, depending.”

“All of us?” Amy said.

“We’re all in this, we’re all important to the big plan in some way, so that makes us all targets,” Bayleaf said soberly. “For Murphy’s Law if nothing else. And frankly, Amy, you’re the single most powerful healer and biokinetic on the planet. You’ve been to Endbringer battles. It’s almost criminal that you’ve never been given anything more protective than a layer of cotton to wear.”

Vicky put her hand to her mouth. “Omigosh, I never thought about that!” she said. She gave her sister a protective hug. “That was stupid of us!”

“And frankly, all of you could use an extra layer of second-chance armor. Especially you, ‘Glory Girl,’” Bayleaf said.

“Why me? I’m invulnerable, after all—” Vicky said, flexing.

Bayleaf’s ears laid flat as he gave her a deadpan look. “I know about your forcefield, Vicky,” he said. Her confident pose faltered. “If it takes a sufficiently solid blow, it fails. And it takes up to several seconds to reboot. You’re completely vulnerable for that space of time.” He shrugged. “All Shard-based supers have defects like that. By design, I suspect. Sort of like how some technology companies were caught deliberately putting defects in their products’ software. Which is why we have a whole thing with people “Jailbreaking” their phones.”

“So how do we “jailbreak” our powers?” Amy said. “Wait, don’t tell me. Second Triggers.”

Bayleaf nodded, an offput expression on his face. “Not what I’d call a recommended course of action. I’ve been using my Azeroth engineering to cobble up ways to compensate, instead. That’s what most of those gifts to the Wards and the Protectorate were for: Workarounds for the most obvious limitations of their powers. They’re going to be hitting Coil soon, and however they do it they’re going to need every edge they can get.” He paused and gave them all a look. “I also made countermeasures, before you ask. I don’t want any of my more exotic toys being turned against me.”

“Anyway, if you let me take a few measurements, I should be able to finish out some ideas I’ve been noodling. In fact I want to tinker up something for everyone, if I can.”

“Bigger shinier weapons aren’t going to be enough,” Danny said, frowning. “They were barely enough when it was just you against the Merchants.” The implication was unspoken but clear.

Bayleaf looked away and ducked his head. “I get what you’re saying, Mr. Hebert,” he said. “You don’t want Taylor leaping in with both feet like… like I did.” He scratched the back of his head, smiling ruefully. “I know how it must look. But I sort of had to hit the ground running, and running hard. I sort of had to establish a beach head.” He sobered. “Almost took it too far, too.

“But now we’ve got some leeway. We can step back, dig in, and make some proper preparations. And that’s my plan for the immediate future: equipment, gear… and training.” He looked around suddenly and coughed. “I… that is, if we’re actually a team and all. Beyond Hemlokk and myself, for obvious reasons—”

He coughed again. “I know some of you are averse to violence,” he said looking at Parian. “And others of you have other obligations. I’m not holding anyone here to any obligations or anything; if you want to just walk away now that this Gaslighting thing is done, that’s cool. But I still want to stay in touch, and I’m still making this gear for you. Para Bellum. War is coming, and war doesn’t
care who’s a bystander and who’s not. So if you leave, I’d rather know that you left with a fighting
care. “If you leave, I’d rather know that you left with a fighting chance.” He looked up. “It’s your call, guys.”

Parian was the first to speak. “I’m afraid I’ll have to take that exit,” she said sadly. “It’s been fun,
reality, but I have my business to run, I have my reputation as an impartial Rogue I’d rather not throw
away-- and I don’t cope well with violence.” She reached over and patted Bayleaf’s hand. “I hope there
are no hard feelings, and I’m still willing to do business with you, or with World of Crafts.”

“No hard feelings,” Bayleaf smiled.

“I’m in,” Aisha burst out. “We still got ‘Cape Business’ to take care of,” she said, making quote
marks in the air with her fingers, “And this is the least bored I’ve been in YEARS. Heck, see if you
can get rid of me.” She stopped and looked a little taken aback. “Not that I’m sure how well I’m
gonna keep up unless I wake up with funky werewolf ninja magic shapeshifter tinker powers too…”

“Yeah, well-- you’ve kept up this far,” Bayleaf said awkwardly. He was not going to tell her that her
baseline alternate had become a Cape. There was no telling what Aisha might do if she decided to try
and make herself Trigger.

“We’re still in too,” Vicky said. Then her face soured. “That is, once we get everything at home
straightened out…”

“That spare one-room is still available, if it comes to that,” Bayleaf said. “Either of you can crash
there if you have to. But… I’d… recommend not together,” he finished awkwardly. The two girls
looked at each other and nodded, before hastily looking away.

“Tomorrow’s Saturday, isn’t it?” Parian said suddenly. “Taylor, if you’re free, that would be a good
day to come in for your fitting.”

“Eeee, can I--”

“Yes, you can come along, Vicky,” Parian said, while Taylor tried to hide her face behind her paws.

“And I need to do a little shopping myself,” Bayleaf said ruefully.

“No, I’m good. Hmm, that’s another thing, transport…” he pulled a marker board off the wall and
started writing.

They demolished the last of the pizza and went their separate ways. Vicky and Amy went home to
face the music; Parian left to check on her shop and prepare for tomorrow’s fitting with Taylor.
Taylor, finally confident she could keep from going wolfen without warning, went home with her
father to finally sleep in her own bed. And Bayleaf sat alone in his strangely quiet Lost Workshop,
going over his to-do list.

CLOTHING-- that one was being handily covered. Costumes would still be an individual matter--
there were few advantages to a one-size-fits-all look or style, especially for people with wildly
different abilities. New Wave did it for PR reasons. PR was the least of Bayleaf’s concerns. He was
here to stop the end of the world, not win Nielson ratings.

ARMOR-- There was only so much one could do with even enchanted cloth and leather, and even
what they had there was limited because Parian for all her skill did not have an Azeroth tailoring
knowledge base. Anything heavier than leather was currently unreachable; Because of the overlap
between metallurgy and engineering, he could kludge some workable stuff-- but it would be dismal
quality compared to what he could get out of someone who was an actual World of Warcraft blacksmith.

WEAPONS— again he cursed his lack of an actual blacksmith. He and Hemlokk would have to do with whatever was commercially available. He hoped her dual-wielding skill had translated over.

MATERIAL SUPPLIES— Not only was he running low on raw materials for his own work, Hemlokk was both an alchemist and a jeweler, and she would be getting the “itch” to use those skills soon. She’d need materials and tools for both, and probably a ton of them. He wrote down “greenhouses, jewelry stores, new age shops, science hobby stores” and circled them.

TRANSPORTATION— Not everyone on this team could fly. And of the two that could, only one could carry another person with them. They could hardly hitch a ride in the back of Mr. Hebert’s truck all the time. Something was needed, he wasn’t sure what yet.

COMMS— the cell phones were darned useful, but they ran off the existing cell phone network and were insecure, among other shortcomings. He had some ideas for a better setup, though, and if he did it right it would give Aisha an area to contribute while keeping her out of harm’s way.

More members— That one he put a big question mark next to. He’d learned the hard way he that no matter how skilled, powerful or prepared in advance he was, no matter how many cheat codes and sneak peeks to the universe he had, he wasn’t going to be able to do everything himself. And a team of three teenage cape girls, one normal teenage girl, and a middle-aged union head of hiring wasn’t going to cut it too well either. That left the question of WHO he was going to recruit, and HOW. The briefcase of Cauldron vials offered one dark solution. He could try to recruit the Undersiders after they were out from under Coil’s thumb… but that didn’t strike him as too savory a choice either. Tattletale was marginally amoral, highly manipulative and dangerously obsessed with showing everyone else she was smarter than them— the sort of person who, had she led a more mundane life would have probably ended up stealing from the store they worked at just to prove they could get away with it, then bragged about it on Facebook under an “anonymous” name. Rachel— Hellhound or “Bitch”— was essentially a violently antisocial autistic. Regent had been abused by his father Heartbreaker… tortured with waves of mindblowing fear until he was little more than a high-functioning sociopath. His trick of causing muscular spasms in his targets was a cover for his real ability: the ability to turn anyone he was exposed to long enough into a puppet he could control, see and hear through, so long as he was within range. As much as Bayleaf pitied him he did NOT want the kid anywhere he could eventually puppeteer any of the girls— or himself. That was one fox he would not trust within reach of any grapes. And Grue… well, what could be said except he was the most sensible and responsible of the group and he had decided that the best way to secure a better future for his little sister was to turn to a life of crime. The kid needed a thump between the ears and his parents probably needed arrested.

The Travelers were an even worse mess, with one of them a Simurgh time-bomb and another a potential S-class monster. And everyone else he knew of was either already contentedly tucked away in their various teams and groups, or was totally unsuitable.

Membership would have to wait.

“--Do you MEAN, You’re not coming home tonight?”
“I mean just that, Mom,” Vicky said. Even over the phone this was proving exhausting. “Amy’s staying at Aunt Sarah’s; I’m staying at a friend’s place.” Vicky swallowed and tried to steel her nerve. “Look, we just, just learned some things--”

“What things?” Carol Dallon’s voice got suspicious. “Does it have anything to do with why the PRT wants to speak to her?”

“Wait, what?”

“She’s been using her-- her other powers again!” Carol said with a touch of hysteria. “She’s been planting these TREES all over the place!”

“Trees?” Vicky couldn’t help it, she snickered out loud. “Who ratted her out, the National Arbor Day Foundation?”

“This is serious, Victoria!” Carol ranted. “Those trees are untested biotechnology! They could do anything!”

“Yah, Mom, they could oxygenate someone to death,” Vicky snarked. “Amy told me all about them. They’re just TREES, that’s all. They’re just really tough and sturdy and disease resistant. They can’t even grow flowers or seeds, so they can’t reproduce. The Giving Tree let her copy his healing power into them--”

“Healing power? Giving Tree? What?”

“Yes, you know HEALING? That stuff Amy does morning noon and night without pay?” Vicky could feel herself getting irritated. “One of the other healer capes--- this Case 53 guy, looks like a tree-- helped her make these trees that shed this healing aura, to help people at the hospital heal faster even when they aren’t around. So you and the PRT can quit wetting your collective pants over it.”

“I don’t like this tone, missy! You come home right now and--”

“I CAN’T!” Vicky all but shouted. She stopped, took a deep breath and started again. “We found out something, Amy and me. Something about my powers.”

There was quiet on the other end of the line. “What about your powers,” her mother said.

“My aura. It-- it’s addictive.” There was a sound of confusion on the other end. “Amy checked-- we had a couple of friends who let themselves be exposed to my aura, and she checked their brains. The chemical changes in the brain were similar to those found in someone who had recently ingested a concentrated dose of heroin. Her words. We.. we checked a couple of my friends at school… She said it caused chemical changes in the… I forget what it’s called but the part of the brain… the changes were typical of someone in the first stages of addiction.” Vicky stopped and wiped her eyes.

“That’s why I’m staying where I am. You know how my power is, how hard it is to control. Even when my power’s “off,” it’s still on, a little bit. To keep you and Dad… out of my aura. And it’s why Amy’s at Aunt Sarah’s. To try and go ‘cold turkey’ off my aura. It turns out she’s been getting it full blast for ages… and since she’s not a blood relative she isn’t even partially immune like everyone else.” She laughed, but there was little humor in it. “And here we’d always thought we’d have to wean her off cigarettes or something.”

“It’s not all bad. We made contact with a Tinker who thinks he can build something to block my power, or something. So this shouldn’t be too long. I’m going to talk to the school about doing my classwork by internet--”
“You will do no such thing. This is nonsense. I don’t know what game Amy thinks she’s playing, but-”

“Oh for-- This is tearing up Amy worse than it is me! She kept going off on crying jags-- all this time I’ve been, I’ve been doping her emotions and she never realized it!”

“I don’t understand...”

“Mom, don’t you get it? Didn’t you ever notice how jealous she got whenever Dean and I were together? Mom, she wasn’t jealous of me for being with Dean… she was jealous of Dean for being with me.”

There was a silence followed by a sound of revolted disbelief. “That...”

“Mom, I’ve had my powers since before she hit her teens. I’ve been pickling her brains in love-me rays since she started puberty! She’s been having all these feelings for me and they weren’t even really hers. The guilt and the shame were killing her. It nearly did kill her to admit it, once we figured it out. All it took was some egghead saying something about pleasure centers and the chemical nature of addiction and…” She ran her hand down her face, her chin crumpling.

It wasn’t the confession that drew her tears.

“I KNEW it!” Carol Dallon ranted on the other end of the line. “I KNEW that bringing that girl into this house would be a-- a-- a horrorshow for us all!” She got back on the phone. “Vicky, where are you, we’ll pick you up--”

“He was right,” Vicky said, her voice emotionless. “You really do hate her.”

That froze Carol cold. “Vicky-- I didn’t mean--”

“Yes, you did,” Vicky said coldly. “You meant it. Will you LISTEN to yourself? “What’s Amy up to, what did Amy do, this has got to be Amy’s fault!” Well, hey, Mom, look on the bright side. The PRT is freaking over some houseplants. If you get out your briefcase and whip up a little lawyerese to go with your hissy fit, maybe you can finally get your daughter-- your other daughter-- THROWN IN THE BIRDCAGE. Then you can live your little Happily Ever After without her!”

She slammed the receiver on the apartment's old-fashioned phone down on the hook so hard it cracked. Then she slammed it two or three times more for good measure. She started sobbing in full earnest then.

It was going to be a long wait till morning.

Taylor found herself at waiting at the front door of Parian’s shop, bright and early. Her father drove off in his truck, off on who knew what mysterious purposes for the Cause-- or maybe for the Dockworkers’ Union. The door opened from the inside and there stood Parian, dressed in her old-fashioned ruffled dress and doll mask. “Oh come in, come in, I’ve been looking forward to this!” she said, all but dragging Taylor inside. She threw a “closed” sign in the window and all but pranced on into the store.
“I really have to say that this is an interesting challenge,” she chattered, while Taylor nervously tiptoed through the mannequins into the center of the floor. “Granted that the size-changing cloth makes it so much easier, but designing styles that will look good on both your human and werewolf-“

“Worgen,” Taylor blurted out. “Um. That’s what our species is called. Apparently.”

“Ah. Well, on both your forms.” She came out of the back carrying an armload of undergarments. “Now, here are some of the basic style’s I’ve made thus far for undergarments. I’m thinking basic black will go well both with your skin tone and your silver-grey fur… so,” she said coyly, “Does Bayleaf like simple lines, or does he prefer it when you wear lace, hmm?”

“What???”

Bayleaf awoke, to his disgruntlement, as someone rapped on his skylight.

He had to replay that thought a few times before it sank in. He rolled out of bed and struggled his way into a pair of sweatpants and an old tee-shirt (was there any other kind, really? he wondered in groggy passing), then climbed the ladder to undo the latch, yawning and grumping. Glory Girl, came floating in, looking distinctly miserable.

“Vicky?” Bayleaf said, scratching himself and yawning. She eeped a bit at the sight of his fangs. “wAAAahat are you doing here so early?… Oh.” Wheels rusty from lack of coffee slowly began turning. “I’m guessing things didn’t go well with your folks,” he said solemnly. "I mean, they weren’t going great even on the phone, so…”

Vicky shook her head. She didn’t cry though; she’d cried out hours past. “Amy’s staying with Aunt Sarah; I stayed in that little apartment. Mom’s on the warpath, she’s blaming Amy for everything.”

Bayleaf growled in annoyance. He’d sincerely hoped that Carol Dallon was more sensible than the baseline version seemed.

“And the fact the PRT is getting torqued about the trees--”

“What about the trees? OH crap,” Bayleaf said. He was fully awake now whether he wanted to be or not. He started rooting around, looking for his cellphone. “I’m an idiot, of course the PRT is freaking out about a whole new biotinkered species showing up in the wild! This is all my fault--”

“Your fault?” Vicky said.

“I encouraged her, I showed her my tree form, let her copy my Blessing of Elune power… where is my bleepin’ PHONE?” One of the workerbots came clattering up, cellphone in hand. “Thanks-- “ He clumsily grabbed it and held it up to his ear. “Dial Panacea. Panacea? This is Bayleaf. I heard about the PRT and the trees--”

“What? Oh.” To his relief Amy actually chuckled a little. "It’s okay, Bayleaf,” Amy reassured him. “Aunt Sarah and Uncle Neil-- you know, Lady Photon and Manpower? They’re taking me to the PRT to sort it out. They say that so long as the trees are non-harmful and incapable of reproducing, the law should put them in the clear. I made a couple of saplings this morning and I’m bringing them for the power wonks to test.”
Bayleaf sighed silently in relief. He made a mental note to check the news channels to see if things had stirred up. “I hope they make a decision before they chop down all the trees you planted,” Bayleaf said irritably.

Amy actually laughed. “They tried. The PRT sent out some sort of cleanup crew to First General with chainsaws and portable incinerators. The Chief of Staff threatened to surgically neuter them if they touched that tree. Same story from all the other hospitals, the hospice, the old folks home…even in hibernation the healing aura has sped up healing by a noticeable margin. Piggot called them off quick. She was probably afraid there’d be riots if she gave the go-ahead.”

“Good to know something’s working in our favor,” Bayleaf said. “Maybe you can arrange something with the PRT so you can do your little plant experiments without them freaking out?”

“That’s one of the things we’re gonna hash out,” Amy said ruefully. “I’m going to be spending days wading through paperwork and lawyerese. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck then,” Bayleaf said. Amy hung up. Bayleaf heaved a sigh. “Well, that’s one thing-- sort of resolved…”

“What did she say?” Vicky asked. Bayleaf relayed the news to her. Vicky looked relieved.

“My fault,” Bayleaf muttered, ears laid back. “I didn’t think--”

“Well neither did she,” Vicky said, fists on hips. “And you’re new here. But it’s all good, right?”

Bayleaf gave her a half smile. “One can hope.” grabbed a stool from his worktable and set it in the middle of his workspace with a clatter. “Here, pull up a seat. Might as well get those readings…”

She pulled up a stool and sat fidgeting while he spent several minutes waving various crystals, odd-looking widgets made of brass and vacuum tubes, what looked like a copper wand and other oddments around her head. All the while he was talking, less to her and more thinking out loud. “The problem, you see, is that thanks to the perpetual crises that keep popping up on Azeroth, most of the thaumaturgic and morphic resonance research has become, er, sort of specialized,” he said, putting a circuit-studded colander on her head. “And not very… hm how to put it…” he scratched his chin thoughtfully while the bowl on Victoria’s head beeped and booped and made unnerving sparking noises.

“Well, in the middle of a war-- or a demonic invasion, or a rising Great Old Ugly Mofo, or whatever-- while most people can use Azeroth’s “Magic” in some form or other, they’ve really not got the patience to understand it in depth. They want quick, dirty and functional--- sort of like apps on a cellphone. Poke the icon and it goes. And also like apps they’ve only got enough room, time and patience for a dozen or so on their desktop. Uh, so to speak.

“Or maybe it’s more like the difference between a cook and a chef,” he said. The colander was removed. With a loud THOK a miniature plunger with wires trailing from the handle was stuck to her forehead. “Yes, that’s actually a better metaphor. Analogy? Whatever.”

“What’s the difference between a cook and a chef?” Vicky said, her eyes crossing as she stared at the plunger. If this thing gives me a forehead-hickey… she thought.

“A cook works from a cookbook. A chef works with techniques,” Bayleaf said. “And unfortunately due to necessity, pretty much everyone in Azeroth, except a few really rarified intellectual types, are working with a cookbook.” He yanked the plunger loose.

“Ow!”
“Sorry. So, when I got rebooted as a worgen, I got my brain stuffed full of recipes: Druid abilities, Engineering schematics, mining and smelting formulas, first aid techniques—even some actual cooking recipes, though I don’t use them. And despite the fact that some of the most effective attacks used on the battlefield are the Fear spell and the Seduce spell, it seems like nobody in those fields worked on anything specifically for shielding against those kind of aura attacks.

“I’m having to go back to first principles… breaking down what I’ve learned from the “recipes” I’ve got filed away in my brain and my files—” here he waved at a filing cabinet stuffed to overflowing with blueprints, charts and formulas—“and trying to assemble something completely new from the mess.” He sat down at a desk situated between his racks of Enchantment ingredient jars, and another rack of jars holding bits and bobs of electronic devices and more mundane chunks of minerals, crystals, and metals. He popped open twenty or so jars and emptied their contents on the graph-paper topped desk.

She saw him pulling sets of tools out. “You’ve got something? Already?” Disbelief and hope warred in her voice.

“Maybe,” he said, holding up a screwdriver in warning. “This is only a first attempt, and really a kludge… just a stopgap till I can make something more permanent and functional. Spit and baling wire—fetch the mice,” he said to a nearby workerbot. The workerbot saluted and marched off. “Give me a minute or two.” He laid out the pieces next to a leather strap and picked up a soldering gun.

A slow hour passed. While he was working, a workerbot came and went, leaving a wire cage with four white mice in it next to the table. A few more minutes crawled by. “Done,” Bayleaf said, holding up the fruits of his labor.

Vicky looked at it skeptically. “It looks like you crossed a pocket radio with a New Age wall hanging and wired the bits to a belt,” she said.

“You’d be surprised how close to accurate that is,” he said dryly. “You wouldn’t believe where I’ve had to shop. Oh, before we try this, better conduct the control side of the experiment…” He reached down and picked up the cage, setting it on the desk. “I realized I’d need some way to test some of the mental effects stuff, so I stopped by a pet store a couple of days ago and picked up some white mice. Say hello to Eenie, Meenie, Minie, and Fred.” The four mice sat up and peered about in curiosity, squeaking and wiggling their pink noses.

“Fred? What happened to Moe?” she said.

“Oh, we don’t need no Moe,” he said—and gave her a goofy doggy grin.

“Ugh, I hate you.”

“Okay,” he said, getting up and dusting off his hands. “First off, I want you to hit them with your fear whammy. Hard as you can. Ready?” He backed up a few steps. “Okay, now.” Vicky scowled and squinted at the mice. The four began shrieking in terror and scrambling like mad, digging away at the bottom of the cage to try and get away from her.

“Okay, off, off!” Bayleaf yelped. He was halfway across the floor and backing up, eyes wide, when she finally cut it off. “Whuff, that’s potent,” he said, shaking himself off dog style.

Vicky blinked at him. “Hardly. I was giving it all I had. Usually people are down on the ground screaming in terror. You must be resistant or something.”

“Good to know I suppose.” He shook again. “Okay, now hit them with the love-me rays.” Vicky
repeated the performance; this time the mice were up against the bars, staring at her adoringly and reaching through the wire to try and touch her. “Aww. that’s kind of cute,” she said as she turned the aura off.

The next instant she was glomped in a hairy werewolf hug. “WAUGH!”

“HEWWO, I am a werewuff! I haff just met yoo and I wuv yoo,” he singsonged, resting his shaggy head on her shoulder and giving her a goofy grin.

“Very funny,” she said, giving him a sharp enough push that it knocked the wind out of him. Bayleaf whuffed and snorted with laughter, staggering away. “Okay okay. We’ve established your power affects animals too. Now we try it with the headband...” He lifted it up and settled it on her forehead, so the largest crystals in the array were over either temple. “Okay, hit it.”

Amy squinted at the cage. Nothing happened. She tried again, harder. Then she switched from “love me” to “fear” and back again… “It works!” she squealed, jumping up and throwing her arms around Bayleaf’s neck in a throttling hug.

“Ack! AIR!” he gagged. She backed off, still grinning gleefully. “Okay, it works, but-- uh oh--”

Just as Glory Girl noticed the light glowing on her forehead and the odd warm spot, there was a “POP” and one of the crystals shattered to dust. “Awwwww…” she said.

Bayleaf squinted and poked at the burnt spot on the headband. “Mm, I kind of expected that,” he said. “The storage capacitor wasn’t bleeding off the energy fast enough. One surge and you overloaded it. No problem though--” He removed the band from her head and fished for some replacement gems. “We’ll brute-force it for now. just add a half dozen bigger storage crystals… I’ll build you something sturdier and easier to use later. You’ll still have to exercise restraint to keep from burning out anything, and bleed off the excess juice every now and then, but this will let you walk around without whamming everyone in the vicinity. Here, let me add a fresnel lens to direct the discharge, that way you can just fire it off into the air when the charge gets too high… gimme that cell phone buzzer...”

He finished his repairs and put the band back on her head. This time the trial went perfectly: the moment the crystals started overloading the coronet buzzed. She looked to the side and tapped the button; the disc in the middle of her forehead glowed, there was a brief flash of light on the wall and then-- nothing. “I think the prototype’s a success,” Bayleaf said with a grin.

“Yes, yesyesyes!” Vicky did a victory dance in midair.

Bayleaf trotted over to his “rag bag” and dug around a bit. “Here we go,” he said, pulling out a sweatband. “Not exactly fashion cutting edge but it’ll cover it up so you don’t look like you’re sprouting an FM radio from your head.” She took it and carefully eased it down over top of the magitek headband.

She looked at her reflection in the glass of one of the cabinets. “Hey, kinda sporty. I like it.” She spun around, eager. “Okay, what next??”

“Well, I’m going to go shower and get dressed,” Bayleaf said, pulling some jeans, a tee and a hoodie off the clothesline stretched between the two furnaces (of all the things he’d bought, assembled, and created thus far, to his disgruntlement and embarrassment he hadn’t put in a clothes dryer yet.) “Then we’ve got to go get some things.” He loped into the bathroom and locked the door. “So, I don’t know what you had planned today, But I gotta do some shopping--”
“I’M IN!”

“This was not what I had in mind when you said you were going shopping,” Vicky grumbled. She glared at the rack of test tubes in front of her.

“You could always go see what Parian is up to with Taylor, you were invited after all,” Adrian said, amused. He was preoccupied stacking a box of erlenmyer flasks on their shopping trolley. “Would you get a box of those round-bottom flasks and stoppers there? No, the small ones. Thanks.”

It seemed that even with international commerce struggling thanks to Leviathan prowling the oceans, and even interstate or continental trade taking a one-two punch from roaming threats like the Slaughterhouse Nine or the Ash Beast, there was always some sort of niche for giant wholesale outlet stores. Perhaps, Bayleaf mused, because there was a growing need for failing businesses to unload their stock, even at a loss…

“Uh uh,” Vicky said. “You don’t know how this works, do you?” At his confused look she smirked and levitated over to him like an oversized impious Tinkerbell. “You’re a new couple. So one of us girls keeps you distracted while the others all gang up on the girl and pump her for dirt.”

“We’re not… not officially a couple,” he protested, not meeting her eye.

“Oh come ON,” Vicky said, dropping to the floor next to him. “You protected her from bullies, you were always at her side, you even charged in and rescued her like a knight in shining armor and carried away in your arms—”

“Vicky!” he said under his breath, looking around. She hadn’t said anything overt yet, but he’d rather not have people drawing conclusions.

Her smirk grew absolutely wicked. “Tell me more, tell me more, does he have a nice car, tell me more, tell me more, did you get very faaar—” she sang under her breath.

“No, we didn’t!” Adrian said, heat rising in his cheeks. “We’re not-- I mean we-- We haven’t even gone on an actual date yet!” he scowled. “And don’t be crass. She’s not that kind of a girl, and I’m not that kind of guy.” His voice got a little heated.

Her demeanor changed rapidly. “Okay, okay, I didn’t mean to rub your fur the wrong way,” she said. “I didn’t mean to suggest either of you were-- like that,” she said, flushing a little.

Adrian’s eyebrows actually rose at that. That seemed a rather… conservative response for a typical 21st century girl. Heck, it was practically Victorian, if one could pardon the pun.

But then he recalled that he wasn’t on the Earth where he’d been born. There had actually been a bit of culture shock here and there as he’d adjusted to Earth Bet, and little of it had to do with people in tights who could fly. The advent of the Cape Age, especially the debut of the Endbringers, had brought about some unexpected cultural sea changes.

Some things were obvious. Gun control wasn’t quite gone but it was dying a hard and painful death. When some lunatic could kill you by pointing his FINGER at you, any government’s claims it could
keep you safe *by taking your guns away* went from merely laughable, straight to actionable.

Others were not so obvious. Among other things, the impact on international trade, and culture at large. Leviathan’s ongoing threat to the ships of the world had turned international trade to a trickle at best, and society had been forced to adapt.

Once-simple luxuries were dwindling. Year-round produce was far less of a thing, and many spices practically vanished from store shelves. Even things like ordinary black pepper were getting scarce, and forget things like saffron or coriander. You’d have to go to online auctions with three-digit bids for that. There was a reason that the Spice Road had been a thing.

But the first thing to drop *really* hard had been the trade in crude oil. Offshore rigs were shut down. Supertankers sat idle and empty; no one was willing to risk losing billions of dollars in precious crude to Leviathan, or give him an easy way to create an ecological disaster with an oil spill. As it was there were already spots on the shoreline around Africa and the Mediterranean that would never be the same.

Once it became apparent this was not a problem that was going away, the people had given their representatives a swift kick in the pants and gotten some changes made. Pipelines were laid, wells were drilled, moratoriums on things like shale oil and coal oil were lifted. Ground was broken on new nuclear and geothermal and hydroelectric dams wherever there was space to put them. Solar farms and wind farms were put out in the deserts too, of course… but typical of the technology were little more than a symbolic gesture when it came to power production. A lot of the political nonsense and environmentalist virtue-signaling went by the wayside; what would be nice was less important than what actually *worked*. People decided that they could sit around and fret over their soymilk about the one-tenth of a degree change forecast over the next decade *after* their cities were no longer in danger of turning into darkened, lifeless tombs.

But as much as they had ramped up domestic production of energy, the impact was still felt, and felt deeply. Travel and transport had become much more expensive due to fuel costs, and those that held out hope that battery powered cars would somehow fill the gap left by trucks and diesel trains swiftly had their bubble burst when it was pointed out that the rare earths that went into those expensive batteries and fuel cells were foreign products too. Which required oil to ship. And still more oil to run the power plants that kept those batteries topped up...

Zeppelins were actually making a comeback as a source of mass transit and shipping, because while they were relatively slow they were far more fuel efficient and could carry far more cargo. Old airliners were being scrapped and recycled, old military vehicle graveyards were being salvaged; landfills were being excavated to dig up all those “useless and outdated” electronics and recycle them for rare earths.

But beyond fuel for shipping, certain other luxuries associated with petroleum distillates had started disappearing: particularly, Rubber, latex and plastics.

Rubber, as it came from the tropical rubber tree plant, was now much more expensive. Which meant “cheap and plentiful” latex condoms weren’t so cheap anymore. Diminished oil production meant fewer plastics as well-- as well as far fewer raw petrochemicals to give to the pharmaceutical industry. So all sorts of normally available medicines and medical supplies were suddenly scarce. Marijuana was legalized largely because it did, after all, have both industrial and medicinal uses and could practically grow on the hood of a Dodge. Half the reason Skidmark and his band of losers were so despised was because their trade was built off of pirated drugs: stealing lifesaving medicine and turning it into party favors for depraved idiots.

Consequently birth control pills, abortifacients, treatments for various venereal diseases and
procedures like “convenience” abortions were suddenly much more expensive and hard to come by. “Casual” sex suddenly became a lot more risky.

Statistics was a bitch. Simply using a condom during sex reduced the chance of pregnancy to about 15%—about one in seven. But that meant nothing if the person using the condom had sex several times more often than they used to... and people using "protection" naturally felt safer, so they tended to do just that.

Only having one bullet in the gun doesn’t help much if you play Russian Roulette six times in a row.

But once society was stripped of the illusion of safety-- when the security blanket of pills and plastic was stripped away by the petroleum shortage-- certain morally conservative attitudes came back in vogue again. Oh, extramarital sex, infidelity, and all their related little sins continued on, because people are people and people are stupid... but they were no longer as openly celebrated as they had been from the sixties to the eighties. Illicit sex rates statistically dropped; venereal disease, abortion and unwed motherhood with it. Blatantly promiscuous behavior had become commonly regarded, once again, as the province of fools. The Free Love Movement was dead with none to mourn it.

This sea change in attitude had been going on for a long time; since before Victoria or her sister had even been born. Promiscuity was not nearly the badge of achievement among the young that it had been in Adrian's own world. It was actually refreshing to be in a world where, as a teenager, Adrian wasn’t practically obligated to be sexually active to be regarded as normal.

Of course the petroleum shortage and the shipping crisis was having a more immediate effect on Adrian's plans than (ahem) social. The rise in prices was not of course uniform. Exotic tools, equipment and materials, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, rare herbs, products organic and inorganic... hundreds of things which were of importance to his and Taylor's crafts... spiked particularly sharply in price thanks to Leviathan's work, the aquatic bastard. Getting even a few pounds of, say, an obscure alloy or crystal was no longer a matter of simply having it mail ordered or placing an international order on some website. After facing some of the more frustrating snags in getting a simple box of swiss watch parts shipped by plane to America, Adrian had out of curiosity done some investigating to determine just how much Coil from the original timeline had to have spent just to get Skitter her requested box of orb weaver spider eggs. He'd seen luxury yachts with smaller price tags. Small wonder the Powers That Be had little trouble tracking down Tinkers by their purchasing habits.

“So what is all this stuff for anyway?” Vicky said. “You got odd tastes in gifts for your girlfriend--”

“She’s an alchemist and a jeweler,” Adrian interrupted her in annoyed amusement. “Which means she’s going to need supplies and tools. Test tubes, beakers, burners, mortars and pestles, pipettes and tubing… and jeweler’s tools, too. Ah! They have a kit!” He grabbed a case with a three digit price tag off a shelf as they rolled by. “A lot of materials, too, which we’ll get at the next couple of stops if we’re lucky.”


“She’s not just going to be making pretty trinkets,” Bayleaf said. “She can put enhancements on them, or even some pretty snazzy defensive or offensive spells, if I remember correctly.”

“Ohhh, magic rings!” She said, excited. She smirk. “Just so you know, though, if a short guy with hairy feet shows up, I’m as good as gone.”

“Arf. She also needs weapons… and armor.” He scowled. “But I’m no proper blacksmith. I don’t
know how to make innately enchanted armor or weapons, and that’s what she needs. We’ll have to make do with some martial arts gear that I’ll juice up. C’mon, let’s see what they got in sporting goods…”

“Sporting goods” proved a bit of a disappointment. Unless Taylor and the rest wanted to charge into battle looking like a pee-wee hockey team, they really didn’t have anything in the way of armor. They really didn’t have any weapons outside of airsoft guns and archery sets. (On a whim, he grabbed a couple anyway.) They had some wicked looking hunting knives and machetes. He grabbed a pair of the K-bar knives. He ruled the shotguns and hunting rifles out… not because he was opposed to them, but any damage they could do, his and Taylor’s weakest attacks could outdo.

Besides, he could make better ones at home. Seriously scary better ones.

The self and home defense section (welcome to Brockton Bay, stranger) produced a few better results. Some collapsible batons, pepper spray, tasers, and the like.

Then he’d spotted the toy aisle and the electronics department. The 75% off signs were like a siren song... A quartet of quadcopters went on the trolley. Then several Go-Pros. Then several (outdated, bottom of the line) laptops that were going for virtual pennies.

After paying (in cash) for their purchases, they trundled out to the parking lot. Adrian had solved the problem of transportation and cargo this time by finding someone with a used truck and throwing a wad of money at him. It was fortunate indeed that he already had plans for the thing, because it was an actual, run down God-as-his-witness 1998 Prius electric hybrid truck, one of the last gasps of the environmentalist movement. It had been one last attempt by the Green party to bend the automotive industry over their knee, and was a dismal failure in every regard. It was less fuel efficient than a Humvee, its batteries alone made it an environmental hazard to rival a 1960s Volkswagon, and it had less horsepower than a Pinto. Just looking at it made him want to take a hammer to it, then go out and kill a spotted owl and roast it over a bonfire made of old growth forest wood.

“I don’t know where you’re going to park this old hunk of junk once you unload it,” Vicky said. She stood watch as Adrian pretended to load everything into the truck-- only to slide nearly everything into his Haversacks (Parian had made him three more.)

He gave her a grin. “Not worried about parking it,” he said. He shut the hatch.

The next several stops were greenhouses, where he purchased potting soil, pots, growing lamps and other supplies. Vicky watched in bemusement while he selected a variety of seeds and seedlings. His method was eccentric, to say the least. He drifted up and down the aisles of the greenhouses, letting his eyes trail over everything. Sometimes he’d get several dozen different plants, sometimes only one or two; at the last one he only bought a single packet of seeds. No explanations.

Then he drove to a junkyard, where he purchased a cheap, half broken down two-wheel flatbed trailer and loaded it with scrap… including a broken down washer-dryer combo.

He was a bit tired of washing his clothes in the shower and drying them over his furnaces.

His next stop was at an arts and crafts chain, which had a plethora of semiprecious gems, stones and crystals. He didn’t leave until he had accumulated two heaping bags of the things. And after he had pried Glory Girl out of the store. Mr Dallon would probably thank him later; Vicky had started getting way too enthusiastic over all the “cute” folk art and craft projects. That was the warning sign. He’d probably saved the poor man from smothering to death in his own home under a pile of needlepoint, folksy bric a brac and potpourri.
The final stop was on the outskirts of Azn Bad Boyz territory: a martial arts shop. Bayleaf found himself more and more disgusted the longer he stayed in the store. He was no weaponsmith, but even he could tell that everything there was ornate, shiny, junk... stuff for floor demonstrations or hanging on the wall to impress your friends in the local Dungeons and Dragons group. He nearly lost it when he discovered that some of the “traditional weapons” had *aluminum blades*.

It wasn’t hard to guess who the owners’ main customer base was; every ABB in the neighborhood was probably running around with one of these chromed, wobbly made-in-taiwan swords strapped to his back or a handful of potmetal shuriken stuffed down his pants. After picking through what was on display for over an hour he finally gave up and purchased a pair of sai that didn’t look *too* crappy, a couple of bokken, and a couple of training manikins. He left with his purchases and a foul temper.

“Junk,” he growled, stuffing his purchases into the back of the nearly overloaded truck. “Shiny junk for tourists!”

“Wouldn’t she be better off with a gun? Or one of your zap guns?” Vicky said as she hopped into the passenger seat.

“Oh she’ll get one of those,” he reassured her as he buckled in. “And a bandolier of smoke bombs, stun grenades, and the like. Believe me, before we even think of going out together I’m going to have her better equipped than Batman! But she’s a melee fighter. All her downloaded instincts and knowledge and training and powers are for sneaking up fast and getting in close. Those are her *strengths*. If she tries to rely her instincts in a pinch and her weapons aren’t suited for it--” he grimaced.

“Yeah, that would be bad,” Vicky agreed. “So what are you gonna do?”

He brooded. “I got a couple ideas for those Sai. I think I can make them into something she can use, for now…” He started up the hybrid. It whined and complained, but it started rolling.

“I don’t think she’s going to be particularly thrilled with stabbing people,” Vicky ventured carefully.

He didn’t look away from the road. “I know,” he said. “But I think I can make something nonlethal, or at least semi-lethal, for her to wield. I know for a *fact* I could make something perfectly suited for her-- if I’d picked up the Blacksmithing skill. But-- dang.”

It was a slow, laborious drive as they crawled along, the Prius moaning and complaining all the way.... But they made it back. They pulled up to the loading dock of the warehouse. “So,” Vicky said smugly, “how you gonna get all this in your workshop? Truck included? And don’t expect ME to lift it,” she added.

Adrian just smiled as he opened the shutter. He went inside, slid aside the plywood sheet and opened the double doors. Then he came back out... holding the gnomish shrink ray.

*Smeeeerrp.*

Changing back into his worgen form, he picked up the shrunken truck and trailer and hustled inside. He set it down in the open floor of the workshop and stepped back. A minute later the shrink ray wore off and the truck and its cargo all returned to full size. There was plenty of room; the Workshop had originally been sized to work on locomotive engines after all. Vicky glared at him. “Cheat,” she muttered. “Come on, let’s get to Parian’s.”

“What, why?”
“Why?? You just bought your girl an *entire wardrobe* of custom-made clothes! Don’t you want to see what she looks like in ‘em? Because I KNOW she wants to know what YOU think.” She grabbed his arm and tugged.

“But-- It’s only been a few hours,” Bayleaf fumbled.

“Super awesome cloth powers, remember? Come on, don’t leave your girlfriend waiting. Bet she’ll give you a whole fashion show, just to see the look on your face.” Her smirk got evil again. “If you’re a good boy, maybe she’ll model some of the lingerie for you--”

“VICK-ee!”

“I know she’s gonna have at least one swimsuit-- whether she knows it or not-- Parian was talking “string bikini.” I wonder how tiny teenie--”

“VICKY!!”

They left, her chivvying him out the door and teasing him till his face flamed.

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He curled up in the corner of the dumpster they’d thrown him in. He was filthy, he had cuts on his arm from a broken bottle that was probably getting infected. He didn’t care. He was trash. It didn’t matter.

From the moment he’d heard what happened to Taylor he’d been horrified. He knew her, he sat in class with her-- he thought she was nice, thought of her as a friend, kind of-- or at least someone who didn’t laugh at him or turn their nose up at him. He’d… kind of had a crush on her, maybe a little.

He cringed at the thought, his self loathing burrowing back in on itself like a toothed worm. He’d sure had a fine way of showing it, hadn’t he. He’d seen her being picked on, being bullied, and he’d just kept his head down. Like a coward. Buried his head in his games and his comics and his anime and dreamed of being a hero, but when the chance came he ducked out like--- he flinched, his bruises throbbing.

Then the locker thing happened. He’d only heard about it hours after it happened; he’d been late for school because he overslept. The details were all confused; nobody told the same story twice. But he knew the important part. Noone had been there for her.

He’d let her down again.

He’d been shellshocked, he supposed. That could be the only thing that could explain his actions. The next day he’d been in the hallway at his locker-- people bumping him and elbowing him and stuff as usual-- and one of Sophia’s nasty little friends, Emma, was chattering in a little clique of the school’s snottier girls, ripping on someone--

Then he heard the name “Taylor.”

“Oh yeah. You think she’ll start CRYING again when she comes back?” Emma was saying. “The little slag spent a WEEK crying over her mom….“So
He knew he wasn’t socially skilled. Come on, he had a mirror, he knew what he was. He never quite engaged his personal filters. Even so, on a better day he might have noticed how… twitchy Emma was acting. Like she was trying desperately to play normal. But at that moment it was like every internal censor and social warning light he had was shut off.

“You really are a soulless bitch, Emma.”

The hallway went quite for like, twenty feet in every direction. It was like no one in earshot could believe where those words came from. Emma stood there, her mouth hanging open. “What did you say to me you little toad?” she finally gasped out.

“You heard me, you SOULLESS BITCH. What kind of a bloodless hag laughs at a girl for crying over her dead Mom? Wouldn’t YOU cry if your Mom died?” He paused, all but jittering in place with his suppressed anger. “No, I bet you wouldn’t, You’d probably just roll her dead body for loose change and credit cards.”

The WhoooaOAAOh that greeted this echoed down the hallway. “Did you hear what he said??” Emma screeched. “Principal Blackwell, did you hear what he said to me?!”

He turned and found himself facing a distinctly unamused Blackwell.

...Crap.

After school detention for a week. Parents called; grounded, all privileges revoked.

Not that he was going to have to worry about detention. Today, the first day of his detention, “friends” of Emma-- her boy-of-the-week and a couple of his buddies-- caught him outside the school, beat him black and blue, and threw him in a dumpster. They left, jeering and laughing, and throwing promises over their shoulder at him that they’d be waiting for him. Every single day. Coming and going.

He wrapped his arm around his stomach. He was a laughingstock at school, an embarrassment at home. His mother did nothing but complain about how he wasn’t this, he wasn’t that, he wasn’t better; His father just looked at him like he was the worst mistake he’d ever made. He couldn’t stick up for a fellow outcast. He couldn’t even stick up for himself.

He’d never felt so worthless.

_Ooh, I want this one._

_Are you sure?

Yes, he’s perfect._

_He looked up, confused. He was on a misty, endless plane, under a twilit sky. He realized he couldn’t feel his injuries anymore. Come to think of it, he couldn’t feel anything! He was formless, shapeless… how was he seeing?_

_Before he could panic, a glowing something floated in front of his face. Hi!_

_“Uh, hello?”_

_Would you like to play the Game?_

_“Iiii… I like games, I guess? So… sure.” A game of some sort would at least pass the time._
He said YES! The the baseball-sized light flitted and flew, loop-de-looping as it giggled in joy.

Yes, I heard.

She-- he couldn’t help but think of her as “she,” could only visualize her like a gleeful little girl-- flew back to hover before him again. Okay, let’s start with words. When I say “Golden,” you think… what?

The game went on, seemingly for hours yet at the same time, mere moments. Word association games, colors, numbers, shapes… little of it made any sense to him. Some of it that did cut him pretty deep, leaving old wounds open, sensitive nerves exposed. By the end of it he was in tears; for what he couldn’t say.

Friend? The little light said. What do you want? The question was as innocent and artless as if from a child.

“I wanted…” he said, tears falling down his face. “I just wanted…” to be liked. To be respected. To be anything but the stupid, lazy, worthless, lonely embarrassment that he was.

But you are. You are smart, you just don’t use it. You’re diligent, just about the wrong things. And really, you can’t help what other people are or are not embarrassed about. And now you’re not lonely!

“I’m not?” he said.

Of course not. I am your Friend. And you are MY friend. And if you have ONE friend, you can’t be alone.

He started actually gushing tears. “That’s the nicest thing anyone ever said to me,” he sniffled, wiping his nose on his arm. “Heh. I guess you are my friend.”

Anyway, I wasn’t asking what you wanted, she sing-songed. I was asking what you WANT.

The meaning in words and letters was obscure; in this featureless plain, the meaning echoed beyond the word. He stood up. Images flashed through his minds of cruel tauntings, of hateful words and hateful blows, of faces twisted with spite and malice, arrogant because they knew the ones they tormented were powerless. “I want to be strong,” he said. “I want to be brave. I want to be kind. I want to help the Good fight the Wicked. I want to protect those who can’t protect themselves. I want to SMITE EVIL.”

“OooOOo, gooood choice,” Friend said.

If anyone had been looking behind that particular store at that moment, they would have seen something that-- probably would have sent them running in the first half-second. Light, golden light, began blazing through the gaps and rust-holes of the dumpster there. There was a bang, and one side dented outward from within. Then the other. Then, like someone setting off a cherry bomb inside a soda can, the steel container ruptured. Standing in the middle of the scattered trash and scraps of crumpled steel was a young man no more than fifteen. He was dressed in a tunic, breeches and cloth shoes, had a haversack hanging from his belt, a round wooden shield on one arm and a wooden mallet in his free hand. He had blonde hair in a bowl cut, blazing blue eyes, and was built like he’d spent his life bending metal to his will.
He staggered for a moment then looked down at himself. If he was cold in the January air, he did not show it. His arm was still bleeding. He grasped the wound with his other hand; it began to glow, squeezing the filth out, cleansing it, then sealing it closed. When he pulled his hand away, only clear, healed skin remained. He stared at his hands, awestruck, then waved them over himself. The grime and filth sloughed off him effortlessly. “That’ll be useful,” he muttered a bit absently.

He strapped the wooden shield to his back, stuck the wooden mallet handle down his shoulder blades, and began walking. He knew what he needed, and he knew where it was.

The salvage yard was mostly idle; it took few people to oversee it in the winter months, with fewer people dragging in aluminum cans and copper wire for recycling. It sat on a big wedge shaped lot, with the crushers and other heavy machinery at the broad end, and mountains of rusting junk everywhere else.

What Greg needed was at the far end, near the point of the wedge. Bayleaf’s Lost Workshop wasn’t the only relic of the past in this town; a small 18th century foundry had sat in this spot, quibbled over by the historians and preservation societies even as it rotted, till it had burned to the ground less than a year ago. All that stood now was a single blackened chimney and a lone anvil on a bare patch of floor, surrounded by mountains of rusting scrap.

Greg squeezed through a gap in the chainlink fence and went inside. He wasn’t worried about dogs; the junkyard owner was too cheap to even buy one. It was futile anyway as buying a guard dog in this town was the same as buying a shot one.

Greg started dragging chunks and scraps of metal to the anvil. He spent an hour picking through the piles surrounding him, following he knew not what sense that led him to one mangled bumper or rusted wheel or refrigerator coil over another, till he had a heap on either side. Then he dug through charred wood and ash around the blackened fireplace till he surfaced with a hammer and tongs—old, rusted from exposure, but still solid. Anyone else might have tried to at least dig the forge out of the rubble, stoke it with fire. Even the best tinkers needed all the tools of their trade; even making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear still required a sow.

Greg didn’t need fire.

He laid his first piece, the shell of a car’s transmission, on the anvil. For the longest time he stood over it, his head bowed, the rusting tongs clamped to the metal, iron hammer clenched in his fist. His hands began to glow. Then the tools in them began to glow as well. Rust fell off them, dusting the air like golden snow. The glow spread to the metal, gold and red like a sunrise. He raised the hammer and brought it down.

For the first time in a century the sound of a ringing anvil rose from the ruins, chiming in time to the flashes of paladin gold…

Sparky flung the half-burned joint into the toilet, cursing himself. He hit the flusher before he could second-guess himself and grab the stupid thing out of the water again.

Crap. He’d swore he’d go clean. He’d swore it. But the minute he saw that roach lying in the
medicine cabinet forgotten… He was already halfway to a buzz when he remembered what he’d promised. Just grab, flick a bic, and away he went.

He dropped his disposable lighter in the john and hit the flusher again. Maybe next time if it wasn’t so easy to light up, he’d stop himself in time.

He hoped the lighter didn’t blow up in the pipes or anything.

Last Christmas he’d gotten the scare of his life, one of those “go straight” scares that those DARE people wished they could whip up. He’d seen the news footage of the Merchant’s big takedown. The gang hauled off in cuffs, their Capes dragged off by the PRT, cops everywhere… a few people dead, even, including Squealer.

It wasn’t the bust that scared him. Mary-J was legal, and that was all he did, so he wasn’t worried about that. But he’d gotten a real good look at the Merchants as they were hauled off. Especially Skidmark.

Skidmark was a CAPE, man. And he was a villain, but he was rich, and powerful, and-- top of the heap, you know? But they’d got footage of him being hauled off and tossed in a paddywagon… except for that raggedy pair-of-underwear mask he wore, you couldn’t tell the difference between him and the worst ten-year meth-head. Shrivelled, skull-like face, rotting teeth, glazed eyes, head lolling about as he gibbered about who-knew-what…

That was a dead-end life. It’d never been so clear to Sparky before.

He’d stayed clean for a day, then two days. Just to take a look at his life when it wasn’t blurred out by weed. It had been devastating to see for himself how far everything had slid. It was like being in a darkened room and thinking it was only a little cluttered, then turning on a light and seeing what a trash-strewn wreck it really was. His grades were shredded. His room was a dump. His parents… well, they had their own issues, they barely remembered him as more than another tenant in the apartment.

He’d sworn he was going to go straight arrow from then on. Totally clean.

That had lasted for a whole ‘nother day. Then he’d found a dime bag he’d forgotten about. Then the next day he’d found a couple of roaches in the sofa cushion (he’d been looking for the remote, he’d swear to it.) Then his friends had come over with some kush and some snacks to share…

He wanted to kill himself. His parents were gonna end up burying him anyway at this rate--

Across manifold dimensions, something reached down--

No! <<SLAP>>

And was smacked down for its impudence.

Sparky looked up. Holy crap, it looked like an eighties album cover. Endless plain, twilit sky with hints of neon at the edges-- All it was missing was a naked chrome robot chick.

Hey! Hi there! Hi hi hi! A glowing blob of something was zipping around his head. Or… where his head ought to be. It was not a good sign when you couldn’t locate body parts. “Oh no,” he moaned. “That roach was bad, wasn’t it. Laced with something--”

Nah, you’re just having a paradimensional alien encounter.
“Uh… huh. Well, that is the sort of thing an LSD hallucination would say, innit?”

**Good point I guess. But, okay, tell me, how do you FEEL right now?**

Sparky thought it over. Actually, he felt… oh hey, there were his appendages… he actually felt more clearheaded and refreshed than he’d felt since-- since his brief stint as completely sober. His mood crashed again.

**Oh, come on, don’t get all mopey now! Especially since I’m here to give you a real chance to turn things around. Whole new life, whole new start!**

Sparky looked at the zippy blob of light askance. “Uh, you’re not about to try and get me to sell my soul to you or anything are you? Because I’m a stoner, not an idiot.”

Zippy Light paused. **What would I do with THAT?**

Sparky shrugged (hey neat, shoulders) “Well, if you’re the Devil or a demon or something--”

*I am NOT!* Zippy Light sounded mortally offended. *I am a non-baryonic extradimensional alien lifeform.*

“aaaaaaand ya lost me.”

**Urrgh, not important. Point is, it’s like this. My people pick Actors-- that’s you-- to be heroes and do good deeds and stuff. We set you up with powers and knowledge and a whole new body, then we put you in a world to help it.**

“Holy… is that how all Capes get their powers?”

**Not even close. The answer was surprisingly cynical sounding. Okay, I’ll try and sum up-- I give you these powers, new start, new life-- but in exchange, you have to help stop the end of the world.**

“Wait-- end of the world??”

Yeah. It’s really a bum trip. Did I use that phrase right? Anyway, it’s like this…. Zippy Light gave Sparky the breakdown. Sparky was pretty sure that he should have fainted from shock. “Ohhhhh crap,” he said, sitting crosslegged in the void. “So what happens if I say no?” he said.

No powers, you go back to your old body and life-- and the world ends anyway. Probably you along with it.

Sparky pondered that one. “So… I really got nothing to lose, huh.”

**Hey, it’s not THAT bad. I’ll stack the deck in your favor as best I can-- and there are others like you right in Brockton Bay who can help you. Don’t worry, you’ll find each other EASY. C’mon c’mon c’mon, say yes, PLEEEZ?**

Sparky started to grin. “Sure. Sure, why not?”

**EXCELLENT!** Zippy did a celebratory loop de loop. **Okay, let’s get this picky-choosy thing over with… An enormous screen popped up in front of them. All right, these are the race templates we’ll pick from…**
Sparky snorted and woke up. He groaned and got up off the couch, stretching. Funny, he didn’t
remember putting on his bathrobe--

He looked down. It wasn’t a bathrobe. It was actually a full body robe of elegant red and blue silk,
trimmed in gold. “Whoa.” Hastily he made his way to the bathroom. What he saw in the full-length
mirror on the bathroom door left him speechless. A tall, robed young man with a ponytail of long
blonde hair down to the middle of his back stared back at him. In one hand he clutched a winged red
and gold staff. A leather pouch hung at his waist. He was tall, slender, with long graceful fingers and
high-cheekboned, aristocratic features. But his most striking features were his long pointed ears and
his glowing, solid green eyes.

He wasn’t Sparky anymore. He was…. “Shar’Din,” He breathed. "Shar'Din Belore."

Brockton Bay’s first Blood Elf contemplated his next move.

Max Anders looked over the polished teak desk that dominated the penthouse office of the Medhall
building. All around him were the evidence of his influence and power. The three hundred and sixty
degree vista of Brockton Bay. The priceless works of art and sculpture that decorated his office. The
tasteful furniture, even the persian rug lying in front of his gleaming desk, all of it gave testimony to
his power, his prestige, his success. Even the ill-shaved presence of Hookwolf, despite all his brutish
violent power waiting for Max Ander's next order as meekly as any valet, was proof of his authority.
The only thing out of place in all that was standing on the rug next to Mr. Brian “Hookwolf”
Meadows: Max Ander’s son.

His son-- his son, a thing he only admitted to with resentment-- stood there next to Hookwolf, head
down, a bandaged cut on his forehead vivid against his pale soft skin. Even from here he could see
the boy was shaking. Even standing still the boy was a disappointment to him. Could he show no
spine at all? “You put him through all the paces?” he asked Hookwolf, refusing to look at the boy.

“Everything you suggested, everything we could think of.” Hookwolf shrugged. “Obstacle runs,
forced marches, surprise attacks-- Nothing. Boy didn’t trigger.” He tossed his head at Theo. “Scared
the literal *piss* outta him several times, but no Trigger.” The scruffy thug of a man snickered.

Max Anders sighed as if every unfair burden in the world had been thrown on his shoulders. “You
did your best, I’ll assume,” he said. “You may go.” He buzzed him out; the neonazi Cape swaggered
out without a glance back, hands in his pockets.

For several breaths Max Anders merely stood there, staring at his son. The boy still didn’t look up.
“Pissed yourself, did you.” the CEO, millionaire and secret neonazi leader let the scorn drip from his
voice.

Theo said nothing. Max Anders-- Kaiser-- wasn’t sure whether that made him less, or more upset.

Before he could think of anything sufficiently or appropriately scathing to say, the automated office
doors were forcibly pushed open. Kayden Anders came striding in, her face full of icy fury. “Go on
downstairs, Theo,” she said without taking her eyes off her ex-husband. All but sagging with relief,
the boy hastened to obey.
The moment he was through the doors and in the elevator headed down, Kayden opened on Max. “I hear from Justin that you sent Theo on one of your little ‘camping trips,’” she spat. “You gave your word that you would stop trying to make the boy Trigger!”

“The boy was unharmed--” Max began.

“‘The boy’ is your son, not a lab experiment and not a plaything for you to break,” Kayden snapped. “‘The boy’ is also no longer your concern. He is already living with me, and he is going to remain with me. You are to keep your hands off him from now on the same as Aster and myself.” She turned on her heel.

Max smoldered. He waited until she was halfway to the door. “I will permit this for now, Kayden,” he said with insulting calm. “Along with all your other little indiscretions. But in the end we both know who’s in charge here.”

She stopped in mid stride. She bother turning around. “Your little knife trick is cute, Max,” she said, loading every syllable with contempt. “But we both know who’d win a dick-swinging contest between us. I can see Medhall from my bedroom window. You start a fight with me, little man, I won’t even have to roll out of bed to finish it.” She started walking again; the polished oaken doors closed behind her.

He waited until he heard the DING of the elevator. Only then did a five hundred dollar crystal inkwell fly across the room to smash against the oak doors.

She held her composure till the elevator doors closed. Then she clenched her fists and pressed them against her mouth, her shoulders shaking.

---

Theo was silent for most of the ride home. It was only when they reached the apartment complex that he spoke up. “Thank you for coming for me, Kayden,” he said softly. “You didn’t have to. I’m not worth it--”

*I’m not worth it.* The words stung Kayden’s heart. She cursed Max Anders anew. That bastard had all but destroyed the boy. They’d never been close-- Theo was only her step-son, born from another woman long before Kayden came on the scene. But she was fond of the boy, and she wouldn’t wish a father like Max on her worst enemy.

They arrived and went inside. The apartment was small but tidy, and well within her budget. It was a bit snug sometimes with her, the boy and Aster, but they made do. Would make do.

Justin was there waiting for them. Crusader was one of Kaiser’s men, a cape who could generate dozens of ghostly duplicates of himself. His usefulness on the battlefield made him one of Kaiser’s favored lieutenants. He’d be a lot less favored if Kaiser knew of the relationship growing between Justin and Kaiser’s ex-wife. He nodded at both of them. “You two okay?” he asked.

Theo nodded, looking away; Kayden answered by all but throwing herself in Justin’s arms. “It’s ridiculous,” she half-laughed, sniffling. “I’m powerful enough to wipe the floor with him, and I’m still scared to death to face him down.”

“Max never fights fair if he can avoid it,” Justin said. “That doesn’t make you weak, it makes you smart. Aster’s down for a nap….”
Kayden moved to the crib to look over her daughter. “Theo, go on and get some rest... we’ll order in something for dinner in an hour or two, okay?” Theo half-nodded, half-shrugged, and went back to his room, closing the door behind him.

He sat down on the bed in the dark, his hand clenched into fists on his knees. This time had been the worst yet. There’d been several times where he’d thought he was actually going to die. He only hoped he didn’t wake up screaming from nightmares this time.

Max-- Theo refused to think of him as anything remotely like “father”-- wanted a legacy, and if he couldn’t have the one he wanted he would hammer Theo into the shape of one. He was convinced his superior genes should be showing through his son. That if Theo would just cooperate and Trigger, he would become an incredibly powerful Cape and a testimony to Max Ander’s natural greatness.

The thought of doing anything that would make Max Anders proud made Theo want to puke.

It was only going to get worse. Despite all the physical and verbal abuse, the screaming, the violent assaults out of nowhere, Theo hadn’t triggered. So Max Anders was bound to come up with an even better idea for getting Theo to trigger.

His head dropped to his chest, tears leaking out of his eyes. “Please,” he whispered. “Please somebody just make it stop...”

I can make it stop.

Theo’s head jerked up-- or it would have, if he’d had a head at the moment. All around him was a smoky, endless plain, lit by a midnight indigo sky. In front of him floated a glowing something...

About an hour later, Kayden heard... something odd from Theo’s room. A tremendous thump, as if something had been dropped from a decent height onto the floor. “Theo?” she called out. When no reply came, she went to his room and started to open the door.

“DON’T!” Theo pleaded. “Don’t come in. Don’t look at me!”

Worry clutched at her heart. “Theo, what’s wrong?”

“I-- I triggered! Please, noone can see me--”

“What??” Ignoring his pleas, she pushed the door open and stepped inside. She stared. And stared again. Standing in the middle of Theo’s bedroom was a panda bear wearing black silk pajamas and a frightened look on it’s face. “I, I didn’t want you to see me like this...” it moaned in Theo’s voice.

Justin ran into the room behind her. “Kayden what-- What.”

Kayden stared at her stepson, utterly flabbergasted. “...Kaiser’s gonna freak,” she said.

Justin thought it over. “Well, at least he’s still HALF white,” he muttered.
Lung was known to have only three real moods: Angry. About to Get Angry, and Asleep. His aggression level was astronomical; understandable since the powers that enabled him to transform into an ever more powerful great dragon only activated in combat. So thus he was always, in his own mind, about to spring into just such a combat... because maintaining that mental state kept his powers at a ready slow burn. His face, when he deigned to remove his mask, was always wearing one expression: slow burning anger.

Nonplussed was a new one.

He was still sitting in his oversized recliner-- truly a throne fit for the gods!-- and staring, chin in hand, at what two of his underlings had dragged before him In their clutches was... he struggled to find some other phrase to name it but there simply was none... a panda girl. A red panda to be exact. She was, what was the word? Rubenesque?-- of build, dressed in a simple black taiji uniform, and had her red hair done in a simple long braid which was currently wrapped in one ABB thug’s fist. “We caught her sneaking around the neighborhood,” the other thug was saying. “She’s obviously a new Trigger, and so we knew she would just love to hear your recruitment pitch.” They both grinned in amusement.

“You imbeciles!” The girl spat where she knelt. She squirmed in their grip. “I’m not even ASIAN!”

This got a roar of laughter from several of Lung’s goons. “Not Asian?” the one holding her hair said. “Girl, you couldn’t be more asian if you had ‘Made in China’ stamped on your backside!”

“I’m white, blast it!”

Lung leaned forward in his seat. She froze when she saw him move, but he merely rested his elbows on his knees and his chin on his folded hands. “Then isn’t it strange,” he rumbled, “how you speak perfect Mandarin Chinese?”

The girl got an utterly dumbfounded look on her face. She started to speak, then looked distracted, as if she was trying to hear the words she was saying. “I... but... I... am... I'm speaking Chinese?! How in Hell??” She yammered at herself, switching back and forth from English to Chinese and back again.

Inwardly Lung shrugged. Waking up knowing how to speak an entirely new language was hardly the strangest Cape ability he’d heard of, or even that unique, actually. Turning into a panda woman, well it was definitely unusual, but not of much use as far as he could see. Though some of the customers at the brothel could be... weird... meh. “Whatever you were before, you belong to the ABB now,” he said.

“But--- look, just let me go! I’m no use to you! At all! My powers are gone!!”

“Gone?” Lung repeated.

She apparently realized her mistake because she paused as if to try and think of a way to cover her words, but obviously decided against it. “Yes. I... I’m Rune, from the Empire Eighty Eight.”

That certainly got a reaction from the room. Rune was a teenage Cape who ran with the E88, and was one of the more powerful Capes in the Bay. She could levitate and control several multi-ton objects, so long as she had touched and “marked” them with her power. And if this was her... “Explain,” he ordered.

“I don’t know what happened,” she said. “I was sitting in my room, feeling like crap ‘cause I’d had a bad day. I musta dozed off because I had some sort of... weird dream...” she trailed off. “I only
remember bits of it. Nonsense junk. Then I feel this… JOLT go through me like I’d stuck my head in a light socket. Then I wake up on the floor looking like this, and my powers don’t work any more!

“I freaked out and ran off before anyone could see me, and the next thing I know I’m running into these two idiots!” She directed a kick at her captors.

Lung brooded on it for a second. “Whatever you were, you are ABB property now,” he said. “Put her in one of the cells downstairs.” The two thugs pulled her to her feet.

“What? No! You can’t do this--!” They frogmarched her off.

Lung saw one of his lieutenants looking at him curiously and explained. “If she is lying, she may still prove useful. If she is who she says she is, she is a bargaining chip for dealing with the E88. If she has truly lost her powers, then there are people—wealthy, powerful people—who will pay quite handsomely for her, so they may try to learn why and how.”

“And if she does have powers?”

“Then she will be taught, most swiftly, who her new master is,” Lung said, cracking his knuckles.

Rune fell to her hands and knees in the middle of the floor. She heard the door slam behind her, heard the locks and bolts click home. For the thousandth time that day she tried to use her powers; to rip up a multi-ton chunk of the floor and send it ripping through the door and the goons on the other side of it. Like every other time, nothing happened.

She sat down on the floor and leaned against the bed, groaning. How had she ended up here, like this? For some reason she only remembered a smattering of that strange dream. The little living light that had heard her wishing for a way out—out of the Nazis, out of her “family,” out of the E88—and had promised to help… then… that powerful, painful flash of light, then nothing. Just a big blank.

The frustrating, infuriating thing was: she knew, somehow she knew she had powers. She just couldn’t remember how to make them work!

She sat there, spending what she was sure was the first of many hours yet to come, slowly poking and prodding at her mind like a sore tooth to try and reawaken her powers….
Chapter 15

Taylor did look good in those outfits.

That was one thought that kept popping into Bayleaf’s head over the next few weeks, every time he looked at her. Of course Glory Girl had chivvied him all the way to dropping on Parian’s store while they were doing the fitting. And of course she’d shoved him through the front door just as Taylor was trying on her new swimsuit.

Man, there’d been a lot of… string… in that string bikini…

She’d nearly died of embarrassment on the spot, and he hadn’t done much better. But there was absolutely no lying, she looked good in it. In both forms, too (surprise lesson: when she got flustered she’d swap forms once or twice.) After everyone had gotten over their mortification (or in Vicky’s case stopped laughing), Parian and Vicky had dragged him back in and had him sit through a viewing of Taylor’s new wardrobe. Everything from sports wear to casual to fancy evening wear. It had taken a couple of hours, and Taylor had looked absolutely stunning in everything.

Thank God they hadn’t tried to show him the lingerie. It’d probably have killed him.

Then they’d surprised him with an armload or two of casual wear for himself. At which point he found himself parading up and down the nonexistent catwalk. Parian thankfully had the sense to acknowledge that men needed less in the way of plumage, and so had restrained herself to some dress shirts and slacks, some basic athletic wear and one very nice three piece suit. He paid her in full and threw in as big a bonus as he dared. He had been getting tired of wearing either jeans or baggy sweats everywhere when he wasn’t “on the job.” He’d thought he looked rather sharp in his new clothes.

To judge from the look in Taylor’s eyes, she’d thought so as well.

At the moment she was in her worgen form, wearing a sport crop top and gym shorts. She was having a go at one of the training manikins, punching and kicking with startling speed and ferocity, popping in and out of existence to attack from behind or even overhead. She was as lithie as any wild predator and moved with vicious grace. He was VERY glad he’d gotten the manikins; just a few sparring bouts with her had made it quite clear that while he was a good bit stronger and bigger, she was wicked fast. He’d spent some time healing himself after the first few and decided to leave sparring her to the OTHER dummies in the Workshop, as he put it. Heck, he imagined he could still feel some of those bruises days later...

As he watched she finished with a pair of slashing claw attacks, then switched out to a pair of sai. They were something of a retrofit: Bayleaf had sawn open the handles, filled them with batteries (Actually gnomish shock capacitors), and rebuilt the martial arts weapons as tasers. Neither of them was completely pleased with the result; the Sai were still rather nasty weapons, designed for making deep, nasty puncture wounds in a person. It would be too easy to slip, stab when one should slash, and grievously injure or kill someone. They kept them though, along with the knives and other, nastier weapons. Neither of them was deceived about what might be required of them out there.

He’d made a pair of shock batons, each about two foot long and weighted for balance. They handled a bit better-- but not much. And they simply lacked the intimidation factor of the black sai blades. For safety’s sake though, she’d wear the batons as her first weapons when they went out tonight, with the Sai as holdouts.
It was finally time. She’d demonstrated (often painfully) that her fighting instincts were fully uploaded and operational; her already buff form was sleek and whipcord deadly after weeks of exercise, and she had been going absolutely bugnuts waiting for Danny to give the go-ahead. Like any good father he’d been seriously reluctant to let his baby girl go out superheroing, fearful for her safety. But it was common knowledge that capes couldn’t just sit on their powers and remain mentally healthy-- a fact that Agent had confirmed with Bayleaf was true whether you were Triggered, Cauldron-born or Agent-imbued.

After he’d seen her tossing Bayleaf around their makeshift gym like a sack of laundry, he was a little less worried.

He finished the final connection on the project in front of him and set his tools down. She gave the badly battered practice dummy a final swat and stepped away, throwing a towel around her neck. She stalked over to where he was working, panting and rubbing the nape of her neck with the towel to dry the sweat out. (Worgen sweated. Go figure.) “Whatcha working on?” she said, leaning over the worktable.

Bayleaf picked it up and held it out. It was a thick, wide belt with a large round buckle, almost looking like an old comic book utility belt. “Another upgrade for Glory Girl,” he said. “Fixes that flaw in her forcefield, hopefully.”

“What’s it do, generate another force field under her own?”

“Flaw?” Taylor asked.

Bayleaf nodded. “Most people don’t know it, so don’t go blabbing it around, but GG’s got a vulnerability. If her forcefield takes a solid enough wallop, it shuts off for a second and has to reboot. Bigger the wallop, the longer it’s out of commission-- and even one second is an eternity in combat. This hopefully fixes it.”

“What’s it do, generate another force field under her own?”

“That was my first idea,” he admitted. “But there are problems with that. Like her forcefield not integrating well with another.” He grabbed a marker and drew a human outline, then drew another outline around that. “In the original timeline, it's canonical that her forcefield can change shape... with a big enough traumatic shock to her body-image, anyway.” He grimaced as he remembered Glory Girl’s ghastly experience as “The Wretch.” "I'm figuring on doing something with a little more finesse than body horror trauma, of course.

"Instead of adding another forcefield, I’m going to try and, er, fold hers.” he erased the outer line and replaced it with a repeating line that doubled back at the top of the head and down at the feet, overlapping over itself. Once it overlaps itself enough the layers will “stick” to themselves, making individual bubbles. It takes advantage of how it melds with itself… that’s how she’s able to rest her own hands on her hips without a bubble-gap in between. Sorta like a soap-bubble blowing trick.” he erased the overlaps with his thumbpad, so that what was left was concentric layers around the figure. “Basically ‘teach’ her forcefield to divide itself into several layers instead of just one, so that when the outer one pops--”

“The inner ones are still going strong!” Taylor said. “Clever.”

“Exactly. The belt will automatically ‘blow a bubble’ or, well, FOLD one, every time the outer layer is burst, as well.” Bayleaf laid the belt out on the worktable.

Taylor put her finger to her lip. “But won’t that make each forcefield weaker, stretching them like that?”
“No, changing it's shape didn't diminish its strength in the main timeline, so it shouldn't here. And even if the individual layers are weaker, she’s still going to be safer with multiple layers instead of one. Actually, it might even amplify her physical strength as well, as her forcefield is the source. Like adding extra layers of muscle tissue would strengthen the muscle.” He tapped the dry board. "In time I’m pretty confident that she might not even need the belt; eventually her field will ‘learn’ the new shape and form it automatically. Who knows, with practice she might be able to control the shape herself. ” He set the belt next to the matching tiara.

“Between this and the finished tiara, she’s gonna be thrilled,” Taylor said, looking over the costume pieces. Bayleaf watched her poking at the two items and how she smiled to herself as she thought of Vicky’s reaction.

He got the very sudden urge to do something for her, something better than just a night out scaring muggers in back alleys. “Taylor,” he said, trying to pick his words and struggling to get them out. “I was thinking… before we go on your first patrol tonight...”

She groaned a little, her shoulders drooping. “Don’t tell me you have something else you want to nitpick over before you let me go out with you,” she complained. “What? The costume? The armor? The commlink? The first aid supplies?”

“Um, actually I was thinking dinner?” he said.

She blinked, then coughed in embarrassment. “Oh, uh, sure. What, Pizza? Fugly Bobs?”

“How about Tony’s? Little sit down restaurant that opened up on the Boardwalk?” he said meekly, his ears low but his eyes hopeful. “I know the owner...”

Her eyes went round. Tony’s wasn’t the ritziest place in Brockton Bay, but it was fairly classy. Well outside the typical dining of a Dockworker Union worker’s daughter, for sure. “I...”

“Then maybe a movie? Or dancing...” he continued, hope growing.

“Are you asking me out on a date?” she said faintly.

“Yyyees?!”

Her eyes lit up like Christmas morning. “I... yes! Yes, I’d love to! Omigosh—I gotta get cleaned up- -” she bolted for the bathroom. Then bolted back out. “No wait I gotta call Dad first--”

Bayleaf held up his phone.

“Okay YOU call him I’ll go get ready-- no I’ll get a shower and then go HOME and get-- argh!” She dove into the bathroom again.

Even as giddy as he felt, Bayleaf couldn’t help chuckling. “Dial Tony’s Restorante’. ... Hi, is Tony there? This is Adrian.”

“Hey, Adrian! Where you been? What can I do you for?”

“I was just wondering, you still got that table you said was always reserved for me? And could you maybe scoot a second chair under it?”

“Ohoh, got a little someone you’re trying to impress, eh? Hey, no problem. What time?”

“Got an opening for, oh, seven tonight?”
“Hey, what I tell you, kid? For you we got an opening 24-7. I’ll be waiting with bells on.”

“Great! Thanks, Tony.” He hung up.  “Dial Danny Hebert.” … Hello, Mr. Hebert? This is Adrian. I just wanted to clear some stuff with you for tonight.”

He heard Mr. Hebert take a deep breath. “Adrian, I have full confidence in you, and in my daughter. She’s a Cape, and she’s going to be a hero. I trust you both, and I’ve made my peace with it. I’m not worried.”

“It’s not that. Um, I just...okay, before we go out on patrol, I was wanting to take Taylor out for um, dinner and dancing. Or a movie. Maybe….?”

There was a pause. “Okay,” Danny said. Adrian wasn’t sure if he was amused or aggrieved. “Now I’m worried.”

Bayleaf set Aisha down in front of the console. “Okay, the middle row is the cable news channels and the weather channel. Uh, except the middle one, that’s got the sci fi channel and cartoon network, just hit the channel selector. The lower and outside screens are tuned to webcams all over Brockton Bay. The PRT, Medhall, the Boardwalk, etc. just the major landmarks and intersections. The top four screens are to the mini quadcopters on the roof. Don’t worry about them being spotted, I stealthed ‘em up. You should be able to fly anywhere over the Bay clear out to Captain’s hill-- they’re locked below a certain altitude to avoid air traffic. They’ve got claw feet so they’ll land on about any surface. Try not to lose ‘em, okay? Replacing ‘em’s a drag.

“Okay, these dials are the radio, CB, Police Band, and this here is the link to our intercoms. You can patch just about anything through to us, audio or video. Use THIS screen and keyboard to access the internet, PHO, et cetera. Use these buttons to record anything off of any of the screens.”

“Bathroom’s through there-- watch out for the bidet-- and fridge is over there. If you need snacks or anything, just tell Obie there and he’ll fetch it for you.” The Alarm-o-bot saluted smartly.

“Oh, and your call sign is ‘Crow’s Nest.’ Any questions?”

“It ain’t like you’ve gone over this mess a hundred times this week already,” Aisha groused.

The “comm center” was Bayleaf’s latest accomplishment. It was basically a dozen or so computer and TV screens, laptops, shortwave radios and desktop towers plugged into each other, synchronized through some very creative software and bolted into a rack made out of modular steel shelving. It was also his best effort at giving Aisha a way to contribute to the team while putting her miles away from any actual danger. It was his hope that the thousand-and-one toys to play with would keep her notoriously short attention span sated. Regardless he was setting all the cameras to auto-record, just in case.

“It’ll be about midnight when we actually hit the street,” he said. “Do what you want until then. We’ll beep you when we’re suited up and on the rooftops.”

“Got it.” Already she was fiddling with the controls on quadcopter 1. It and its three siblings were perched on the roof, under the steel parking canopy he’d put up there. (It was pretty carefully
camouflaged as part of the uneven rooftops all around it; quite a few people would probably have kittens over some of the things he had parked up there.)

“Great.” He fidgeted a bit. “My tie straight?” He was in his human form, and fidgeting like a schoolboy getting ready for a class photo. She looked over, looked him up and down, then reached over and straightened the tie. “Be ready to lose the noose, though,” she said. “You’re gonna be dancing.”

“Right, right. Wish me luck.” He bounded for the door and out into the evening.

Five minutes later there was a knock at the skylight. Victoria Dallon stuck her head down through the open window. “Is he gone yet?” she stage whispered.

“If he wasn’t you’d already know it,” Aisha said sarcastically. “Get your butt in here, blondie, we got some spying to do.”

Eagerly Vicky dove down into the Workshop and pulled up a chair next to Aisha. “He goes out on a date and leaves you with a fleet of invisible spy drones? The fool!” Vicky cackled. A moment later a pair of workerbots came trotting up with bowls of popcorn, pretzels and bottles of pop.

Aisha sat back and twisted the top off her soda as Quadcopter 1 spun up. “This is gonna be good.”

Adrian’s Uber pulled up at Taylor’s door promptly at six thirty. She was waiting there on the front step in a knee-length, off-the-shoulder black dress and toeless sandals that laced up to mid calf. Her black hair tumbled down over her shoulders, and gold glinted at her neck, ears, fingers and wrists. She clutched her purse in nervous hands. Her glasses were gone-- they’d been fakes ever since her metamorphosis-- and her eyes shone.

Adrian’s breath caught in his throat at the sight of her. He hopped out of the car and hastened to give her a hand down the steps, nearly tripping on that danged wobbly first step himself in the process. “You look amazing,” he blurted out, blushing at the cliche’. Cliche’ or not it was the right thing to say, apparently. She smiled and blushed like a rose. As she got in he took note that her jewelry was some of her own making. That he was pleased to see. Even with nothing else those trinkets at her ears, fingers and throat meant she was better armored than a police officer in full SWAT gear.

They arrived at Tony’s just before seven. The maitre’d heard Adrian’s name and promptly escorted them to a window seat, looking out on the bay. Moments later a robust fellow with a paunch and a curling handlebar mustache under a ripe tomato of a nose came out to greet them. “Hello, I am Tony, and I’ll be serving you two tonight,” he said, handing each of them a menu with a flourish. “Welcome back, Adrian m’boy!” He said, beaming. “And this lovely thing is…?”

“Hey, Tony,” Adrian said, beaming back. “This is Taylor, Taylor Hebert.” Tony greeted Taylor with a kiss to the knuckles, making her giggle. “How’s business?” Adrian asked.

“Oh, going great guns since you dropped your little notebook with the chefs,” Tony chuckled. “Speaking of which, I gotta go check on them. I’ll let you two look over the menu...” he trundled off.

Taylor waited till he was out of earshot, then whispered, “Little notebook?”
Adrian grinned. “I wrote out a few recipes for his kitchen staff, even whipped up a few. They went nuts over them.”

“You cook?”

“Yep. And so do you, remember?” he said. “Our Azeroth cooking skills are maxed out. We both know over three hundred different recipes, from a dozen different races and twice that many cultures. Meats, salads, soups, desserts, beverages... Not just the recipes, but the ingredients, scents, textures, flavors... so we can make substitutions on the fly. I bet you ‘remember’ what pickled Stormray or Suramar Surf and Turf taste like.”

She paused and looked like she was trying to recall something. “You’re right, I do!” she exclaimed. “How weird.”

“But useful. A dozen recipes to spice up Tony’s menu, and here we are.”

She thought for a minute and her nose wrinkled. “I hope none of them were crispy bat wing or Kaldorei Spider Kabob,” she said, amused.

“Actually you can substitute crabmeat for that second one-- oh, hi Tony,” Adrian said.

“You kids had time to decide?” Tony asked cheerfully.

Taylor had only glanced at the menu. “Oh, um...” she skimmed down the rather sizeable selection, gave up and looked at Adrian. “I don’t know. You decide.”

To her confusion Tony and Adrian glanced sideways at each other. Tony’s mouth and eyebrows twisted like putty into a droll, amused expression while Adrian started biting his lip, face turning red as he fought a smile. “You sure you can eat all that?” Tony quipped, confusing her further.

“Last page, bottom half,” Adrian finally said, pointing at her menu. Puzzled, she opened her menu again and looked. Outlined in special trim was a boxed-in area:

ENDED

LADY’S CHOICE MENU

I Don’t Know.....Seafood sampler platter
I Don’t Care..... T-bone and potato or fries
I’m Not Sure.... Chicken A la King w/ rice pilaf
Oh, You Decide.... Surf and Turf

DESSERT

Just a Salad....Cherry Pie
But I’m on a diet... Double Chocolate fudge cake
Taylor screwed up her face at them. Tony and Adrian broke out laughing.

“Fine, fine,” she growled. “Surf and Turf. And that fudge cake sounds really good.”

“What I tell you, boy?” Tony chuckled, his gut bouncing. “They get mad, but they eat it all the same…”

“Make it two, Tony,” Adrian said. “With… sparkling lemon to drink?”

Tony took their menus. “Good choice,” he beamed at them. “It’ll be out in no time.” He trundled away again, to be briefly replaced by a young earnest waiter who set out their silverware, beverages and water. Taylor sipped at hers and raised her eyebrows. “This is good,” she said.

“Not exactly your everyday soda pop,” Adrian agreed. “Real lemon and citrus, sparkling water and cane sugar. Mixed up right here. Tony would die before serving anything made from a soft drink syrup.”

The steak and shrimp were delicious, and almost too much to finish. For not the first time Taylor was thankful for her worgen metabolism… it would have broken her heart not to eat the decadent, gooey chocolate masterpiece they brought out for dessert.

They had just started on dessert when Adrian glanced out the window and froze. “Well well, small world,” he muttered. Taylor glanced over her shoulder. Standing out on the boardwalk, gawking at them through the picture window like a pair of stunned herring, were Madison and Emma.

Taylor couldn’t resist. She couldn’t. Without breaking eye contact with either of them, she took an enormous forkful of her chocolate dessert, put it in her mouth and chewed slowly, half closing her eyes as she savored it. Then she gave them both a little fingertip wave.

Adrian joined in, waggling his fingers at the two bitch-queens of Winslow. “Hi girls. We’re in here, you’re not. Bye bye. Bye bye now,” he whispered under his breath, smiling toothily. Madison did the classic Offended Teen Oh-Em-Gee Eyeroll while Emma swelled up as if she was going to explode. They turned and marched off down the boardwalk, noses in the air.

Taylor looked Adrian in mock sorrow. “We are bad, bad people,” she said sadly. They both broke up giggling. When they both finally caught their breath, she looked at Adrian ruefully. “We’ve both got to stop living our lives by measuring them against theirs,” she said a little wistfully.

Adrian sighed and nodded. Privately he was glad to hear it… one of his fears was that Taylor might never be able to move on. When she said it, though, he realized maybe he ought to worry a little about moving on himself. Taylor’s bullies may have brought the two of them together but it was a lousy thing to build a future on.

The girl in front of him was smart, a lover of the classics but open to the new; she had a massively overdeveloped sense of responsibility that made Peter Parker look like a careless hedonist-- it would
take careful watching to keep it from turning into undeserved guilt and self-loathing like it had in the baseline. He’d seen inklings of her cunning and tactical genius, and yes, even her ruthless streak, but it was well-placed and, in a dangerous world, well-needed. In the baseline, she yearned to do what was right, to be a hero, even when she’d been forced by cruel contrivance into the role of a villain; She was the same here. She was fiercely loyal to those she loved, right or wrong… which was part of why Emma had scarred her so deeply and cruelly.

She was worth knowing.

They finished their meal, thanked Tony profusely and left a hefty tip. It was a chilly February evening but they took a little walk anyway to settle their meal. She leaned on his arm and weather or no, they both felt warm. “So where to now?” Taylor said.

“Well, I was thinking…” Adrian said slowly. “Since tonight is supposed to be your big debut as a Cape… and we’re still going out on patrol at midnight, but…”

“What?”

He morphed into Bayleaf. Thanks to the Quickchange spell his suit switched out for something more dance-floor worthy. “How about we have your debut in a different way?”

She grinned and skipped into the shadows of the alley between the shops (she was a touch more timid about trusting the Quickchange spell than he was.) “Give me a second to put my dancing shoes on…”

Gregor the Snail and Newter were idling about at the entryway of the Palanquin, watching people file in under the marquee and past the bouncer. Arbitrarily they were keeping their eye out for any trouble the mundane bouncers couldn’t handle; more realistically they were simply whiling away some time people-watching. It was a slow night, even for that.

Of course in a moment things quickly picked up. Newter was the first to spot a familiar looking silhouette in the back of the crowd waiting to get in. He tapped Greg on the arm with a (gloved) hand. “Is that who I think…?” he pointed.

Greg looked and straightened up. “Well, well, it seems our wolfen friend is back,” he said. His voice went up in surprise. “With.. a friend.” He was right. Skinwalker indeed had a female of the species with him: a she-wolf with pale gray fur and tumbling locks of black hair pressed into his side.

Newter let out a low whistle. “And a hottie, no less.” At Gregor’s look he snorted. “Greg, my brotha, I look like a punk rock iguana. I’m gonna diss a cutie with a cute booty ‘cause she’s a little on the fuzzy side?”

Gregor shrugged. “Fair enough.” He motioned for the bouncer to let the pair through the velvet rope. Both were certainly dressed well for the evening; Skinwalker was dressed in a white sleeveless shirt and loose black slacks; his date (mate?) was wearing an off the shoulder black silk crop top and mini skirt, grey leggings and strap sandals on her digitigrade feet. Gold gleamed at their necks, fingers, and at the lobes of the female’s ears.
“Gregor, Newter,” Skinwalker said, his mellow bass voice full of genuine pleasure. “Glad to see you’re still in town. Surprised, actually.” His voice had a lilt of curiosity on the last few words.

“We… consulted an expert or two,” Gregor said. “It appears that, for whatever reason, Brockton Bay is the place to be if one wishes to avoid, ah, certain kinds of prying eyes.” He nodded meaningfully. Skinwalker nodded in reply, “And so, Skinwalker— would you care to introduce us to your lovely lady friend?”

“Skinwalker is more of a title,” the wolfman said. “My name is actually Bayleaf. And this is Hemlokk.”

“Hello,” she said softly, obviously a touch shy. Her voice was a sweet contralto.

“Charmed,” Gregor replied. Neither case 53 offered their hand; physical contact from either of them could be— unpleasant.

“This is basically her debut night as a Cape,” Skinwalker… Bayleaf… went on. He scratched the back of his head. “I figured this might be a little preferable to either a press release or getting photographed punching a mugger.” The Faultline capes chuckled in understanding.

“Don’t let us keep you then,” Newter said with a grin, waving them towards the entrance. “Go on in and tear up the floor a little, have some fun.” The worgen took the invitation; he put his arm around his girl and guided her in through the glass doors. The thumping music spilled out into the street briefly, then was cut off as the pneumatic doors swung closed.

Gregor gave Newter a chiding look. “You’re going to go sneak off to the DJ’s booth and start taking photos of them to post on PHO, aren’t you,” he said.

“Well he did say it was their debut,” Newter said with a grin. He leaped off the parking pylon he was perched on and shot up the outside wall, slipping inside through a window on the second floor.

“Aha, they’re in Tony’s still. Looks like dessert. Man that looks good.” Aisha twitched the controllers; the camera view zoomed in. “Ooh, she’s all smilin’ and laughin,’ Wolfman Jack here is smoooooth, apparently,” she chortled.

She and Vicky were spying on the two lovebirds, thanks to the stealthed quadcopters Bayleaf had provided. They were intended for surveillance over the city for villainous activity, but expecting either of the two hyperactive, attention-deficit girls to stick to that was a vain hope.

Vicky fished for more pretzels in the nearby bowl. “Bring the copter around, maybe we can read his lips— wait, who are they?” They watched as two overly made up and blatantly underdressed high school girls stopped in front of the restaurant window and gawked at the couple like they were fish in an aquarium.


Vicky immediately knew who she was talking about. “Ugh, what are THOSE two doing THERE of
all places? Don’t they know there’s a one-Skank limit in that part of the Boardwalk?"

“HAH! Oh no, wait…. Ohhh, Tay-tay givin’ them the diss. HAHA! Look at that cow Emma’s face!” Aisha slapped her hand on the control panel, laughing.

“And now they’re waving bye bye… ooooh, ice cold.” Vicki held up one of the microphones on the comm and did her best golfing-sportcaster voice. “And it’s a beautiful brushoff by the Bayleaf-Hemlokk team, I’d give it an easy 8 out of 10 for form…”

“Aaaaand away they go, Resting Bitch Face Mode active.”

“And the couple are back to their dinner like nothing happened.” Vicki nodded. “Good for you, Taylor. You don’t need to sink to their level.” The girls swapped an evil grin.

“...We’ll do it for you,” Aisha cackled. She brought the quadcopter around and looked for a target.

It didn’t take long. Someone had dumped a half-eaten calzone on top of one of the boardwalk trashcans. For a miracle the seagulls hadn’t snagged it. The quadcopter didn’t have any tools or weapons, but it did have specially made gripping-claw landing gear that let it perch just about anywhere. Aisha carefully brought the quadcopter down, claws extended, and just barely managed to snag the rotting sandwich’s wrapper in the cam-copter’s talons. The motors strained, but the quadcopter went aloft with its cargo.

The first clue either Emma or Madison had that their evening was about to go downhill was when something rancid and nasty dripped on Madison’s head from a great height. About half the rotting calzone’s fillings slopped out, landing square on Madison’s cute little beribboned head. The squeal of shock and horror was epic.

Before Emma could do more than react in surprise, the quadcopter released the rest of its load. It landed with a splat, foursquare, right on her head, wrapper and all, covering her hundred-dollar salon job like the world’s most horrible beret. Even over the microphones the shrieks and screams were bloodchilling.

“Crow’s Nest to Glory Girl: target annihilated.” Aisha smirked.

“Glory Girl to Mama Crow: Mission accomplished. well done, it’s Miller Time!” Vicky shot back.

The two high fived each other.

Sparky…Shar’din Belore… woke up. He hit the can, showered, brushed his teeth, and groomed his blonde hair into the topknot-ponytail thing he’d found it in that first day. He took his red, blue and gold robes off their hanger and donned them. Then he wrapped his head in an ace bandage to hide his pointy ears and donned sunglasses to hide his glowing green eyes.

He walked out through the living room. His dad was there, still in his underpants, scratching his gut and watching the TV. “Hey Dad. I’m off to try and prevent the apocalypse, ‘Kay?” Gildin said.

His father grunted and looked up, then quickly looked away. “Look, don’t care about whatever
weird cult you’re in,” he said. “Just leave me out of it.”

“Okay, dad,” Shar’Din said.

“And we’re out of beer. Tell your Mom to put it on the grocery list.”

“Right.” He had no intention of doing any such thing. He picked up his winged staff and walked out the front door.

Once he’d been given his mission, Shar’Din found he had a little problem. He knew some of the most terrible secrets of the world, including how it was going to end if the people with all the money and power didn’t get their heads out of their rear ends.

The problem was that this left no one for him to tell and ask for help. The PRT? Run by the bad guys. The Government? Again, run by the bad guys. And some of the bad guys were run by even bigger, badder bad guys, and even the ordinary bad guys could probably squish him like a grape.

But Zippy the Cosmic Glowing Light Thing had said there were people who could help him. People right in Brockton Bay. Zippy wasn’t allowed to tell him who they were because of “The Rules.” But Zippy swore that if he looked, he’d find them. So for lack of any better plan, Shar’Din had taken to spending all day walking up and down the streets of the city, searching with his new powers to try and find these people, whoever they were.

Of course he spent a good portion of that time running. Whether it was cops, security guards or angry guys pouring out of a biker bar, most people in Brockton Bay weren’t too welcoming to skinny blonde weirdos in dresses who rambled on about the End of the World… half of it in some weird foreign language. His Blink and Invisibility powers had gotten a heck of a workout.

The thing that was making it worse was… he was jonesing. For something. He didn’t know what. He didn’t have to worry about getting hooked on dope anymore; he’d tried smoking some nug he had left, and he might as well have been smoking straw. He guessed Blood Elves didn’t get high on grass. Beer just made him barf. And he wasn’t about to go picking through his Mom’s prescriptions, hell no. But the craving was getting worse every day, leaving him feeling weak and crappy.

He hoped he found these other people soon, and that they could tell him what was wrong. It’d better be today or he was going to be too sick to get out of bed by the morning…

Greg was still in the junkyard.

He’d spent day after day using raw Light to smelt, forge, and hammer the raw scrap around him into what he needed. He bathed in an open steel barrel full of rainwater. He slept inside one of the junked cars, wrapped in blankets he’d stolen from a clothing donation bin. He’d had a stroke of fortune and the same gift that let him pick out just the right scraps of metal from the yard led him to a small rotten box with a handful of old silver quarters in it. He’d pawned those, and used the money to buy food when he was hungry.
He learned about his powers. He practiced healing on his blistered hands and his bruised fingers. He cast auras and protections upon himself. Whenever he wasn’t working on the tools of his trade, he practiced thrusts, strikes, parries and shieldcraft against his own shadow, and eventually against a crude sparring dummy made from an old store manikin…. All of it with the monomaniacal singlemindedness with which he’d once devoted himself to leveling characters in an RPG, or in arguing over inane things in PHO. All he’d lacked was something worthwhile to devote himself to. This was it.

He didn’t know why he was left alone. He didn’t know that the bums and streetwalkers and other detritus of the neighborhood had seen the ghostly lights and eerie glows cast by his powers and had begun whispering ghost stories to one another and to anyone who would listen. Those few who didn’t believe in ghosts (at least in the daylight) steered clear of the junkyard anyway; it took few brains in this world to recognize the possible oddities of a Cape, and to know enough to stay far away for one’s own health.

Greg, Vindicator Gregory, finished the last piece of equipment that morning. He spent the rest of the day resting, either sleeping or meditating and soaking his body in the rainbarrel and in the Light, purging the aches and pains from his body.

Tonight was the night.

Someone was knocking-- no, banging-- at the door. Kayden got to it first, with a piece of her mind to give to whoever was on the other side. She cracked the door open, keeping the chain hooked. “Whoever you are there is a baby sleeping in here and—oh. YOU.” Her mood only grew icier when she recognized who was on the other side of the door.

Outside the door stood two men with severe haircuts, black business suits and dark glasses. They were ostensibly Max Anders’ bodyguards, but Purity knew quite well they were footsoldiers from the E88. Max had promoted them to the job of posing as security from the more loyal ranks of the neonazi gang, rather than hiring real security who might get in his way as Kaiser. They were no less skilled, however, and no less dangerous.

They were also no less committed to obeying Max Anders’ orders to the letter. “Ma’am, Max Anders has been made aware that his son has manifested as a Cape. He wishes for him to come home immediately. We’re here to pick him up.” It wasn’t a request.

Kayden let a little of Purity’s light seep from her eyes. The two men stiffened, but didn’t back down. “Theo is going nowhere,” she said flatly.

A third man appeared, this one a round-shouldered, balding man with a briefcase in his hand and a face like a rat. “Ma’am, I am Jason Sneed, an attorney representing your ex-husband,” he said, raising his nasal voice loud enough to be heard inside the apartment. “I am to inform you that if you do not return Max Anders’ son to him immediately, you will be served with court papers demanding custody of BOTH children--”

Inside a baby started crying. The glimmer of light in Kayden’s eyes turned to roadside flares as
Sneed proceeded to make possibly the last mistake of his life. “If you think you will intimidate me, you little---”

“Kayden, what’s going on? The yelling woke Aster.” Theo’s voice came from behind her.

Sneed was busy demonstrating his complete lack of survival instinct. “Miz Anders,” he said triumphantly, “Is about to learn the consequences of trying to cross Max Anders about his wishes for his own offspring. Now, we will either be leaving with Theo Anders, or we will be leaving with Theo AND Aster Anders--”

Kayden Anders was pulled back out of the way. The door chain snapped as the door was ripped open. Standing in the doorway was a six foot tall panda with a very upset expression on its face-- or in other words, a large, angry bear. Max Anders’ men responded in the manner one might expect of armed guards confronted with a large, angry bear; one grabbed Sneed and pulled him to safety while the other whipped a rather large gun out of his jacket and aimed it at the bear’s head.

In the blink of an eye, Theo’s hand whipped out, blocked the hammer of the gun with one finger while twisting it down and to the side and out of the man’s grip. Once the gun was free he then lashed out and struck the armed guard in the face.

Oh, about seven, maybe eight times.

The blows came so quickly it looked like the man was looking in multiple directions at the same time. When they finally stopped, Theo reached up, smoothed the man’s hair, straightened his crooked sunglasses, and then poked him in the forehead with a single stubby panda finger. The man collapsed to the hallway floor like a loose sack of lincoln logs.

He looked over to the two men still standing and held out his hand. “Papers,” he said. Sneed very carefully pulled the manila envelope out of his briefcase and put it in the panda’s hand with his own trembling one.

Starting a campfire is a level-zero ability anyone in Azeroth can do. Theo merely focused his attention on the envelope and it went up like flash paper. The two men flinched as the flame flared then went out, but neither made a move for a weapon. “You,” Theo said, his voice as calm as if he were on a walk in park, “Pick him up.” The armed goon moved to obey, heaving his partner off the floor. “You’re going to be driving me to the Ale Hall. My father and I are going to… talk.”

“Theo… you don’t have to--” Kayden started to say.

To her surprise he simply gave her a kiss on the cheek. “You didn’t have to help me, either,” he said. “I know you never could really make yourself be a Mother to me-- but you and Aster, you’re still family. I’ll be fine, I promise.”

He pulled a staff from behind the door; it was a stout bamboo pole that Justin had picked up in Chinatown as a joke, at some junk “martial arts” shop. He put it over one shoulder and followed his father’s properly chastened flunkies down the hall to the stairwell and descended out of sight.
The girl once known as the teenage villain Rune had learned some interesting and enlightening things during her days as a prisoner of the ABB.

The first thing she learned was that, regardless of their race or creed or color, racists were all exactly the same sort of A-holes.

Now this doesn’t sound like much of a revelation, but for a girl like her who had spent her entire life being raised by Nazis… first by the Herron clan, then by the E88… it was something of an epiphany. When you’re a member of a paranoid, insular, ideological group, it never occurs to you that other people who you think of as A-holes think exactly like you do until you have to listen to them. One of the fastest ways to get someone to question their beliefs is to confront them with someone else whom they vehemently disagree with, and point out that these people they so despise are using the exact same arguments as them.

Rune had just spent days on end surrounded by Asian racists who used the same rhetoric, the same arguments, the same emotional appeals to justify their bigotry that her white supremacist family and friends used to justify theirs. The only real difference she saw between white racism and yellow racism was that even under Lung’s thumb the Asians were all harboring seething racial resentment against each other too. The Japanese hated the Chinese, who talked smack about the Koreans, who thought that the Vietnamese were apes and pigs, who swore that the Japanese were all warmongering barbarians… names and nationalities interchangeable at the drop of a hat. The observation amused her-- till she remembered how some of her relatives in the Herron clan had talked about the French, or the Italians, or the Irish. Cripes, the Irish. Freckled redheads who were so pale they practically burst into flame under open sunlight. How much whiter could you get? But not “white” enough for some of her clan, she realized…

Many of her precious, family indoctrinated beliefs were beginning to crumble.

She also came to the realization that outside of “Rune the Neonazi Villainess,” she didn’t have much of an identity of her own at all. Hell, she wasn’t even quite sure what her own real name was, it’d been changed so many times. Various members of the Herron clan had to leave town and change their names at different times for different reasons, her own included. Then her parents had broken away from the Herron clan and changed their names. Then she, in a fit of teen rebellion, had run away back to the clan, changing her name yet again-- then she’d Triggered, and she’d fled to the E88 and been dubbed “Rune.” It was kind of a laugh; her name at the time had been “Renee.”

Then that kid, what’s his name, Hawk, had died. Just-- blam. Dead. Shot by some junkie in a turf fight with the Merchants. She’d never known anybody who’d died before, not another kid her age anyway. It had hit her deep. It’d sunk in finally that she wasn’t bulletproof either; she could end it just like this, and for just as stupid a reason-- fighting for the right to sell drugs on a couple of blocks of ratty tenement buildings. She’d wanted out. Out of the E88, out of the Herron clan, out of her ever-so-polite closeted racist family, out of the supervillain scene.

Then she’d Triggered a second time and lost everything. Her powers, her face, her body, even, apparently, a huge swath of her memories. Leastways she had odd chunks of memories floating around loose… names, places, phrases, recipes for foods she’d never tasted, instructions in first aid-- a course she didn’t remember taking… She wasn’t even sure of her own name.

Now she was a prisoner of the ABB, and Lung’s property. The fool didn’t even really have a use for her. She had no powers. If he tried to flaunt her as an ABB cape he’d be a laughingstock. Yet like a
child who refused to give up a toy he didn’t even want, he kept her prisoner “till he decided what to do with her.”

The possibilities made her shudder.

Her captors called her “MeiMei.” Some sort of mocking diminutive in Chinese society, she suspected. (She knew the language, but not the culture.) Apparently finding out she used to be Rune was hilarious. They fed her canned la choy, made her dress in a cheongsam or kimono, poked her with bamboo and asked her if she wanted a snack… the last one to try that had dang near lost fingers.

Then they’d slipped up. Bored to tears, she’d pleaded for something, anything to alleviate the boredom. As a masterpiece of mockery, they’d given her an oriental brush and pen set, with bottles of ink, brushes and a little lap/floor table to work from. Even a mortar and pestle meant for grinding new ink.

Among all the muddled memories cluttering up her mind, she remembered that she knew the Azeroth trade skill Inscription.

Ever since they’d given it to her she’d spent every moment they were watching her practicing, painting cranes and herons and the Chinese astrology animals and naked geishas combing their hair and whatever oriental crap she could think of. When they weren’t looking she was busy inscribing the most potent scrolls she could manage. She passed them off as practice sheets of her brush strokes, and hidden the most powerful ones away so they couldn’t throw them out.

Her pretty paintings, at least, earned her some favor with Lung. They represented class and culture and traditional values of the East, things he could trade on. Simply having such pictures painted and framed in his office meant he gained respect from his underlings and potential allies. He allowed her a few more creature comforts for that; a proper bed. Better food.

More paints and pigments.

Paintings of naked geishas were apparently good as money among the ABB men; she traded several of them for more materials and substances to grind into ink. They thought she wanted the various plants and roots for color. She needed them in order to make her scrolls more potent.

By blind luck she had stumbled across a combination of herbs that, when milled, produced Cerulean Pigments. She slowly, painfully saved those up, and converted them into War Paints, which she saved up in turn. She pocketed every by product-- the sorcerous earths and the like-- and hid them in her haversack, which by miracle had gone undiscovered…

Then they had left a plain, ordinary wooden handled broom in her room, for her to clean with. She’d broken the handle off the brush, taken her precious war paints and crafted a Crystalfire Spellstaff.

She had a weapon.

Then a contact from somewhere in Asia heard the rumor that Lung was the owner of a real, live Tanuki. Her. They were sending a representative who was going to be offering payment-- not in Yen or dollars or in any paper currency, but in gems. Rubies. Several hundred carats worth. If she didn’t escape that night, by next morning she’d be on a slow boat to China, for real, and God only knew what sort of fate.

But she had to wait. The trader’s offer was part of her plan to survive.

The moment came. The representative, a tiny little wrinkled yellow man with white hair and an
expensive business suit, came to her room and saw her. He exclaimed and rattled off—something… in a dialect she didn’t recognize. He saw the paintings and yammered some more. Apparently Lung was going to get a phat deal out of this.

She waited until they had retreated to his office, then quickly changed out of the oriental geisha- whatever-it-was they’d dolled her up in and into the kung fu pajamas she’d begged off of one naked geisha painting customer, slung her Haversack full of scrolls and inks and ingredients over her shoulder, and retrieved her Spellstaff and the one Scroll of Strength she had managed to inscribe from under her bed. It would last only thirty minutes. She would have to hustle.

She gripped her inscribed staff tightly and activated the scroll. It dissolved into glowing flakes of ash, as arcane energies infused her body. She felt a rush of incredible power; the energy infused set off a chain reaction and she activated the staff. It rebounded and redoubled. She felt her mind grow clearer, sharper, and her body a hundred fold more energetic. And her strength….

The Scroll of strength, in World of Warcraft terms, raised her physical strength by forty points. What did that mean in real world terms? The guards lazing about on either side of her prison door learned. They were caught quite by surprise when she kicked the heavy wooden door, its frame, and a good chunk of the wall on either side into the far wall, with them in between the wall and it. She ran out over top of them, only pausing to give the chunk of wall flattening them to the floor a couple of good stomps and a selection of swearing in Mandarin and Redneck before fleeing.

She raced through the halls and down the stairs. ABB members of all sizes and shapes heard the ruckus and poured out of side doors, filling the corridor. She didn’t even slow down; she didn’t dare. It was then that a good number of Lung’s gang were introduced to the concept of the ‘foe tossing charge.’ she charged straight at them, never swerving, swatting each of them out of the way and into the walls or ceiling without breaking stride. Panic was on her side, as those with guns all shot wide of their mark even as she bore them down into the floor. She was no martial artist but she currently had the strength of ten men, the stamina of a dozen marathon runners and the ‘intellect’—that is to say the hand-eye coordination, spatial awareness and reflexes—of a black belt in any martial art you care to name. Even a bumbling schoolyard brawler would be devastating with those, and Rune… MeiMei… had been in a scrap or two in the past, to say the least.

She’d found her way, somehow, to an open atrium in the middle of the building… was Lung’s HQ some sort of office building?—when Oni Lee made his appearance. This particular bastard’s talent was the ability to teleport, only when he teleported he left behind a clone that kept on fighting for several seconds till it crumbled to dust, while the original appeared someone else. It made him a nightmare to fight, as he could leave behind “suicide bomber” copies of himself who would detonate their grenade bandoliers, taking out anything and anyone around him.

It was also turning him into a vegetable. Every time he ‘hopped’ like that it briefly stopped the neural signals in his brain, like a hard reboot— which did a number on his short and long term memory, rendering him more and more incapable of anything but passive instruction while his mind tried to re-lay his neural pathways. He was Lung’s number one lieutenant… probably because he had all the independent thought and initiative of a baked potato.

But fighting, that he was still good at. He teleported in and lashed out in a high kick, catching MeiMei in the face and knocking her back before she could parry. As he pressed the attack from the front he reappeared behind her, striking her in the back of the knee and dropping her crashing to the floor even as the one in front of her crumbled to dust. One or two more strikes and she would be out for the count.

Unfortunately for Oni Lee, MeiMei wasn’t working on autopilot like he was. In fact the staff was
overclocking her brain. That was how after just two strikes she was able to predict his next appearance and spin her staff around to strike where he was weakest.

Oni Lee reappeared on the rail to her left just in time for his crotch to intercept the end of her whirling staff. There was a wet, cartilaginous crunch and he doubled up, eyes all but bulging through his oriental demon mask. With only the faintest of groans he toppled backwards over the rail and fell to the atrium floor two levels below.

She didn’t even wait for the whump as he hit the tiles. She was already on the move.

Lung and the intermediary were in Lung’s preferred office for.. sensitive financial interactions. It was a corporate boardroom with a long table, some few chairs scattered around it and nothing else. He and the intermediary sat on opposite sides of the long table; Lung with his own men standing around him, the intermediary with his own escorts, stiff and unsmiling. Wordlessly the man opened the case, revealing a velvet bag the size of his fist. He opened it and poured the contents out into the case. Dozens of pigeon’s blood rubies, some of the rarest gemstones in Asia, glittered under the unflattering office lights.

One of Lung’s men took a jeweler’s loupe and examined one of the stones. His eyebrows rose. He turned and nodded to Lung. As the intermediary carefully put the stones one by one back into the bag, one of Lung’s rare smiles slowly spread across his face.

It was wiped off in the next instant when, just as the intermediary put the last stone back in the velvet bag, the very girl who was the object of the exchange exploded through the doors at the North end of the room. She leapt onto the table, ran its full length, and snagged the looped cord of the gem bag with the end of her staff. She vaulted over the heads of the men there, shattering the windowpane with the other end of her staff, and leaped out into the night.

The intermediary’s cry of horror was drowned out by Lung’s roar of rage.

MeiMei landed painfully in the decorative bushes below the window, barely missing the shattered glass, and rolled to her feet. “Never… doing that… again,” she groaned. She started running, heedless of the gravel crunching under her feet. Leathered footpads were good for something it seemed. Behind her the “abandoned” office building was exploding into noise and activity. She ran on heedless, not looking back.

Anyone else might say that her behavior was lunacy. Why not just run straight out once she was free from her cell? Why double back and risk everything to steal a bag of gems?

Despite appearances there was a method to her madness. She did have a plan. She wasn’t crazy or greedy or crazy with greed… though a bag of gems worth at least a cool million might drive a few people bonkers. She was alone. She was a Case 53, a mutated cape. She no longer had a family. She no longer had a gang. She couldn’t go to the PRT because… her sputtering memory only provided “very very bad” as an explanation for that. But she chose to trust it. And even if she’d escaped empty handed she would still have had the ABB on her tail. Her million-dollar pricetag tail.

If she was going to stay free for longer than it took to do a hundred yard dash, she was going to need to hire or bribe or pay off some help-- and that bag of rubies was the ticket. She yanked the bag off the end of her staff and stuffed it down into the magic pouch she’d found on her belt, keeping one stone in her hand. Now who the hell could she hire to help her--

She turned a corner and nearly plowed headlong into a dog disguised as a rhinoceros.

She backed up a step and looked up. Way up. There were three huge mutated rhino-alligator-dog
things blocking her way. Perched on their backs were four teenagers: a petite, freckled blonde girl in a domino mask and a black and purple spandex suit; a delicate, girly looking boy with curly black hair in a renfaire costume, with a jester’s staff and mask; a tall, tough-looking guy in a leather jacket and skull-motif helmet who had boiling clouds of blackness seeping off him, and a rough, mannish looking brown haired girl in tank-top, cargo pants, combat boots and a cheap plastic bulldog mask....

The Undersiders; Tattletale, Regent, Grue and Hellhound aka Bitch.

They were obviously as surprised to see her as she was to see them.

“A Panda chick?” the guy in the renfaire costume blurted.

Okay, maybe a bit MORE surprised.

“You’ll do,” MeiMei said. Before anyone could ask what she meant by that, she took the ruby she’d picked and held it up between her thumb and forefinger. It was about the size of her thumb. The blonde girl’s eyes bugged out behind her mask and she made a choking noise. MeiMei spoke up and tried to sound confident. “I’ll pay you four of these to help me escape,” she said loudly.

“From who?” the guy in the helmet said suspiciously.

There was a distant bellow of rage. Meimei looked back, then at her potential rescuers. “That.”

The eyes of the Undersiders went round behind their masks as bellowing roars and flames gouted into the sky from that direction. “Hey whoa, let's reconsider—OW!” The guy in the helmet started to speak, only to get frog-punched by the blonde girl in purple. Purple girl never took her eyes off the gem. “Say YES, idiot,” she said.

The other Undersiders looked at her. “You serious?” the helmet guy said.

“As a heart attack,” the girl in purple said severely, glaring at him.

“Well, our specialty IS running away, so we can live to run away again tomorrow,” the renfaire kid quipped. "Might as well live up to it and earn a shiny."

The helmet guy held out his hand. Meimei pointedly dropped the gem into her belt pouch and took his hand. The implication was clear; escape first, then payment. As he heaved her up onto the mutant dog’s back she caught a glimpse of cocoa brown skin between his glove and his jacket sleeve. How about that, she thought. A Negro rescuing a Nazi Panda from a Chinese dragon. I don’t know if it’s irony or not but it couldn’t get any weirder.

Then there was no time for anything but holding on; the dogs bounded up the sides of the buildings, their passengers clinging for dear life, and raced away across the rooftops. “So where to?” the helmeted guy-- Grue, that was his name-- shouted.

There was a roar from the city behind them. “I’d say anywhere but back there sounds good,” MeiMei yelled back.
“Um, we are underage, you remember?” Hemlokk said to Bayleaf. She wasn’t concerned about being heard; the driving beat of the music pretty much drowned out everything. She was so glad she’d learned to turn down her hypersensitive hearing.

“One of three answers to that,” he said with a doggy grin. “One: Not in dog years, Two: who cares, and Three: I won’t tell if you won’t.” He laughed at her expression and tugged on her hand. “Come on, let’s dance.” Ears flicking in a lupine blush, she followed.

The moment they got out on the floor they started attracting attention. People called and waved. Some started taking pictures. “Oh no Dad’s gonna see the pictures and kill us both—” Hemlokk whimpered, starting to panic.

“It’s okay, I told him I was bringing you here,” Bayleaf said next to her ear. “It took some talking but I persuaded him it was a good way to confuse people about your age...”

She sagged with relief. “Oh thank-- why didn’t you tell me that first?” she said.

“Uh, because you’re cute when you get all panicky?” he confessed with a grin.

“Rrrr...” she mock-growled at him. That only made him laugh more.

Bayleaf’s plans for the night unfortunately started to go a bit off-script at that point. He’d forgotten that he’d left quite an impression the last time he was here, and that even in the Palanquin a pair of werewolves were going to be the center of attention. Pretty soon the two were all but encircled by people shouting things, taking photographs, or just generally gawking and being impolite gits.

Hemlokk started getting tense next to him. “Well, there had to be a first time,” he said to her, feeling a little nervous. It was a lot easier when you weren’t on a date to be the center of all this invasive attention. That, and being half loopy from sleep deprivation and exhaustion had helped... “Better here than out on the street, right?”

She realized he was right. She nodded, forcing herself to relax. She was going to have to learn to handle rude mobs like this sooner or later, right?…

Then Newter stuck his oar in. A spotlight lanced down, illuminating them where they stood.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE AT THE PALANQUIN WOULD LIKE TO WELCOME BACK ONE OF OUR FAVORITE GUESTS, THE WEREWOLF OF BROCKTON BAY, THE SKINWALKER, MY MAN BAYLEAF!” there was applause and whistles. Bayleaf waved and gave a canine smile. What else could he do?

“AAAAND MAKING HER DEBUT, THE LOVELY LADY WOLF ON HIS ARM, HEMLOKK!” Taylor actually yipped, then gave a wave to everyone. “MY MAN GOT HIMSELF A LADYFRIEND TO CALL DOWN THE MOON WITH. AWHOOOO! NOOOIIICE GOING, BAY!”

“And now as a tribute to our new “cutest couple”….” There was the sound of a record needle scratching (surely faked, Bayleaf thought. Wasn’t everything digital these days?) and a new tune started playing--- Bayleaf and Hemlokk both looked confused as the oldies song opened...

ooOO “And they call it Puppy Love....” OOoo
That got a few laughs from the floor. Bayleaf and Hemlokk shot disgusted looks at the DJ boot high above.

“OKAY OKAY, JUST KIDDING-- NOW LET’S GET SOME REAL TUNES ROLLING...” the fake needle scratched again.

ooOO”Dark in the city night is a wire/ Steam in the subway earth is afire/Mouth is alive with juices like wine/And I’m hungry like the wolf .”Oooo

“Newter!!” Bayleaf barked. The audience was cracking up.

“OKAY OKAY I GOT IT OUT OF MY SYSTEM I SWEAR.... AND HERE WE GO--”

ooOO ”Hey there Little Red Riding Hood
You sure are looking good
You’re everything a big bad wolf could want...Owooooo...” Oooo

The two of them could see Newter in the DJ booth, laughing his tangerine ass off. Bayleaf started stalking toward the stairwell that led up to the booth, a dangerous glint in his eye.

“WAGH, HE’s COMING THIS WAY! BAR THE DOOR! EVERY FREAK FOR HIMSELF!
AUGH, PLAY THE NEXT MIX!!”

The lightshow started up again. With a synthetic squeal of needle on vinyl the soundsystem resumed its normal dance floor beat. Bayleaf decided to let him live and turned back. Hemlokk was still standing on the illuminated floor, giggling helplessly. “Just... let’s just dance,” he said, shaking his head and giving her a twirl.

For a brief moment the two of them faltered. The same thought went through both their heads at the same time: I don’t know how to dance! Then each paused again as they realized they did... Taylor was the first to break the stasis. No way was she dancing the Macarena, doggone it. On a whim she tried stringing a few steps from each of the dances in her memory together. To her surprise it more or less worked, the driving beat of the music smoothing out the rough edges. Hesitantly, then with more enthusiasm, Adrian followed her lead. They both were keenly aware that probably looked as silly as heck... but soon neither one cared.
The Ale Hall was well known as one of the major hangouts of the Empire Eighty Eight. There were
biker bars that were less gratuitous about the identity of their main clientele. The whole tavern was
done in late German beer hall, with decorations in darkened corners that smacked a little bit too much
of the mid 1940s for any normal person’s comfort. At any given time of day the bar was packed with
skinheads of all stripe and plumage, downing cheap beer and bragging about their alleged
achievements, whether with booze, brawling and women or on behalf of “the cause.” More than a
few simply sat and stared with gimlet eyes at anyone who dared enter. Few who didn’t belong failed
to take the hint. Those who did usually exited head or feet first, and often into the back alley behind
the Hall where they were further educated by the brotherhood in the error of their ways.

For those who could actually pass that gauntlet untouched, there were the amenities of the second
floor. Kaiser, and Allfather before him, had spared no expense in adorning that upper floor,
decorating it in the style of a Viking mead hall. From broad beams crossing the ceiling to viking
warshields and axes decorating the walls to dim torchlike lanterns to the broad, heavy oaken table
that stretched the full length of the single room, style, if not exact authenticity, were the word of the
day. This was the table the inner circle of the E88 sat at, and nothing less than the most grandiose
would do.

Seated at the head of this great oak masterpiece, in a carved oaken chair that was throne in all but
name, was Max Anders, AKA Kaiser. He was dressed in his full Lord Sauron armor. Hookwolf was
there as well, leaning over the left arm of the wooden throne. Alabaster was to his right. All of them
were staring in fascination at the screen of the smartphone in Kaiser’s hand.

“A panda,” Kaiser said. “My son has turned into a panda.” Mercifully the rest of the Cape contingent
of the E88 wasn’t present. This was mortifying enough.

“Well,” Hookwolf smirked. “At least he’s still half white.”

Kaiser’s helmeted head turned and stared at him long and hard. “I despise you for that joke.”
Hookwolf shrugged and tried to look innocent. He failed utterly.

“Still, we need new blood,” Alabaster said. “With Purity leaving and Rune gone missing, we could
need fresh young faces to oh I just can’t say it…. the pasty white indestructible man put his face in
his hands.

“This does not leave this room. I will be speaking to him at the Medhall building in an hour--” the
phone in his hand beeped. Kaiser looked down, puzzled. He tapped the screen to accept.

“Sir, this is Sneed, did you receive my last email?”

“Yes. With the photo. Why are you calling?”

“Sir, we’ve arrived and your son is going in right now--”

Kaiser growled impatiently. “As he is supposed to, he is supposed to wait for me there at Medhall
until I am ready to--”

“No sir, not Medhall… He’s going into the Ale Hall.”

“What? I didn’t say to bring him here!” If the rank and file of the Empire Eighty Eight saw his
ridiculous spawn….

“He was insistent, sir.”

“And how did he know I was here?”
“He got it out of Wilson, sir. After he punched Micheals out. Again.”

“...What?”

“Then he knocked both of them unconscious and made me drive us here, sir.” The ratfaced little man was almost whimpering.

There was a commotion from downstairs. A large number of men jeering, and then shouting. And then the shouting grew alarmed and was joined by the sound of breaking furniture. Sneed started shouting over the line. “Sir, several of the men tried to jump him and they... OH my that looks painful he just-- AHG! Kicked a man over the bar--” more crashing below... “That was a Roundhouse kick to the--” The capes heard the sound of several bodies hitting the walls and floor. “AAAAAaand ohmigosh NOT THIS WAY--” There was a loud snap and a scream that would have done Wilhelm proud. “Arms aren’t supposed to bend that way!!!” More thumps, bangs, smashes, and screams echoed up from the floor below. “Somebody send some help down here!”

Kaiser sat there, shooting looks from his phone to the doorway and back to his phone again. The disbelief that was surely on his face was showing on Hookwolf’s and Alabaster’s.

“Sounds like Junior’s a bit feistier than he used to be,” Hookwolf chuckled.

Kaiser motioned to Alabaster. “Go down there and deal with it,” he growled. The bone-white man got to his feet and left via the grand double doors at the entrance to the hall.

He promptly returned the same way, at high velocity and high altitude, to hit the wall behind Kaiser with a bone-jarring smack. He slid, groaning, down the wall and out of sight behind Kaiser’s chair. Alarmed, Kaiser half-rose to his feet. Hookwolf jumped into the middle of the room, hooked blades protruding from his skin in every direction.

Through the open doors stepped a panda. A panda wearing a black silk kung fu uniform and carrying a bamboo staff.

Hookwolf stared. Kaiser stared. Alabaster (who was pulling himself up off the floor) stared. Hookwolf started chuckling. “Hey there, Theo,” he said. “Ready for round two?”

The most alarming thing of the whole matter was that Theo looked at Hookwolf, and smiled. “You know something Hookwolf? I’m going to enjoy this.” He struck a martial arts pose and thrust one hand out at the laughing killer-- and jade colored lightning erupted from his fingertips. With a sound like an erupting Tesla coil it lashed across the room, striking Hookwolf in a dozen places, dancing and arcing over the half-metal man and making him flop and shake and spasm where he stood.

“Ahiaiaarrggghhabababahbbbbahahahhauuuggghhrbhabhabhaaugh!!!!”

Theo cut the lightning off; with a groan Hookwolf slumped to the floor, a pile of tarnished metal blades and burnt, smoking meat.

Before Hookwolf hit the floor Alabaster was on the move; his Power had gone through it’s five second cycle, reverting him back to the perfect, uninjured state he had started at. He darted forward, drawing his gun.

Theo rushed forward to meet him. Moving impossibly fast he snatched up one of Hookwolf’s broken
blades and pinned Alabaster to the table by his gun hand, driving it through the wrist and inches deep into the wood of the table. Alabaster's immediate future was one full of pain. Due to his 'reboot' power, he would heal over and over again, physically reverting every 4.35 seconds to his original state, but that blade would still be there. Until someone pried that blade out, Alabaster was going nowhere. Theo left the man shrieking and cursing and grappling with the blade through his wrist, and headed for his father.

Kaiser panicked. He lashed out with his power; razor sharp blades burst from the floor between himself and his son, turning the space between them into a thicket of swords. Theo halted inches from the blades and cupped his paw-like hands; a ball of blue-white flame erupted from them and formed into a giant ghostly tiger. Roaring, it leapt through the blades as if they weren’t even there and bore the screaming crime lord to the ground.

Max lashed out at the tiger, spearing it again and again with blades he grew from his gauntlets. They passed through the creature like it was a ghost. It pinned him to the floor with its weight. He felt its jaws close around his throat, its fangs passing through his armor as if it wasn’t even there.

“Pull the blades back, Father,” Theo’s voice commanded. The tiger growled, its fangs squeezing. Max flexed his powers and the blades disappeared. Theo stepped closer, till he was in his father’s line of view. “Here’s the deal, Dad,” he said.

“You don’t have a son anymore. You don’t have a daughter. You don’t have an ex-wife. As far as you’re concerned, Kayden, Aster, and me-- we never existed. We’re gone, and you never bother any of us again.”

“Or what?” Kaiser mocked, sweat rolling down his face inside his helmet. “You’ll come back and kill me? Forget having the guts, boy, you haven’t got what it takes. You beat up a bunch of bottom-rung biker thugs and you caught me and a couple of my lieutenants by surprise. You won’t even come close next time.”

“Who said anything about killing you?” Theo said blandly, shrugging. “I’ll just go to the cops and tell them everything I know.”

At this Max exploded into laughter. “You go and break the Unwritten Rules, boy, and there won’t be enough left of you to bury! You’ll end up outing Kayden too. Five seconds after they find out she’s Kaiser’s ex-wife, they’ll be storming her front door to take Aster away.”

“Oh, I won’t tell them anything I know about Kaiser,” he said. He gave his father a smile. It wasn’t a very nice one. “I’ll tell them everything I know about Max Anders.”

“You see, Dad, I spent the last week or so thinking. I asked myself, “What do I really know about my father?” So I started writing stuff down. And after about the third page, I thought, you know, most of this stuff the COPS would love to hear about. So I kept writing. It was a long, long list, Daddy.

Names, Places. Dollar amounts. All those times you went ahead and talked business, or just bragged to your friends about this crime you committed or that law you broke with me standing right there. Because you thought I was a non-entity. A nothing. And a worthless nothing couldn’t have a thought in his empty little head, could he?

“Think I’m bluffing? How about the Francesco bill? Or the Medhall retirement fund you skimmed? Or the maid you boffed when I was fourteen, got pregnant and threw out on the street? Or maybe that underage babysitter of mine when I was twelve?” Theo’s malicious smile grew wider with every twitch of recognition on Kaiser’s part. “That’s right, Father. All of it written down, every detail, in a
dossier that I planted copies of all over the place, including in a time-locked folder on the Internet. You even look at Kayden or Aster funny ever again, I’ll make you think you have your dick in a pencil sharpener.

“So I suggest you do the smart thing, Mister Maximillian Anders; You let us all go our separate ways.” He put his bamboo staff over his shoulder and walked away.

“Theo-- so help me I swear I will--” the threat was choked off as the tiger’s jaws tightened.

The panda boy looked back, his face scornful. “My name is not Theo,” he said. “And it certainly isn’t ‘Anders’ anymore.” His staff whipped out and cracked Alabaster across the back of the head, just as he pried the blade pinning his hand out of the table. The white-skinned man slumped to the table, unconscious.

“My name is Shen.”

The spectral tiger did not fade away until long after Shen walked out the front door.

Shen stepped out into the street. He stopped, planted his staff and leaned on it, overcome by the stress of what he’d just done. After a few minutes’ of shaking as the adrenaline left his body, he drew a deep breath and looked around. Where to now? He had no home to go to. He couldn’t go back to Kayden and Aster’s place; once Kaiser finished rinsing the piss out of his armor he’d be out for blood, and staying with Kayden would put all Kaiser’s most hated targets in one place. No, he was alone.

He was better off than it seemed. He had his staff, his magic pouch, and a good amount of cash stashed away therein— he’d “borrowed” Dad’s bank card number and PIN some time ago, and he’d unloaded it of several grand before his ride here. (Kayden was going to have a surprise the next time she got Aster a treat from the cookie jar.) And currently there weren’t too many toughs hanging around who looked like they wanted a rematch. Still, he was already feeling terribly lost and lonely.

There were others like himself, according to Xing, the little star. He needed to find them. But for right now… he looked around. He was a few blocks over from the start of the oriental neighborhoods. He laughed to himself. I wonder if they’ll accept me out of hand or reject me just as vehemently? He thought. It could go either way. But he might as well be an outcast there as anywhere else. At least he’d speak the language. Besides, he was hungry, and stereotypical or not a chinese buffet sounded just about right. He started walking.

“You! Hey You! Quit peeing on that store sign!”

The drunk taking a whiz on the storefront jumped and spun around wildly, spattering his shoes.

“Ugh, that’s disgusting, your mother would be ashamed!”

He fumbled awkwardly as he tried to zip himself up, looking around wide eyed for the source of the voice shouting at him. He saw nothing.

“Now go home and sleep it off, you nasty man! Or I’ll tell your mother on you!”
The drunk fled into the night, staggering down the sidewalk.

Miles away, Vicky and Aisha leaned against each other, howling with laughter. Once Bayleaf and Hemlokk had gone inside the Palanquin their cloaked quadcopters could no longer follow, so out of boredom they had decided to spend their time tormenting the nightlife of Brockton Bay. They had taken a quadcopter each and begun patrolling.

The quadcopters were equipped with powerful little spotlights and loudspeakers, and made quite the impression if one wasn’t expecting them… especially as they still remained cloaked, and Aisha had figured out how to play various MP3s over the loudspeakers. Five drunks, four would-be cat burglars and at least a half dozen preteens with spray cans nearly had the life scared out of them thus far, and it was only getting funnier.

“Okay, let’s swing up by Chinatown— I got the other two copters doing a slow preprogrammed route city patrol at hight altitude… whoah, got a live one.” The screen panned over, showed several armed men kicking in a storefront window. “These guys ain’t gonna get scared off by no flying toys.” Aisha picked up the phone line and dialed. “Hello, 911? This is the Crow’s Nest, we’d like to report an armed break-in at the Sam’s Pawn at...” she rattled off the address.

“Roger, we copy that, Crow’s nest. The police are on their way. This is your third call tonight, Crow’s Nest,” the operator went on in a more conversational tone.

“Hey, girl’s gotta have a hobby,” Aisha said. That elicited a laugh. “We’ll keep an eye on things till your boys get there so the bad guys don’t surprise nobody.”

“We appreciate that. And the BBPD thanks you for your assistance.”

The two girls watched the screen until the red and blue lights showed up. The thugs were caught with their pants down and quickly surrendered. Both girls sighed and moved on. “That’s three for three,” Vicky said in a pleased voice. “Congratulations, Crow Girl.”

“That’s ‘Mama Crow,’” Aisha corrected her.

“Aren’t you worried about the police tracking the calls back here?” Vicky asked.

“Nah. Hemlokk souped it up, did some computer hacker, cracker firewall thing that makes it untraceable,” Aisha said, waving her hand dismissively. It turned out that Hemlokk’s powers included a ‘lockpicking’ ability she could use for disarming traps, bypassing security devices, and of course for picking locks. It also happened to synergise amazingly well with her burgeoning computer skills, turning someone who was already a deft computer programmer into a full blown hacker. She’d jailbroken everyone’s phones, cherryed out the antiviral and firewall programming in their laptops and of course hacked the absolute bejeezus out of Bayleaf’s cobbled together comm center. Aisha had understood maybe one word out of ten when Hemlokk had explained what she’d done, but “that means they can’t find us” translated just fine.

The quadcopters continued their slow rambling sweep of the city. It was a surprisingly peaceful night for Brockton Bay. Nothing was on fire, exploding, or climbing a building swatting down planes, anyway…

Something caught the corner of Aisha’s eye. She took the controls of quadcopter three and turned it around, scanning for whatever she’d seen. At furthest zoom she caught it. Three gigantic dogs, if one was being gracious about the definition of ‘dog,’ were running along the rooftops with several figures clinging to their backs… “What is THAT?” Vicky exclaimed.
“Oh hell, it’s my brother and his gang,” Aisha said. “What the hell have they gotten into, they’re running like the Devil himself--” she left QC3 tracking her brother and his friends and switched to QC4, panning back along the path they were fleeing. Two or three blocks away light was climbing up the sides of the buildings as something in the streets below burned.

“Ohh chicken biscuits,” Aisha said. “They riled up LUNG somehow.” The QC drew closer, she could see Lung, already quite literally blazing mad, riding in the back of a pickup. Apparently the Undersiders had been playing hide-and-go-seek with him; she could see him yelling and giving orders to the other vehicles and the ABB members on foot, telling them to split up and search.

As to the undersiders, the other quadcopter revealed that they had managed to corner themselves. They had detoured to a rooftop, barely making the leap across the four-lane from a higher roof-- Aisha could see the claw marks and torn out chunks of stone on the ledge where one of the dogs almost hadn’t made it-- and had nowhere else to go. Lung and his crews were maybe a block or two away and sweeping the area. They’d have the Undersiders surrounded in minutes.

“I better get there,” Vicky said. She was already slipping out of her baggy “lazy day” sweats, her Glory Girl uniform underneath.

“Don’t forget your new gear!” Aisha shouted, pointing at the worktable. Vicky grabbed the tiara and belt, slipping them on and turning them up. There was a whine from the capacitor and her altered forcefield went up, an almost-invisible heat shimmer around her.

“How do I look?” Glory Girl asked, hands on her hips.

The silvery steel belt and angled headband made her look far more intimidating than her normal prom queen look, but Aisha was in no mood to banter. “Like it’s time for you to go, now GO!” she said, yanking on the rope to the skylight. It swung open on creaking springs. Glory Girl shot through it and off into the sky.

Aisha hit the phone line again. This time she hit “the party line”-- the police, the PRT, and the number to Bayleaf and Hemlokk’s cellphones. She actually managed to keep the tremor out of her voice.

“Attention, this is the Crow’s Nest, this is going out to the Police, the PRT and everybody else. Lung is on the move, I repeat, Lung is on the move. We have eyes on him, he is just Northeast of the North End scrapyard, and he is looking to corner the Undersiders...”

Bayleaf and Hemlokk tripped off the dance floor, panting and laughing. A few dollars secured a couple of bottles of Evian at the bar and they stood there, draining their drinks and cooling off.


Bayleaf froze; he could see Hemlokk freeze as well. That was the ringtone and vibration sequence they’d decided on for an APB from the Crow’s Nest. They both pulled out their phones and took the call.

“--to the Police, the PRT and everybody else. Lung is on the move, I repeat, Lung is on the move.
We have eyes on him, he is just Northeast of the North End scrapyard, and he is looking to corner the Undersiders..."

Crap.

He hit ‘reply.’ “Aisha, this is Bayleaf, we’re on our way,” he said. He put up the phone and looked over at Hemlokk. “It looks like our date night is over,” he said grimly.

Hemlokk looked at him with wide, alarmed eyes. “What do we do?”

“We go and find the Undersiders and extract them. Let the Protectorate handle Lung and his gang. But I promised Aisha I’d get her brother out of the mess he was in and this pretty much qualifies.” He shook his head. “Let’s just hope those four idiots accept help when it’s offered--”

Hemlokk suddenly put her phone back up to her ear. “Aisha, use the quadcopters, let Grue and his friends know we’re incoming and we’re friendly. We don’t want them attacking us when we show up.” She listened to the response, nodded and hung up. “She’s sending one of the quads to the rooftop they’re on. She says it’s one block over from the scrapyard.

“We’d better move,” Bayleaf said. They wedged their way through the crowds, ducked down a hallway and headed for the back exit, already swapping out their clothes with a quickchange spell.

Grue, Regent, Bitch, Tattletale and their impromptu client lay flat on the rooftop, hiding between an air conditioning unit and a tattered billboard. The dogs lay on the rooftop next to them. They were all doing their very best to look very, very small. This was not likely to make much of a difference very soon. The streets below were rapidly emptying of any civilians and filling up with ABB gangbangers. It would be mere minutes before they found out which building the Undersiders were hiding on.

Grue rolled over on his back and looked at Tattletale. Before he could ask her for any suggestions a model quadcopter appeared less than a foot over his head.

“Undersiders, this is the Crow’s Nest--”

Grue nearly wet himself. He whipped out his crowbar, missing the hovering cambot by an inch. He barely resisted the urge to smother the thing in his darkness generating smoke--- that would have been as effective as a road flare in letting everyone down in the streets below know where they were hiding.

The others reacted almost like he did; Regent pulling out his taser-topped jester's staff and Tattletale whipping out her gun. Nobody, thankfully, fired. “Brian, stop that you idiot!” the quadcopter snapped at him. “I’m trying to tell you HELP is on the way!”

Grue stared up at the minicopter. “….Aisha??”

“Oh, IT SPEEEEEEAKS,” the copter snarked. “Look, the Protectorate, the cops and the PRT are on their way there to handle Lung. Bayleaf and Hemlokk are on their way to haul your butts out of there. So don’t shoot ’em, dumbass.”
“Who the hell are Bayleaf and Hemlock?” Regent stage whispered. Everyone else lying on the roof looked like they were wondering the same thing… except for Tattletale, who suddenly looked like Christmas morning had arrived again.

“The wolf-man-- Skinwalker--”

“A wolf guy? That’s our help?” Grue said in disbelief.

Then Tattletale grabbed the collar of his biker jacket and pulled him over. “Yeah, the wolf guy who took down the Merchants and all their capes singlehanded,” she hissed at him. “THAT guy!”

“Are you sure he’s on our side?” Grue said uncertainly. “Do we want his help??”

Tattletale pulled him closer and whispered in his ear. “He’s also the cape who has Coil crapping his pants for some reason,” she said almost gleefully. “He’s got allies all over the place and he’s been kicking over anthills that the PRT doesn’t even know about yet. He may act like a clown when he’s messing with Armsmaster but he’s probably one of the heaviest hitters in Brockton Bay. So hell YES we want his help!”

Meanwhile Aisha was getting some incredibly bad news. “The HELL do you mean the PRT and the Protectorate are TIED UP?” she yelled into her microphone. “This is LUNG we’re talking about!” And my brother, she added silently.

“What I mean, Crow’s Nest, is that they’ve been dispatched to places all over the tri state area,” the PRT dispatch officer said. “There’s been a jailbreak in Midvale County Correctional involving several capes, which is occupying Triumph. Mush, Trainwreck and Skidmark have made an escape attempt while in transit on the opposite side of the state, and Assault, Battery, and Velocity are responding. and the Dragonslayers are making an attempt on a military weapons depot to the North of us, to which Armsmaster and Miss Militia left to respond an hour ago.

“At the moment the PRT and the Wards are moving to respond to your report-”

“Except everyone knows they’re not allowed to engage supervillains unless it’s already gone to hell in a handbasket,” Aisha snarled. “At which point it’s already too late!”

It was after dark when the ruckus rising out on the road woke Greg. He stumbled out of his makeshift bed, bleary eyed, but already rapidly awakening as some instinct told him that things were not well.

He scrambled up the slope of one of the junk heaps and looked out over the scrapyard fence. This
was bad, this was very very bad. There were ABB gang members all over the place. Some in vehicles, some on foot. Most of them waving weapons. In the middle of the mob was a pickup truck; standing in the back was--

Lung. Greg gulped. He was already standing seven feet tall, swole, and had flames licking up and down his bare arms and chest. The paint job of the vehicle he was standing in was actually blistered from the heat; Greg didn’t envy the mook who was driving the thing; it had to be like an oven.

The ABB footsoldiers were gathered around his truck. He was yelling at them all-- in English? Greg wondered. Then he thought about it; most of the asians in Brockton Bay were refugees from half a dozen different countries. English was probably the only language they all had in common. “Find the wretched brats, and KILL them,” he was shouting, his voice like gravel in cement mixer. “Bring me everything they were carrying, and bring me their HEADS. Yes, even the girl! Let her be an example-- noone betrays me and lives!”

Greg clambered back down the junkpile, heart pounding. Lung was out to kill a bunch of kids. Even a little girl! And there was noone to stop it. Nobody but Greg. And Greg stood about as much chance of stopping Lung as a slug trying to stop a steamroller. There was no chance! This was suicide!

He was already reaching for the helmet even as the thought ran through his head.

There were maybe a dozen men still gathered around Lung’s smoldering truck in the five-way intersection when they heard the clanking. They all fell still as a figure in gold and steel strode out of a gap in the fence around the old junkyard. It was a man, or at least a figure of a man, clad from head to toe in steel plate trimmed in gold. A round bullet helmet with a vertical slit for the mouth and nose and a horizontal one for the eyes covered his head. Burning blue eyes shone from inside the helm. A burnished round shield covered his left arm. In his right hand, he held a solid metal warhammer with a three foot handle and a head the size of a breadbox. All of it was covered in a faint aura of golden light. The figure marched out into the middle of the street and stood facing the intersection, “You go no farther, Lung!” the figure shouted, his helmet making his voice ring strangely.

“It’s Triumph!” someone shouted.

“No, it’s Dauntless!”

“Shut up you fools,” Lung growled at them. He rested his elbows on the roof of the truck and regarded the metal-plated man before him. “Who is this idiot? Move, fool; you are in my way.”

Greg’s mouth was dry and his heart was hammering. He spoke up, trying to think of what one of the heroes from his video games back home would say and hoping his voice didn’t crack. “I will do no such thing. I am Vindicator, and you will harm no more innocents tonight.”

Greg felt his heart sink as several of the men laughed. Lung himself was smirking. “Oh, I see. The brave knight wants to slay the dragon.” Lung glanced around for approval; his men obediently laughed louder. “Poor little knight, it looks like he won’t get his wish.” Lung looked away, already bored; if the man in armor were any threat he would have struck already. “Kill him.”

All around, guns were raised and racks slid. The man in armor cringed and raised his shield just as half a dozen men opened fire on him. The alley was filled with the sound of gunfire--- and with the screams of pain as the bullets ricocheted, spattering into the gang members in every direction. Several went down, clutching at blossoming red wounds. Others with more brains leapt for cover as friendly fire chipped the brick and asphalt around them.
The armored man hadn’t even staggered.

The ABB men started shouting in a garbled mess of eastern tongues; words like “Cape” and “brute” and “bulletproof” popping up amidst the mess. More men, foolish enough to ignore their own bleeding men at their feet, opened fire.

Bullets spangled and sparked off Greg’s helmet. He didn’t bother raising his shield or ducking. There would be no lucky bullet getting through the eyeslit of his helm or any other gap; the coverage from a paladin’s armor was complete. He shifted his grip on his warhammer. Smothering the last of his fear as death rattled an inch from his skin, he began to recite the mantra that had gotten him through all these last nights and days. With every line the golden light shone brighter.

“A knight is sworn to valour,”

He pulled his shield arm back and whipped it forward. The golden disc, blazing with fire, flew straight and true. With a timpany of “CLANGclangCLANG clangCLANG clangCLANG” seven ABB men went down as the disc ricocheted off their skulls. The shield flew unerringly back to Vindicator’s arm.

“His heart knows only virtue,”

The hammer whirled. An identical hammer of golden flame shot into the crowd, knocking men flying.

“His word speaks only truth,”

The hammer whirled again. Another hammer of light flew, more men were laid out in the street.

“His might upholds the weak,”

Those still standing went for their knives, bats and chains, their tire irons and nightsticks. They charged him, looking to dogpile him and beat and stab him to bloody mush. The mob closed over him-- then exploded outward as a veritable tornado of flaming hammers whirled about him in a widening spiral, breaking flesh and shattering bone.

“His blade defends the helpless.”

The ground around Vindicator was clear. He began running towards Lung, charging-- then instantly he was astride a horse of flaming light. He bore down on the astonished Lung at full gallop. The driver of the pickup had long fled-- fortunate for him, because the flaming horse struck the pickup like a speeding train, smashing the engine back through the cabin like it wasn’t even there. At the last instant Greg Veder leapt from the saddle, half running, half-leaping over the crumpled hood--

“His wrath undoes the wicked!”

--- and brought his warhammer around in a smashing uppercut to Lung’s jaw. Teeth shattered, jaw splintered, the dragon man of Kyushu flew off the back of the ruined truck in a back-bowed arc and smashed into the pavement.

Now the battle had really begun.
Back at the Lost Workshop, Aisha had switched from the cellphones to the commlinks. This connected her directly to the earbuds both Bayleaf and Hemlokk wore with their costumes, streamlining their communications when they were in the field. “Crow’s Nest to Bayleaf and Hemlokk, It looks like most of the PRT and the Protectorate are tied up dealing with villains everywhere else but here again--”

“Crap. Do they have anyone out here to help us?” Bayleaf snapped. He managed to keep his voice level as he ran.

“They got the Wards out, and they’re sending whatever they got left of the PRT officers, but you know and I know that’s jack squat,” Aisha said.

“Great, just what we need, Shadow Stalker running around unsupervised,” Hemlokk snarled. She raced to the edge of the roof and leapt to the next, running on all fours, Bayleaf right beside her.

Bayleaf almost stumbled. “Crap, she’s right, Aisha, get the quadcopters flying around the Undersiders, be on the lookout for Shadow Stalker.” He’d forgotten about that issue with Shadow Stalker. Crap crap crap crap.

“Why?”

“Because she hates your brother’s guts and wants to put a crossbow bolt in them,” Bayleaf said, his voice intense. “His powers screw with hers, so she wants him dead. She’s already taken at least one potshot at him in the past. If she sees him pinned down--”

Aisha swore. Bayleaf and Hemlokk both could hear the fear in her voice. “I got ‘em orbiting the building, or rotating or whatever you call it,” she said in a moment. “I-- oh crap.”

Both worgen skidded to a halt. Bayleaf stood up, his hand to his ear. “What is it, Crow’s Nest?”

“Things just went hairball, guys,” Aisha said. “Some new cape is throwing down with Lung and his boys. HO-lee-- and he’s not doing too bad either-- but he’s started the big jackass ramping up!”

“Give us a description, Crow’s Nest,” Bayleaf barked.

“Guy, six foot tall, silver and gold armor, has a shield and a hammer and --- how in hell did he do that with his shield??-- and he’s throwing them around and knocking the snot out of Lung’s men!”

A shield and hammer… “Lot of golden light?” he asked suddenly. “In everything?”

“Yeah, golden glowing everything, more yellow than Scion’s though and ohhh man he just laid Lung out.”

“What?” Hemlokk said.

“You heard me-- he just laid Lung OUT. Blasted him in the face with that hammer and--” A faint roar echoed over the city. “And Lung is back up again and he is getting ugly FAST guys--!”

Hemlokk looked at Bayleaf. “You know something.” It was a statement, not a question.

Bayleaf nodded. “We just found another Actor. A paladin. And he’s just started Lung’s Power escalation. We’d better move or there’s not going to be anything left of him, the Undersiders or the rest of the neighborhood!” He dropped to all fours and resumed racing for the rising glow in the heart of the city.
Shar’Din Belore was not having a good day.

Operation: find the Others was a bust. In fact Operation: Don’t Get Your Ass Kicked and Operation: Don’t Get Caught by the Cops were doing kind of poorly as well. He’d gotten smacked around by a couple of angry people yelling in… well, in some language he didn’t speak. Italian maybe? And ended up having to hide in a trash can to escape a couple of police officers who were, quote, “Responding to a report about some weirdo in a dress soliciting for a cult.”

His cravings for he-didn’t-know-what were past the point of just cravings. Now he was starting to feel sick. He didn’t know what withdrawal was supposed to be like. Was this it? Aches, pains, weakness… it was a lot like the flu. Maybe he just had the flu? He didn’t remember the flu being this bad, though…

And now he could hear people outside his trash can yelling and running around. He lifted up the lid and peeked. There were ABB members all over the place. Was a gang war starting? And here came a pickup truck with--

Oh Lord. Oh LORD. LUNG.

Shar’Din closed the trash can lid. It was nice here. Who else knew about this? Just him and Oscar the Grouch.

He half-listened to Lung screaming at his men about finding somebody and killing them and God knew what all else. Not good. Not good. So not good. What was a half-used-up stoner doing in the middle of--

No. He grabbed his long blonde hair in his fists and pulled on it. He was NOT a used-up stoner. He was NOT. He was Shar’Din Belore, Sunspark, Blood Elf, and it was his job to save the world!

...But LUNG? The guy who went six rounds with an ENDBRINGER?

...Yeah, but he was gonna kill someone. If Shar’din was gonna save the world, he had to start with somebody.

He was about to leap out of his hiding place and, he didn’t know, pull a Gandalf and shout “You Will Not PASS!” when the noise outside changed. Someone was shouting... shouting at Lung. There was a lot of laughter. Then there was gunfire!

Shar’Din cringed into a ball, expecting his galvanized steel hiding place to be perforated, and him along with it. It didn’t happen. Then it didn’t happen some more. Then he heard the sounds of steel on steel, of metal impacting flesh and screams of pain. Baffled at his own survival and confused by the sounds outside, he peeked again…

Just in time to see some armored cape smash into Lung’s truck, crushing it like a beer can, and deliver an uppercut with a giant steel mallet that sent him flying. Lung flipped clean end over end and crashed to the ground behind the burning wreck of the truck, out of sight.

“All RIGHT!” Shar’din whooped.
Then Lung got back up, bigger, uglier and angrier.

“AWW CRAAP!” Shar’din squawked.

Lung had grown FAST. He was towering over the truck like a child over a toy. His skin was covered in flames and metallic scales, and his head and face were deformed into something monstrous and getting even uglier by the second. He backhanded the armored Cape, sending him rocketing across the intersection to smash into the wall next to Shar’Din’s hiding place. Shar’Din heard brickwork crack as the guy hit.

The lid of the trashcan flipped away. Shar’Din sat up and looked down at the guy in knight’s armor next to him. The guy’s helmet had flown off, revealing a kid about Shar’Din’s own age with a longish face and dirty blonde hair in a bowl-cut. He gawked, boggled.

“Greg? Greg Veder??”

Greg sat up, clutching his head in one gauntleted hand. He gawked at the gaudily-dressed weirdo who’d literally popped out of a trashcan next to him. “Who the hell are you?”

“It’s me, Sparky!” Shar’Din pulled off his sunglasses and unraveled the dirty ace bandages covering his ear-points. “See?….” he paused. “Oh, wait, right--”

That hadn’t helped in the least. Greg was now gawking at Sparky’s pointed ears and glowing green eyes. No comprende’, no recognition. Shar’Din tried to quickly think of something, anything to prove his identity. “Wait, I can prove it! I sit next to you in Current Events! Gladly is a wanker! You play HALO Online religiously! Your handle on PHO is Void Cowboy! Uhhm--”

For a second it looked like Greg was about to recognize him. Then Greg’s expression of dawning comprehension turned to one of dawning panic. “DUCK!” he yelled, grabbing the front of Shar’Din’s robe and yanking down. Shar’Din’s trash can tipped over, decanting him onto the pavement.

Just as they both hit the asphalt a ball of fire hit the brick wall behind them, splattering flame and chunks of blackened brick in every direction. And here came Lung, stomping towards them like a mountain of death.

Shar’Din grabbed his staff and got to his feet (and hadn’t it been a trick fitting the thing into that trashcan with him.) He leveled the staff at the oncoming villain and shouted at the top of his lungs. “Band’or shorel’aran!”

The Arcane Eruption was perfectly cast. Blue-white light lashed out and struck Lung square in the chest, and exploded out of the ground at his feet. It not only knocked already-massive Lung on his heels but launched him twelve feet into the air, to land once again on his back with a resounding crunch. Shar’Din crumpled to the pavement, groaning.

Greg helped him sit up. “Sparky! What happened?”

“Dunno, man…” Shar’Din clutched his head. “Been feeling more and more like crap for days--” he looked up and saw a furious Lung getting to his feet. “Uh, Greg?” he pointed.

“What?” Greg looked and eeped. Lung was now twelve feet tall and sporting a face like an alien alligator. The asphalt was going soft at his feet. Some of the ABB were getting back together where they had been scattered, but they were standing well clear from the rising heat.

“We’re gonna die now aren’t we?” Sparky whimpered.
“Yeah,” Greg replied.

Fire flowed down Lung’s arms and pooled into his taloned hands. He wound up, getting ready to fling a wad of dripping flame the size of his head at the two prone would-be heroes. But before he could throw, something white and golden-haired streaked down out of the sky and struck him, feet first. He was driven sideways, plowing a yards-long furrow in the street to come up short against a storefront. The flying thing that struck him pulled away, hovering over the center of the five-way, revealing itself to be Glory Girl. She hovered over the battlefield, smiling savagely and cracking her knuckles. Greg couldn’t help but notice that she was looking different from her promotional pictures- her prom-queen tiara was gone, replaced with a metallic headband with a downward turning point in the center of her forehead. There was a large golden faux-gem set in the point that was glowing slightly. She also had a metallic segmented belt around her waist and a large round buckle. There seemed to be a distortion around her, a sort of faint heat shimmer that silhouetted her form.

Some of the braver, or stupider, ABB members started plinking shots at her. “Oh no you don’t,” she said. She put her fingertips up to her temples… no, to her tiara.. and began turning in a circle. A cone of pale white light, almost like a searchlight, radiated out from the gem on her forehead. Any of the gang members it swept over suddenly screamed in terror, dropping their weapons and falling to the ground or fleeing as if for their very lives. She stopped after a full three-sixty and pumped her fist. “Power upgrades for the win, Booyah!”

Lung was back on his feet again. “I’ ettig tired o dis!” he bellowed, and charged the heroine. She flew at him with an enthusiastic grin on her face. They met with fists swinging.

Greg ignored the ensuing fracas to try and tend to his downed friend. “What was that you shouted anyway?” he said, putting a glowing hand on Sparky’s back. “Some sort of incantation?”

“A battle cry,” Sparky said.

“What’s it mean?”

“‘Hasta la vista, baby’” in Elvish, actually,” Sparky grunted. “I-- whoah!” The golden glow of a quick paladin’s heal spread over his body, then swirled inside him as he inhaled. Instantly he felt better than he had in weeks. “Whoa, do that again!”

Startled, Greg complied, hitting him with a bigger, more potent heal. Once again the glow swirled away inside the elf to who-knew-where. “Oh man, that’s the STUFF,” Sparky said, leaping to his feet. “Woo! Whatever that was it was just what I needed!” he looked in the direction of the ongoing fracas. “Oh man, what do we do?”

Glory Girl was obviously giving a good accounting of herself; the asphalt all around was torn up, light poles snapped, and two or three ABB vehicles abandoned in the street were now scrap. But Lung was still growing. He had Glory Girl down now and was pummeling her with both fists, sending chunks of street flying.

“We help her,” Greg said. He grabbed his helmet out of the trash and put it back on, chinching it tight. “I’m a paladin, it’s what we do. You’re a wizard, right?”

“A mage, yeah.”

“Got any buffs?” Greg asked even as he gestured at them both himself. Glowing silhouettes settled over each of them. Divine Shield, Blessing of Protection, blessing of kings…

“What-- oh yeah!” Sparky cast Prismatic shield over both of them, then SlowFall, then threw in
Presence of Mind and Arcane Power on himself. He summoned an Arcane Familiar, a glowing ball of sparks that hovered at his shoulder, and for a finish, Mirror Image. To Greg’s astonishment there were suddenly three elven mages standing next to him. “Okay,” they said in triplicate. ‘LET’S DO IT.’

Shar’Din and Vindicator turned and attacked. Arcane missiles and golden Hammers of Justice swarmed through the air as they shouted the only battle cry that fit.

Lung had just enough time to wonder who the hell Leroy Jenkins was before he was pummeled by a firestorm of arcane and Light magic.

It had been one hectic night for the wards. With the Protectorate scattered hither, thither and yon, it had fallen on the young trainee heroes to help hold the line when all hell started breaking loose in the Asian quarter. Something had the ABB stirred up and in full idiot mode; they were out in squads, generally running in groups of four or five, and pretty heavily armed. The impression the Wards got was that they were out looking for something or someone, and the footsoldiers were using it as an excuse to kick up some sand. Every other minute they’d run into a group of ABBs out looking to find trouble or make some of their own, and getting in clashes with the cops that tried to stop them. Rules be damned, the PRT crews were flying fast and loose with their restraining foam, and the Wards were engaging the gangsters full on.

Never had kids been so happy with their Christmas gifts. Clockblocker and Vista, one normally limited to the range of his touch and the other normally assigned to the rear and far away from the action as possible, were making a massive impact with their Power-fueled ray guns. Group after group of gun-waving thugs found themselves suddenly frozen immobile only to wake up cuffed, or worse yet shrunk to the size of Barbie dolls, scoped up, and dropped in the back of a police van.

Some few had made the mistake of opening fire on Gallant. Gallant had chivalrously allowed them their one free shot-- then gleefully returned fire with his new enhanced emotion blasts, knocking the thugs flying and leaving them lying on the floor in a groaning-- or blubbering, or screaming, or giggling-- heap. Some tried to flee down darkened alleyways. They quickly learned that Gallant’s mind-enhancing goggles also enhanced his night vision. Gangbangers would disappear down a back alley, he would disappear after them, there would be the loud WHANG noise of Gallant’s psi-blast and gangbangers would come cartwheeling back out.

Aegis was feeling better than he had in a long time. It’s a lot more fun having a high damage threshold when you had a genuine high healing factor to go with it. The ‘recombobulator’ on his belt had completely healed him at least once already, letting him go fresh into the fight when he used to have to fall back just to duct tape all the holes shut. He suspected it was a lot better for police and PRT morale to not have a hero leaking all over the place from bullet and knife wounds, too…

As for Browbeat, he was thoroughly enjoying charging random groups of ABB holdouts and slapping them around without worrying his pants would get ripped to shreds. Screaming “Browbeat SMASH” was a bit excessive though.

They were working a perimeter, slowly moving inward towards the center of the chaos, sweeping up stragglers along the way. Aegis hit the commlink. “Kid Win, Gallant, get me some oversight,” he
said. “fly to the center of this mess and see what Lung is up to--”

“Copy,” Gallant replied.

“On my way,” Kid Win said.

“I’m on it,” Shadow Stalker cut in.

“No, Shadow Stalker, I didn’t--” Aegis snapped angrily. Crap, there’d been word that the Undersiders were in the middle of this somehow. If she ran into Grue and went off the plot--

“Didn’t hear, don’t care,” Shadow said. He saw her silhouette ziplining over the rooftops. He swore vehemently, trying to decide if he should try and catch her--

Then the E88 showed up to the party and he was suddenly too busy to worry what Princess Grimdark was up to.

_____________________

Theo, now going by the name “Shen,” had an… interesting day. His trip through the Asian quarter--at least the more tourist-friendly parts of it-- had gotten a lot of mixed reactions. There’d been a lot of gawking and more than a few photographs. There’d been a surprising bit of anger from a few people; they seemed to be under the impression that the pandaren walking through their neighborhood was mocking them somehow. The older folks had been suspicious, at least till he had startled them by greeting them in Mandarin with the proper honorifics. The younger children had been more enthusiastic, waving and shrieking and basically acting as if he were some big amusement park mascot.

He had wandered through the street market for a bit; an aggressive salesman had gotten him to hand over a few dollars for some wooden sandals and a douli-- one of the old-fashioned cone shaped straw hats. He wore it, though he wasn’t sure he wasn’t being pranked; Till that day he’d never seen one outside a kung fu flick. He kind of liked it, though. He felt a little more dressed, anyway.

He spent a long lunch in a chinese buffet. He had worried they would throw him out, but they’d been more than happy to serve him. He was generating a hell of a lot of foot traffic for them just being there.

It was when he was exiting that things started going sour. He had just stepped out onto the street when he found himself facing three toughs wearing ABB colors going the other way. “Holy-- it’s another one!” One blurted out.

Another one?

The other two did a double take. The biggest one grinned; it did not look like a pleasant smile. He looked over his shoulder and said something to the other two… in Korean, unfortunately. Shen caught the name “Lung” two or three times in the middle. Their eager grins didn’t make him feel any more confident. “You!” the big one said, pointing at Shen. “You’re coming with us. Lung wants to see you.”

That wasn’t good. Shen looked around; the street was clearing rapidly. Three punks were no
problem for him now, but he could see guns bulging under their jackets (something he’d learned to recognize from hanging around the dregs of the E88.) If he started a fight here, innocent people could get hurt. He held up his hands. “All right, all right,” he said. “I—I’ll come quietly. There’s no need for any...” he looked behind them and cringed. “Trouble...”

They only turned and looked when they heard the car horn. Here came a convertible full of what looked like E88. They were leather clad, they were carrying weapons, they were looking bloody, battered and angry. The street had been clearing out before, now people were disappearing like water down a drain. One of the skinheads stood up in the front seat, pointing at Shen with a baseball bat and shouting.

“Oh great,” Shen muttered. Some of the morons from his father’s Oktoberfest fantasyland wanted a rematch. The ABB punks turned and saw the E88 rolling through their territory. Their lead stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled. More asian kids in ABB colors started appearing out of nowhere. Soon the street was crowded again, and this time it was looking uglier by the second. The lead ABB punk started shouting at the bat-wielding skinhead, who started cussing and shouting back. Guns started coming out.

Shen did the only thing he could think of. With a “Kai Yi” he performed a fifteen foot leap, sailing into the air and landing in between the ABB and the E88 in a Striking Tiger pose.

His sudden appearance stunned both leaders into silence. He held his stance for one second, two seconds, three… then without warning took off running--- to the right, in between the two groups and off down the street.

He could hear the two groups shouting in outrage, then the sound of pursuit. Perfect. Now all he had to do was find the cops, or a hero on patrol, or maybe the PRT…

Because in what was in retrospect a SEVERE tactical error, he had thrown away everything that reminded him of his old life or could be used to trace him to it-- including the cell phone his father had given him…

“Aegis, this is Kid Win, I’m in position.” The teen tinker was hovering over the rooftops, looking down on the five-way just to the north of the local junkyard. He was keeping back, WELL back, from all that was going down, and had shifted his new modular goggles into digital zoom to track everything.

“Aegis, Gallant. I’m on the opposite side of the combat zone. Shadow Stalker is-- somewhere in the rooftops around here, I can’t spot her.”

Aegis pinched off a curse. “Gimme the sitrep.”

“It’s Lung, alright. he’s closing in on fifteen feet. I can see asphalt bubbling from here-- there are capes already engaging him-- two unknowns and Glory Girl. She’s tearing into him bigtime too, I mean I’ve seen her fight before but--”

“Breakdown on the other two, Kid Win,” Aegis interrupted.
“Some guy in medieval style armor, shield and warhammer,” Kid Win said. “Serious brute rating I’m guessing, he’s in there swinging… and he seems to be shooting projections of some sort, flaming hammers… The other guy’s a skinny blonde guy in a robe-- with-- pointy ears and glowing green eyes? he’s a serious blaster, standing off and just raining bolts of energy on Lung… whoa was that-- yes, he hit him with some sort of freeze ray too, locked his legs for a few seconds there-- the guy in the robes has some sort of bubble forcefield around himself…. And the armor guy is breaking away, him and the blaster are, it looks like they’re buffing each other--”

“What?” Aegis wasn’t sure he wanted to know. It sounded vaguely obscene.

“Buffing! Power boosting each other! Play more video games, Aegis,” Kid Win said sarcastically. “They’re hitting each other with protective shields and auras of some kind. Looks like they’re amping up Glory Girl while she’s fighting too… I think there might be some sort of healing effect going on too, GG had some light burns that are gone now--”

“I’m moving in to provide support fire,” Gallant said suddenly.

“Gallant, don’t, we’re not supposed to directly engage,” Aegis said.

“We’re not supposed to do a lot of things,” Gallant said.

Kid Win could only watch as Gallant dropped down into the battlezone. The knight-armored Ward cupped his hands and gathered a ball of psi-energy in his palms. It shot down and struck Lung between the shoulder blades. The dragon-man shrieked… in rage? Pain?… no, despair. Lung’s shoulders drooped and he almost went down to his knees.

Kid Win double checked and got on the comm. “Gallant, whatever you threw at him, pour it on. He lost at least a foot in height!”

“Copy!” Gallant landed and began flinging psi-bursts hand over hand.

Glory Girl must have picked up what he was attempting because she suddenly backed off. But she wasn’t dropping out of the fight. Her hands went to her temples and a cone of white light suddenly shot from her forehead, illuminating Lung. Lung screamed again, this time in fear. He dropped to all fours, lashing out like an animal in all directions. Fire splashed off of shields, forcefields, armor, and already-smouldering vehicles and buildings.

“Crap, THAT backfired,” Kid Win muttered. Lung had shrunk another five feet but everyone pressing him had to fall back from the torrent of flames he’d flung out. He began dismantling and reassembling his electro-bolt pistols into a pulse rifle. Maybe he could hit a strong enough subsonic frequency to sap Lung’s will…?

It didn’t take long for Shen to find some PRT and their vehicle. Unfortunately he found them while they were in the middle of aiding the police in taking down still more ABB gang members. How many people were following that lunatic Lung…?

Right. Anyone in Brockton Bay with yellow skin who wasn’t inflammable.
Shen ran past the PRT agents wielding the restraint foam sprayers and slapped them in the back of their helmets. “Tag, you’re it!” he said, running between them.

“Wha--?” The two agents turned around just in time to see a small mob of ABB come pouring around the corner, right behind a convertible filled with skinheads. Give them props, they needed no cue; the nozzles came up and the foam flew. In seconds everything was immobilized, even the car.

Shen kept running. He leapt over a police barricade and raced on down the road, using his chi to accelerate forward.

When he finally stopped and caught his breath, he realized he was right on top of the biggest cape fight he’d ever scene. Right in the middle was Lung. He’d just knocked everyone else back with a blastwave of flame… and was looking with maddened eyes straight at Shen.

Had Lung’s vision been a little clearer, he would have seen Shen wasn’t who he thought he was. But flame, smoke, and pain had blurred his eyesight. “Y’ooo.” Lung snarled, pointing at Shen. “I KII Yoo!”

“Ohhh sh--”

“--adow Stalker! Report! Give us your position and sitrep now, we--”

Cursing at the distraction, Sophia flicked the off switch on the earbud with her finger. She was NOT going to miss this shot because Captain Meatwall decided to yammer about protocol in her ear.

Shadow Stalker could. Not. Believe. Her. Luck. She’d gotten to the combat zone, and Lung (as usual) was tearing up the street with one of his tantrums. And it wasn’t hard to figure out why; right there on the next roof over were the Undersiders, lying flat on the roof and trying NOT to look interesting. Had those losers actually tried to pull something on Lung? Well, judging by the mess he was making of the immediate vicinity… yes.

Then they’d gone and gotten themselves cornered. Oh, it was too rich.

And there was Grue, lying doggo on the roof with the rest of them, a sitting duck. Apparently he wasn’t using his Darkness because it would draw too much attention. She could just imagine spending an hour in her literature class arguing whether it was ironic or not.

Shadow Stalker was one rooftop over, kneeling on the ledge and looking down on them. An easy shot. Slowly, carefully, she pulled out one of her crossbow bolts and unscrewed the tranquilizer tip. Then she pulled out the “lucky medallion” she’d been given for Christmas. It was certainly good for one thing. She pried the back open and pulled out one of the steel arrowheads she’d hidden inside. She screwed the arrowhead on and nocked the bolt in her crossbow.

She lined up the iron sights on the spot between Grue’s shoulder blades. Time to put this pain out of her misery. She let her breath out and started to squeeze the trigger---
the Undersiders all jolted and turned about to stare in the direction of the ring tone.

"SON OF A MOTHERBUCKING MONKEYSLAPPER!" Sophia snatched up the cellphone where it was lying on the rooftop next to her and threw it with all of her might. She heard it clack against the far building on its way to the pavement, still fricking RINGING-- in desperate frustration she whipped her crossbow and aimed for Grue's chest---

Just as a clawed foot lashed out from nowhere and kicked the crossbow out of her hand. The bolt flew wide, striking the roof several feet from Grue’s helmeted head. The next instant Grue shot a cloud of darkness out, blotting the entire roof his team was on from sight.

Swearing and hissing like a scalded cat, Sophia dove and rolled sideways out of the reach of whoever had just disarmed her. She pulled out a collapsible baton as she rolled, snapping it out as she got her feet under her.

Perched on the ledge was another Cape wrapped in a dark cloak. She-- it was clearly female, the way the cloak wrapped around her-- was crouched there, a pair of sai in her hands, leg still extended from the sweep kick. Her leg…was wrong. The padded plates protecting the knee and the leg were the wrong proportions. And the leg ended in a paw, with inch-long splayed talons…

That’s when the rest of it registered: the glowing yellow eyes under the hood, the mouthful of gleaming white fangs. A basso profundo growl rumbled across the rooftop.

Shadow Stalker went for her batons even as her hindbrain heard that growl, ran down her spine and kicked her in the bladder and informed her in no uncertain terms that she was not the biggest predator on the rooftops tonight.

Angrily she shoved that visceral response down and snarled back. “Think ya gonna scare me with that big bad wolf routine, bitch?” she sneered.

The she-wolf spoke. “Oh I know you’re scared,” she said in a rumbling growl that was almost a purr. “I can smell it.” She lunged.

She was halfway across the roof and closed the distance in a single leap. Shadow Stalker went intangible instantly and the werewolf passed through her. Sophia spun about, ready to deliver a strike at the other Cape’s unprotected back-- only to see her disappear in a burst of indigo smoke. Then suddenly someone was behind her again, she lunged forward just in time to blunt a punch to her kidneys.

Then it all dissolved into a flurry of kicks and strikes and smoke passing through smoke, and Shadow Stalker was very, very preoccupied with her own little issues.

“--You got to get down off this roof, idiot!” the quadcopter screeched at Grue. “Shadow Stalker is up there and Hemlokk may be keeping her occupied, but right now you guys are sitting ducks!”
Grue had pulled a curtain of darkness over his team like a tent, blocking them from the view of whoever shot that crossbow bolt. *Whoever? Don’t kid yourself, Brian, that was Shadow Stalker, Grue thought.* The PRT’s pet pedigree psychopath.

Surprisingly the quadcopter hadn’t been disconnected from whatever broadcasting tower was controlling it by the cloud, and Aisha had been yelling at him through it nonstop. “Will you shut up? You’re going to draw fire!” he snarled.

“*Like Kid Win or Gallant or some other hero isn’t going to strafe the big Dark Cloud of Darkness the minute they notice it!*” Aisha shot back. “*You gotta get down off this roof and down to the street!*”

“And down into THAT?” Regent yelped, pointing at the raging firefight below.

“*Bayleaf-- Skinwalker-- says you all got to be together before he can get everyone out!*” Aisha said. “*And that means down there with the rest of ‘em.*”

“And where IS this great and wonderful Skinwalker who’s going to save all our butts?” Tattletale spat sarcastically.

THOOM. THOOM THOOM THOOMTHOOMTHOOM. Suddenly a half-dozen bolts of Moonfire fell out of the sky, riveting Lung in place and lighting up the five-way like day. Aisha’s voice couldn’t have sounded more smug. “*He just arrived.*”

Falling out of the night sky in a Stukka dive came an enormous horned owl. It shrieked and pulled up at the last second, transforming into a robed and hooded wolfman who landed on all fours next to Shen. Bayleaf hit the ground moving; he hadn’t even stood erect before he was lashing out at Lung with entangling vine spells. The vines burned to ash in seconds; Lung shook them off and charged.

Bayleaf waved his hand again; a trio, then a sextet of Treants burst out of the ground and tackled Lung in mid stride. They slowed him, but were swiftly immolated. Lung leapt forward, flinging pieces of burning treant in every direction. It was just enough time; Bayleaf grabbed Shen under the arms and used Displacer Beast to fling himself and the pandaren out of his path. Lung plowed into the building that had been behind them, bringing brick and concrete raining down on his own head.

Up on the roof, the Undersiders were still arguing with one another and Aisha about what to do. All except Tattletale. Her Power was nothing less than Sherlock Holmes in a bottle— the capacity for deductive and inductive reasoning on a superhuman scale. She could put together entire portfolios of information from a single threadbare clue, or read someone’s life backstory from a few microexpressions. Right now she was trying to follow both the battle in the streets and the deadly duel in the rooftops at the same time and pushing her Power and her own brain as hard and fast as she ever had.

Multiple power sets. Disparate abilities.

Disparate yet similar or possibly identical sources. Mass Trigger?

She caught a glimpse of Hemlok and Shadow Stalker dancing around each other, clouds of intangible shadow and bursts of occluding smoke. She watched as the Skinwalker blinked from one place to another; as the blonde elf suddenly did the same to evade a random fireball.
Hemlokk capable of teleportation.

Bayleaf aka Skinwalker capable of teleportation.

Elf, capable of--

Most or all members of new category Cape, capable of some form of teleportation…

“Grue, we have to get down there and help!”

She could almost see Regent’s eyes bugging out through his harlequin mask. “Are you insane? For WHAT?”

“To save our ride out of here, and I don’t mean Bitch’s dogs!”

Before she could explain further, the rooftop became crowded by one more person. Grue had let his Darkness slip in the heat of the argument, and someone else had seen an opening. A figure in a ninja shozoku and wearing a red demon mask appeared on the rooftop next to MeiMei, sword drawn for a killing blow.

He wasn’t quite fast enough; before the blade came down Hemlokk saw him. Instantly she broke off from Shadow Stalker, disappearing in a huge blast of smoke that left her opponent choking. She reappeared behind Oni Lee in a burst of purple smoke and drove both her sai straight into his back. He crumbled to dust just as a new Oni Lee appeared directly behind her-- only to have her disappear and reappear directly behind him--

“Come on, it’s either down there with Lung or up here with Kung Fu Splodeydope!” Tattletale yelled. As if to punctuate her statement one of Oni Lee’s clones went up in an explosion. It seemed he’d remembered the bombs on his bandolier.

Grue made the call. “Rachel, time to saddle up!” Bitch got her dogs up; the others all but climbed over each other mounting up.

MeiMei looked to object. “But my powers are still-- Ah #$ it--” the panda girl began slapping scrolls onto everyone, even the dogs. Strength, agility, defense, dodge, whatever she had.

Regent looked at the one slapped to his ruffled renfaire shirt in confusion. “A naked geisha?”

“GIVE me that-!” She yanked it away and hit him with the strongest dexterity scroll she had left. She scrambled up on the dog-monster’s back. “Okay, let’s do this, Charge of the Light Brigade, let’s go!”

“Isn’t that the one where they all Diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeed--!!!” Regent got out as they plunged over the side of the building in a boiling cloud of black.

When she was a little girl, Taylor had owned two or three different little pegboard games. Some were triangle shaped, others shaped like big crosses or squares, but the play idea was the same for all of them: you jumped the pegs over each other, checkers-style, till only one peg was left. Now as
Hemlokk she couldn’t help feeling like was in the middle of the biggest, most dangerous game of pegboard-hop of her life. There were only two pegs, and the game was only going to end when one of them hopped wrong and was deleted—suddenly, loudly and violently.

She was lightning fast. She had powers and abilities he had probably never thought of. But he had years of experience as an assassin, saboteur and living paradox—a serial suicide bomber. She was barely one split second ahead of his blasts, each one catching her on the very edge as she teleported, rattling her bones and making her ears ring, while every kick, sai strike or raking claw came away with nothing but a cloud of clone-dust. They were popping back and forth from rooftop to rooftop, spreading dust, smoke and fire everywhere, and she was running out of places to maneuver.

She ninja-vanished, crouching invisible in the clouds of smoke and dust, trying to catch her breath. Oni Lee appeared next to her, facing the other way, finger through the trigger of his bomb-belt. Then another, then another and another—in half a breath half a dozen Oni Lee clones were scattered over the roof. It looked like he was going to go for spamming the area as fast as he could and try to catch her in the area blast.

Her teleportation ability, unfortunately, had one current limitation: she could only teleport to a place directly behind another person—a deadly advantage if you needed to get in a backstab. A deadly flaw if you needed to get as far away from everyone as possible. She looked around frantically, trying to figure out where the one real and therefore safe to teleport to Oni Lee was.


A green ray lanced down, striking the clones one after the other. All six of the Oni Lees surrounding her suddenly shrank to one tenth their height. They went off like a string of firecrackers, barely stinging her ankles with bits of gravel. Hemlokk looked up; hovering overhead was Aegis, carrying Vista in his arms. The youngest Ward blew some imaginary smoke off the barrel of her shrink ray and gave Hemlokk a fist pump. On the next roof over she could see the real Oni Lee, frozen in midleap. Clockblocker was there, hopping onto the roof off what appeared to be…a staircase of time-frozen paper sheets? Clever. He’d obviously nailed the teleporting bomber with a time freeze ray just as he’d reappeared. He was calmly putting a black bag over the time-stopped villain’s head (line of sight teleporting, ah hah) and liberally applying containment foam from an extruder that looked rather like a chrome super-soaker. The stuff was designed to stop Brutes like Lung; even a few spritzes around the hands and feet would restrain a baseline-strength human like Oni Lee.

She returned Vista’s fist-pump and, with a quick glance down into the chaos below, teleported town to Bayleaf just as Grue’s smoke closed over everything.

Shadow Stalker and Hemlokk were all over the roof. She hated to admit it, and she was starting to feel a little fear. This were-bitch was fast, and judging from the damage she was doing to the surroundings scary strong. Up till now Sophia had never had much trouble with hand-to-hand combat unless she was forced to do it unpowered. With her shadow-form she was all-attack; she
could strike, phase out, then strike again without having to pause to parry or give ground dodging. But this new Cape was just as aggressive and at least half a step faster, landing one or two grazing blows in the eyeblink it took for Sophia to phase out. And she was even harder to hit than Sophia was herself, teleporting and reappearing BEHIND her over and over-- it was infuriating! She even briefly went into some half-shadowy state at one point, suddenly making all Sophias strikes and blows a fraction as effective.

Then she’d jerked her head to one side, said “I’ll deal with you later--” and teleported away. Like Sophia was nothing but an annoyance, a distraction!

Seething with rage at the insult, Sophia cast around, looking either for the wolf-bitch or her crossbow. Lucky day, it hadn’t fallen off the roof. She snatched it up, loading and cocking it as she swept for her target-- who was going toe-to-toe with Oni Lee, now. The two of them were popping in and out all over the place, neither one quite able to land a blow on each other, but still tearing it up like two bobcats in a burlap bag. Even if they’d been in range she’d never have a chance of getting off a shot at either of them.

And now Grue’s screw-you-up smoke was wafting all over the place, making it a minefield for her personally. Sophia screamed in frustration and put this new wolf-cape bitch at the absolute TOP of her list. Number one with a BULLET. Snarling, she pulled out her grapnel gun and shot a line for a parapet that would pull her outside the smoke and Darkness filled perimeter. It was way past time she upgraded her own gear. Starting with a better weapon. Preferably something more rapid fire than a freaking crossbow…

Bitch’s dogs hit the street, and the Undersiders bailed off, rolling to disperse their momentum. A whistled command from Bitch and all three monster dogs went for Lung. They must have been revitalized by MeiMei’s scrolls because they hit like three runaway garbage trucks, biting and tearing.

In an instant Grue was on his feet, casting a roof of Darkness high overhead. He was taking no chances on Shadow Stalker taking a free shot at anyone on his team.

And, unfortunately and not to his knowledge, cutting off Clockblocker and Vista from getting a shot at Lung.

Regent was next to get to his feet. He was bowed over, hands on knees, but he pointed his jester’s baton at Lung just as the raging cape flung Bitch’s dogs away. Inexplicably Lung began punching himself in the face.

“Stop hitting yourself, Lung. Stop hitting yourself, Lung, stop hitting yourself,” Regent chanted in a singsong, waving the jester’s staff back and forth.

Unfortunately Lung didn’t need his hands free to spew flame. Shen barely snatched Regent out of the way in time, grabbing him as he did a Flying Dragon kick across the makeshift arena.

“Can’t you do anything?” MeiMei shouted at Tattletale. The girl HAD to have some sort of secret extra power up her sleeve, right?
Even as she spoke, Tattletale had her pistol out and was popping shots at Lung, hoping to hit a vulnerable spot. “I’m a Thinker,” she shouted as she tried to circle strafe. “Whaddya want me to do, ANALYZE him to death? Hey LUNG, WERE YOU TWELVE OR THIRTEEN WHEN YOU QUIT WETTING THE BED?”

Lung’s head snapped around, his eyes bulging with rage. He ripped a flaming chunk out of the street and flung it overhand at the purple-clad girl. It went high, smashing against a distant building. “Holy crap, she shoots, she scores,” Tattletale muttered in surprise. “I was just guessing. Yeek!” She was suddenly very busy dodging a barrage of flaming asphalt.

MeiMei was weeping in frustration. Just two weeks ago, not even that, she could have ripped up a chunk of building or sidewalk the size of a city bus or even a city bus itself, a half-dozen buses, she could have fought… instead she was just a prize for other people to fight over, the stupid freaking damsel in distress—

“Move, dammit,” she screamed at the stone underneath her, pounding her furry fists on the cracked pavement. “MOVE!!”

*The stone answered.*

She felt it before she saw it; she fell backwards as the pavement crumbled, was shoved up and aside by something below coming up. A huge mass of solid granite heaved up through the pavement like a grumpy titan rising from the blankets of its bed. It had a chest as wide as the cab of a garbage truck, arms and fists made of clustered boulders, and an almost ludicrously tiny head with glowing coals for eyes. Its torso ended in a pile of loose stones the size of truck tires that rolled over and under each other constantly. It looked down on her with those glowing eyes.

{WHAT DO?}

*It wanted orders.* She pointed at Lung. “Hit him,” she said. “Lots.” The Earth Elemental (where did that name come from?) smacked one massive fist in the other, somehow giving her the impression of an eager grin, and rumbled off to obey. The sound of granite boulders pounding scaled flesh soon punctuated the roars and bellows and smashings.

“I...” *hominahominahominahomina.* Words filled her head as another crack in her fractured memory healed itself. *That’s an Earth Elemental. Temporarily animated earth and stone, given a crude sapience templated off rudimentary parts of my own mind. It’s only one kind of Elemental at my disposal.*

*Only one kind.*

She looked over at a nearby fire hydrant. She gestured. It ruptured, spewing water into the air. Another gesture and the water had gathered in a crude humanoid shape, halfway between man and water spout, with glowing eyes shining through the glassy head. “Attack!” She pointed at Lung; it began flinging barrelfuls of water at him, dousing the flames and raising clouds of steam…

*I’m MORE than I was. I command the primal, destructive forces of nature. Lightning, earthquakes and eruptions. Earth, water, FIRE--*
Another dance of her hands overhead and the flames from the smouldering buildings, ruined vehicles, the flaming asphalt were swept together and an Elemental of flame stood to accept her command.

_I am a SHAMAN._

A pointed finger-- one accompanied by a sizzling lightning bolt that struck the struggling Lung-- and the Fire Elemental fell on him, swirling around him, blinding and disorienting him. “EAT IT, LUNG!” She screamed.

Everyone began raining absolute hell on the enemy. Moonfire, Sunfire, Jade Lightning, ordinary lightning, blasts of raw fear and despair, arcane lances and bolts and eruptions, time-slowing effects, hammers of flaming light, uncontrolled muscle spasms, shurikens drenched in Darkness, everything they had. For a moment it looked like it was working.

Then Lung SURGED. He swelled, doubling in height in a single rush, muscle forming on top of muscle, and a massive barbed tail extending behind him, lashing the air. Skeletal limbs ripped free of his back, forming the beginning of wings…

“Aw crap,” Bayleaf said for them all.

“Everyone, hold him for just a second!” the elf wizard suddenly screamed. He stepped forward waving his staff in an incredibly complex pattern. Pressing their luck, the others did their best to oblige; the Elementals grappled with Lung’s arms; already-shriveling vines wound his legs, Regent fought with him for control of his own limbs. The Earth Elemental crumbled; the fire and water Elementals evaporated, the vines burned away. One second… two…

“Valanor Shadath!” Shar’Din shouted, pointing his staff at Lung. There was a rippling flash of _something_…

“BAAAA!” Lung raged.

The battlefield fell eerily silent as everyone present stared at Lung, leader of the ABB, ruler of the Asian quarter of Brockton Bay… and world’s angriest sheep.

“You turned him into a sheep,” Grue said in a monotone.

“Uhh, yeah?” Shar’Din said.

“A sheep,” Regent said, dumbfounded.

The sentiment seemed universal. Even Bitch’s dogs looked confused, staring at the woolly Lung with their heads cocked at odd angles. It was understandable; it wasn’t often you saw a sheep behaving the way Lung was. He the size of a largish dog, covered in dirty white wool, and was baaing and bawling like only a psychotically enraged ungulate can. He shook his head and made abortive ramming charges at one person or the other. His behavior only became more deranged as people began to laugh.

“Uh, guys,” Shar’Din said in growing alarm. “I don’t know how long it’ll be till it wears off--!”

Swearing, Tattletale took aim with her pistol and prepared to put Lung out of everyone’s misery, but before she could take the shot, with a flash of octarine light the spell broke--

Leaving a very naked, very confused, and very human Lung kneeling in the middle of the ruins of the street.
Fortunately not everyone was slow on the draw. Before Lung could do anything but blink, Hemlokk appeared behind him and cracked him across the base of his skull with a magically-infused blackjack.

When Lung next came to, he was lying on his stomach, gagged, hogtied, and fitted out with a very familiar restraining collar: one made of titanium steel and lined with explosive-driven darts loaded with tinker tranquilizers. It had been made by Armsmaster for him years ago; this was the third time he’d had the pleasure of wearing it. Surrounding him were the PRT, the Wards, and Capes who had fought him to a standstill; right in front of him knelt the wolf-man wretch. “Before you think of trying anything, Lung,” he said, “I think you really really ought to know that a WHOLE lotta things just changed.

“How we took you down… you remember that just now don’t you Lung? Wasn’t that interesting? Oh, not the sheep part; that was just hilarious.” Lung snarled silently. He would avenge this unbelievable insult. “Oh, oh oh, don’t get all testy with me, hǔn dàn,” Bayleaf said warningly. “The interesting part was how you were oh so ramped up-- and then we changed you back. That’s right, you BŪN tyen-shung duh ee-DWAY-RO ,” he said as Lungs eyes went wide with understanding. “we have an INSTANT RESET BUTTON FOR YOU now.

“Oh, and in case you get the idea that only Shar’Din can do it…” he gestured behind him. Lung looked up. There stood that Lǜ Chá Biào, the panda girl. She was smirking like the devil himself. Past her stood the little ponce that ran with the Undersiders, with the tights and the blousy shirt and harlequin mask.

“Do I gotta do this?” Regent whined.

“Yes, shuddup,” MeiMei said. She waved her hand at him. There was a flash of impossibly-colored light and where Regent once stood was a bullfrog. Tattletale scooped him up for safekeeping. Regent croaked disconsolately.

“ So you see, Lung-- or would that be YANG--” Lung snarled at hearing himself called a sheep-- " if you try anything stupid... like say, coming after the delightful miss MeiMei... you will have a very very SHORT career eating flies. That is, before she puts on her frog-stomping boots and goes to town.” He blew a raspberry and made a stomping motion. Lung flinched; message received.

“In fact, if you throw another one of your famous temper tantrums anywhere, one of us will show up, polymorph your stupid ass, and let whoever you were annoying rip your all too human head off your all too human shoulders.” He paused thoughtfully. “Come to think of it, I think we could whip up a Lung-to-Frog ray just for the PRT… ahh, such a to-do list. Anyway, it’s going to be real important to behave yourself from now on, I think.” He patted Lung on the cheek and got to his feet. “Come on, guys, it’s time to go.” He stepped away with the others; the PRT men waiting just out of view poured in and prepared to haul the humbled Lung away.

The Wards and the PRT were all over the area, throwing up barricades and trying to look authoritative. The Undersiders and the Warcrafted were all clustering together, more or less, exchanging awkward looks and halting words. Glory Girl was in there, radiating good feelings-- darn it, Bayleaf was going to have to check that tiara for leaks. Oh well, at least it served a good
purpose at the moment; namely keeping anyone from getting skittish and bolting. He made a “rally up” gesture with an upraised hand. “Okay, guys, we’ve all got a lot of stuff to talk about--”

“No foolin’,” Shar’Din said, looking over at Shen. Who was staring at MeiMei and the Undersiders, who were staring at everyone else-- except for Rachel, who was too busy tending to her (thankfully shrunk down to normal) dogs.

“--and I really think that things are going to get awkward around here for some of us real soon,” Bayleaf said meaningfully. “So if you’ll all gather in, we...”

“Hold on right there,” Aegis said, floating over to where they were gathered. “You guys, I’m afraid that you can’t leave yet.”

“You gonna try and stop us?” Rachel growled, standing next to her dogs. They growled and for a moment started growing-- only to shrink back down when Grue put a hand on her arm and shook his head.

“As leader of the Wards,” Aegis said, looking regretful, “a member of the PRT and currently the most senior representative of the Protectorate present, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to come with us to PRT headquarters to--”

“Yabba yabba yabba official talky talky,” the recently re-humanized Regent said. He looked to the Skinwalker. “You were saying about someplace to go? Preferably, immediately?”

Bayleaf nodded. “You coming, GG?”

“I--” she started to say something, then blanched as she looked to the horizon. Several glowing streaks of light could be seen in the sky, closing fast; the rest of New Wave. “Oh poop, the ‘rents-- I’m with you, Bayleaf, just hurry!”

“You got it. Grue, can you give us a little privacy?” Before Bayleaf even finished speaking the helmeted boy nodded. A swirling dome of vanta black covered the group. “Shar’Din, we need a mass teleport, like, yesterday.”

“But-- where??” Shar’Din said.

Bayleaf fished his hearthstone out of his haversack and threw it to him. Shar’Din fumbled but caught it. “Use that to home in on where to go!” he said, mentally crossing his fingers.

“Yeah… oh yeah! Okay, everyone get in close together!” Shar’Din gripped the stone and his staff in one hand and began waving the other in a complicated pattern.

“Cast faster, Elf boy,” Grue said. He could see the PRT and the Wards gathering their courage to plunge into the cloud he’d summoned.

Leaf-green light began spiraling around them. They all pulled together as the air began to hum in a rising note, everyone grabbing a hand or a sleeve or a dog collar. With a final crescendo, they disappeared in a flash of light, leaving behind a dissipating cloud of Dark and a very confused and upset crowd of PRT.
Bayleaf’s secret base had once been a metal shop for working on train engines, so despite all the different projects Bayleaf had going back at base, there was still quite a bit of open space in the workshop floor. This was a fortunate thing. With a flash of light, the entire mob-- the Undersiders, the Warcrafted, even the dogs-- appeared in midair and fell to the floor with a rather loud crash.

“Owugh! My back!”

“Get your shield out of my crotch!”

“Sorry--”

“--My dogs better not be hurt--”

“They’re okay, the pandas broke their fall.”

“owfff...”

Bayleaf crawled out from under the pile. He dragged himself up into a sitting position and waited while everyone untangled themselves, then waved a hand to their surroundings.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Lost Workshop.

“Oh, and welcome to the Alliance.”
Chapter 17

It took a few minutes for everyone to sort themselves out. Once everyone was through gawking at their sudden change of scenery, everyone began squaring off. The Undersiders were grouping together, their backs up and looking hostile; Glory Girl was hovering in a corner, looking like she was fighting the instinct to try and arrest the Undersiders; the new Warcrafted were scattered about looking back and forth between everyone and looking confused, and Bayleaf and Hemlokk were more or less in the middle, making ‘calm down’ motions and trying to keep everything from getting seriously agitated.

“Before we go anywhere here,” Bayleaf was saying, “I need everyone to pull up a chair and calm down. It may not look it but we’re all on the same side here.”

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t share the sentiment,” Regent said drolly, looking square at Glory Girl. She flipped him the bird. He tipped the head of his jester’s staff at her… then started in obvious surprise when nothing happened.

Bayleaf caught the byplay. It seemed Glory Girl’s new tiara worked both ways. Interesting. Let Regent wonder why his power suddenly wasn’t working; it’d probably help keep him in line.

Rachel and her dogs both started growling. A much louder, deeper and MUCH scarier growl slowly drowned them out; the dogs whimpered and dropped to their bellies on the floor and Rachel turned three shades paler. She sat down on the floor abruptly. Once they all looked like they were behaving, Hemlokk let the growl fade away. “We’re trying to help you,” Hemlokk said to the girl. “Don’t do anything to make that change.”

Bayleaf looked over at Hemlokk, surprised. “I’ve been practicing,” she muttered, crossing her arms and flicking her ears in embarrassment. She didn’t take her eyes off Rachel or the dogs.

Grue cleared his throat… an odd sound with that strange reverb his shadows gave it. “Not to sound ungrateful for that bail out,” he said. “But why are you helping us?”

“A question I’d like answered myself,” Gallant said, stepping forward from behind Vicky. Several people yelped.

“How did you come along?” Bayleaf said, surprised. “How did you know we were teleporting??”

Gallant shrugged. “What was there to know?” he said. He looked at Glory Girl. “I saw where she went and I followed.”


“That doesn’t answer MY question,” Grue said.

“I’ll answer it for ya,” Aisha said, stepping around the Comm center and marching up to him. “'Cause I ASKED him to!”


“Tell ya later,” she said, smothering a giggle.

“That doesn’t answer MY question,” Grue said.

“I’ll answer it for ya,” Aisha said, stepping around the Comm center and marching up to him. “'Cause I ASKED him to!”

“Aisha!” Grue yelped. “What are you doing here with him?”

“Bailing YOUR sorry, stupid ass out!” she snapped. She punctuated her sentence with a slap to the top of his helmet. “You need to be more responsible, Aisha!” SLAP. “You need to get your ACT
together, Aisha!” SLAP. “You can’t just run around doing whatever you WANT, Aisha!” SLAP. “Is THIS how you were going to ‘make our lives better,’ you overgrown musclebound Jackass? Becoming a VILLAIN? Starting a GANG? You RETARD!” SLAP SLAP SLAP.

Grue ended up grabbing both her wrists and holding them to stop her slapping him. “There were extenuating circumstances,” he protested to everyone at large. She started kicking him in the shins. “OW!”

“I’ll extenderate your circumstandings, you IDIOT!”

“As entertaining as this is...” Regent said, his voice filled with amusement, "This isn't helping..."

“Aisha!” Bayleaf barked. Loudly enough to make the rafters ring and everyone else jump. Rachel's dogs even cringed down lower to the floor. Aisha stopped kicking and stood there fuming. Bayleaf let out a sigh and took a deep breath. “Brian Laborne, oldest of two children. Mother is a drug addict, Father is... less than optimal. Triggered when he came to his mother’s house and found one of her boyfriends-- who had abused him in the past-- was now attempting to abuse his little sister.” Grue made an abortive choking noise. “Is currently struggling to take custody of his sister in order to remove her from the toxic environment, but is at loggerheads with the system. Was approached by Coil, and offered leadership of a new supervillain team in exchange for help working through the child welfare system and a job so he is-- at least on paper-- legitimate.”

“Bayleaf--!” Hemlokk exclaimed, appalled.

Bayleaf ignored her and pressed on. “Aisha already pretty much exposed him, Hemlokk. Might as well pull the rest of the bandaid off. Rachel Lindt!” Rachel’s head snapped up.

“Aka Bitch, aka Hellhound. Uneducated, illiterate, essentially autistic. Abandoned by her mother when very small, put into child protective services as a borderline feral child. Put in a series of abusive foster homes, culminating in a final one where she Triggered when her sadistic bitch of a foster mother tried to drown a stray puppy Rachel had adopted in the backyard pool.” Several of the listeners made tiny sounds of shock and sympathy. “Unfortunately while Rachel can turn those dogs into the monsters you’ve seen, she cannot automatically control them; she has to train them, the same as anyone else. And the puppy was untrained. It mutated into a monster the size of a compact car that mauled her foster mother to death, badly injured all the other foster children in the house and then destroyed the building. Railroaded by the legal system, from whom she escaped. Lived as a fugitive and low-level violent criminal until being recruited into the Undersiders with the promise of safety for her and her dogs.”

Tattletale eyed him. She started to smirk and say something… but then her smirk faded. “You didn’t get that off the internet,” she said, sounding worried.

His next words made her worry even more. “Not YOUR internet, no.”

“Regent. AKA Alec… born Jean-Paul Vasil, son of Nicholas Vasil, Heartbreaker.” The name alone was enough to send a chill around the room.

Regent shrugged carelessly, but anyone could see the casualness was faked. “Nothing anyone else hasn’t guessed.”

“True enough. Or that you’re the fourth of his children to manifest… due to him torturing you over and over to the brink of insanity with his emotion-controlling powers.” Regent was immobile as a doll. “As it is, you’re effectively a high-functioning sociopath because he literally burned out your ability to feel strong emotions, including empathy. Wanted for several rapes and murders which your
father forced you to commit. You have the power to seize control of another person’s body… the little “uncontrolled spasms” thing is just a cover. Once you’ve been exposed to someone long enough, tinkered with their nervous system with those little tweaks and jerks enough-- we’re talking several days, here-- you can puppeteer them, see through their eyes, hear through their ears, make them move and speak and do whatever you wish… while they retain full awareness of it all.

“You’re terrified that the PRT will find out the truth about your power and find some excuse to throw you into the Birdcage… or that your father will find you and come take you back.”

“Got it in one,” Regent said, flipping his jester’s mace end over end. Noone was fooled by his attempt to sound casual. Noone missed the burning intensity in his eyes.

Bayleaf turned his merciless eyes on Tattletale. This was going to be the hard one.

“Tattletale. AKA Lisa Wilbourne...” Tattletale got a half-smirk...” NOT her actual birth name.” Her half-smirk rapidly disappeared. “Born Sarah Livsey. NOT a psychic or a precog; instead has what is essentially a turbocharged capacity for deductive and inductive reasoning, enabling her to basically “cold read” anyone or anything.

“Triggered when her brother committed suicide, and her parents blamed her for his death when she said she thought she’d noticed something wrong--”

“Stop it,” Tattletale said.

“Once her parents figured out her power, they began exploiting it, using her abilities in business trades, on the stock market, and get-rich-quick scams. She finally grew sick of being exploited and ran away….”

“STOP IT!” Tattletale pulled her gun and aimed it right between Bayleaf’s eyes. He didn’t even blink.

“She then demonstrated just exactly how smarter she was than everyone else,” he said sarcastically, “by coming to Brockton Bay and using her powers to completely drain the accounts of several rich and powerful men in a row, pocketing their wealth and leaving a trail through the local economic underworld like a blindfolded elephant. At which point she was approached by Coil, who made her an offer at the point of a gun-- “

Hemlokk suddenly appeared behind Tattletale and snatched the gun away. She held the furious girl effortlessly in a one-armed grip. “Stop it, that’s enough!” Hemlokk said, her voice full of fear. She could smell the surprise, the fear, the swelling anger coming off the other Capes in the room.

“Bayleaf, unmasking a cape is serious--”

“Yes. Serious. Serious as the end of the world, isn’t it.” His eyes never left Tattletale’s. “I don’t have time, the world doesn’t have time for us to play masquerade party… To sit around pussyfooting, pretending that we can’t figure out who each of us is. And I’m certainly not going to sit here pretending NOT to know what it is each of you wants or needs fixed so that we can get down to saving the world.

“I’m not unmasking anyone here. I’m letting you know what I know. I’m laying all my cards on the table face up.”

“I don’t see you spilling YOUR life story,” Tattletale said coldly.

Bayleaf sighed and threw himself into one of the overstuffed chairs he’d tossed about the place. He began to speak. “Bayleaf. Also known as Skinwalker, the Giving Tree, the Demon Tiger, the Night
A chorus of “whats” went up. He couldn’t help grinning. “Real name? Adrian… Smith, I think. Born in an alternate universe-- no, not like Earth Aleph, Earth Aleph is an alternate dimension of this world. I’m from a LOT farther away.

“I was… picked… from my homeworld by an extradimensional being I know as ‘The Agent,’ to serve as an Actor in this reality. Given a whole new life, a clean slate. Granted a suite of powers, and dropped-- literally-- into Brockton Bay, with a pretty massive mission: to save the world.”

“And pretty much everyone here is going to be in the middle of it in some way or another.”

The elf-boy, who was sitting on the floor indian style and playing with the glowing plants, raised his hand. “I can.. I can like, testify to that,” he said. “I got the same deal. Well, except for the whole ‘nother universe thing, I’m a local boy, heh. But-- okay, endless cosmic plane, talking glowy light thing, let’s make a deal, all of this sounding familiar to anybody else? Anybody?” He raised his eyebrows and waved his hand a little, trying to get a response.

The paladin raised his gauntleted hand. “Um, same for me,” he said.

The male panda held up his hand, silently. The female started to, then looked upset and confused.

Glory Girl raised her hand. “I’ve seen some of the evidence,” she said. “Guys, trust us, this is only the beginning of the weird.”

“But why don’t I remember this?” MeiMei said. She gestured to herself. “I mean, I believe you-- I mean after THIS-- but…”

Bayleaf nodded, not quite frowning. “That’s just the first of my questions. I was told that I was to be the only one here-- and that Hemlokk was a huge exception to the rules….

“Aisha, go order up about… eh, a dozen pepperoni pizzas, and six jugs of coca cola,” he said. “use the mad money in the coffee can. Oh, and call Panacea, see if she can stop by. Wouldn’t hurt to have everyone get a checkup after all that happened.” He pulled his legs up into his chair so that he was sitting crosslegged. He settled into a lotus position and closed his eyes.

“What’s he doing?” Grue said. Then he gulped audibly as the wolfman suddenly went as transparent as green glass.

Aisha looked at Bayleaf, then over at her brother. “From the look of it-- callin’ tech support.”

Aisha had just finished placing the order with a very understanding and accommodating (see: cape friendly) pizza place that Glory Girl had clued Bayleaf to some time ago when Bayleaf suddenly became opaque again and opened his eyes. “Okay, everyone, this… okay this is going to take a bit more… everyone, everyone sit in a circle. Come on,” he said impatiently when some of them hesitated. “You want answers, this is it. Sit, sit, sit… You, uh, Shen was it? Sit in the center of the
“Remember how to do a Zen Pilgrimage? You’re going to lead the way for the rest of us.”

Shen looked alarmed, but he nodded. He shifted back and forth, folding his legs in a lotus position. “Couldn’ta done this a couple weeks ago,” he muttered as he folded his legs over each other. He sat up, back straight, hands resting palms-up on his knees and closed his eyes. The others muttered for a moment, but fell silent in astonishment as he slowly began to rise off the stone floor. He floated a foot off the floor, lights swirling around him, and slowly turned as transparent as glass.

“Everyone, join hands,” Bayleaf said. He smiled as he felt Hemlokk’s paw slip into his own. “Oh come on, what, you’re afraid of getting cooties? Join hands already.” Everyone obeyed. Even Rachel complied; her dogs stuck their heads under her arms and into her lap. Bayleaf closed his eyes and started reaching out to the Emerald Dream.

*Hope this works like he said--*

Bayleaf opened his eyes. All of them were there, sitting in a circle around the Pandaren monk. They were all dressed in simple homespun tunics and breeches. To his left was a wide flight of stone steps that ascended gently up a rolling hillside to the patio upon which they all sat. To his right stood an enormous oriental temple, story after story of white stone walls and ornate, gabled red tiled roofs and gilded eaves. He could hear the splashing of a fountain somewhere, and the wooden tones of bamboo wind chimes.

Everyone else looked around and saw it too; gasps of surprise and awe filled the air. A faintly glowing figure, like a man made out of neon tubes, came out of the front doors and approached them. *Welcome to the Temple of the Five Dawns,* it said. *Or, well, Mister Shen’s personal edition thereof. Do come inside.*

The group of young heroes and villains got to their feet. Rachel’s dogs stayed close at her heels, but they were eagerly sniffing everything in reach. Glory Girl was hovering and looking in all directions; it was obvious she wanted to fly off and start exploring as much as the dogs did.

They all started to walk inside when one of the young men yelped. *What is it?* The entity asked.

“My mask! My costume!” Gallant-- and it was obviously Gallant from his voice-- said. He actually tried to cover his face with the collar of his peasant shirt.

Bayleaf rolled his eyes, caught between amusement and irritation. “Dean Stansfield, blaster/master combo, boyfriend of Victoria Dallon, need I go on? It’s a little late in the day for all that. Even without insider knowledge, four of us here could identify you by scent, one of us could figure out your PIN number and favorite ice cream flavor from your microexpressions, and the rest have already guessed from the way you two act around each other in AND out of costume. You’re not nearly as subtle as you think, you two.” Vicky and Gallant blushed at each other.

They all went inside. The interior was even more beautiful on the inside than the outside. An enormous fountain stood in the center of the floor. A giant bronze statue of a Pandaren seated on a turtle and holding an oriental parasol over his head dominated the fountain; water fell in a steady shower from the multi-domed ceiling high above, splashing off the bronze parasol, down the statue and into the pool below. Braziers full of coals and incense burned at the four corners of the pool, and four floating masked creatures-- one made of water, one of fire, one of air and one of earth-- hovered about it. Floating around the statue were a handful of glowing dollops of light, seemingly of the same circle. This is going to take both of us.”

“What do you want me to do?” Shen asked as he sat on the floor facing the worgen.

“Remember how to do a Zen Pilgrimage? You’re going to lead the way for the rest of us.”
stuff as their guest. They darted about the statue, playing tag with one another and with the four masked elemental playmates. The capes could hear the elementals and the light-flecks laughing, high and childlike.

**Children? Come down here and say hello to your clients.** Agent’s voice had a certain tone of worn patience Bayleaf couldn’t quite place…

Wait. Children??

The lights left their elemental playmates and came soaring down to greet them. Four in particular split up and began hovering over the four new Warcrafted. **Vindicator! Shen! Shar’Din! Lei Ling!** They danced about their heads, cheerful and hyper as toddlers.

“Friend?” the paladin said.

**Yes, it’s me, Greg!** The light said, strobing brightly.

“Greg? Greg Veder?” Hemlokk and Bayleaf said in astonishment. It has to be said, regrettably, that Hemlokk’s voice was laden with more than a touch of disdain.

**You didn’t recognize him?** Agent asked them with a hint of amusement.

“I thought he sort of smelled familiar,” Bayleaf said. “But…”

**And you? You were his classmate for two years,** Agent teased Hemlokk.

“The last time I saw him his neck wasn’t almost as thick around as his head!” Hemlokk said, waving her hand at Greg’s taller and rather heavily muscled form. Her hands suddenly darted to her mouth. “Oh my gosh. It’s been weeks… and I remember hearing somebody at school say you’d gone missing-- I didn’t give it a thought…”

**Interesting isn’t it?** Agent said idly, interrupting. **How what is epic drama and tragedy to one person is an unimportant bit of gossip to anyone else…** he seemed to give her a meaningful look. It was hard to tell with his blank, glowing face.

“That’s where you’ve been? Dealing with-- this?” she said.

“Uh, yeah,” Greg said, scratching the back of his head. “Couldn’t exactly go home like this… they woulda just wanted to put me in the Wards, assuming they believed it was really me.”

“What’s wrong with the Wards?” Gallant said a trifle defensively.

“Uh, we’ll get to that in a minute, honey,” Glory Girl said with a grimace.

“Do, uh, do I know you?” Greg asked Hemlokk, more than a little confused.

Hemlokk looked at Bayleaf and half-groaned, half-whined. Bayleaf sighed and nodded. Resigned, Hemlokk drew a deep breath and transformed back to Taylor Hebert.

“TAYLOR?” Greg stammered. Taylor could almost see the marbles plinking into place in his head. He looked over at Bayleaf. “You’re… a relative of hers, then?” Was it her imagination or was there a hint of hope in there? **Was he hoping he still had a chance? Ew.** “Actually we just started dating,” she said, taking Bayleaf’s arm. Maybe a little hurriedly.

Bayleaf gave him a grin and turned back into Adrian Smith. “Sorry, fella,” he said. The poor kid
actually looked crestfallen.

“Oh. I see. I figured-- you know, same powers, and, um, you looking after her like a big brother and all--” he managed to force himself to shut up and looked away before he stuffed his foot further into his own mouth.

Tattletale suddenly snapped her fingers. “Hebert!” she said, pointing at Hemlokk-now-Taylor. “That girl who got stuffed in the locker last month...”

“Not something I like recalling, but yeah,” Taylor said a trifle curtly.

“Man, I hope the skanks who did that got theirs,” Lisa said soberly.

Adrian put an arm around Taylor’s shoulders. “We’re working on it,” he said, his voice grim.

MeiMei… now LeiLing. For crying out loud, another name?… looked around, shook her head and snorted. “Boy if my parents could see me now,” she muttered. “Hanging out in a Chink temple with a couple of coloreds and a heeb-- they’d crap themselves in five colors.”

The light orbiting her head formed a tiny fist and bopped her on the head. LeiLing! Be NICE!

“Excuse me?” Aisha said, hands on hips.

Shen, on the other hand, groaned in disgust and recognition. “Hello, Rune,” he said. “Long time no see.”

“LeiLing” gawped at him. “How did you….” she squinted, then her jaw dropped even further. “Theo?”

Shen waved a paw, a sarcastic smile on his face.

That actually brought several people up short. “How in hell did you recognize him like that?” Aisha said in confusion.

Leiling shrugged as she looked for words. “Dunno, it’s just... if anyone was going to become a panda, Theo was that sort of guy?” she said.

“It’s Pandaren, by the way,” Shen said frostily. “And the name is Shen. Max Anders can go sit and spin, he wants to claim he has a son anymore, stupid Nazi bastard. Feel free to go kiss his feet like the rest of E88.”

“Wait wait wait,” Grue said. “Rune? As in ‘throws chunks of street at people’ Rune, the Nazi girl cape?” In growing horror he added, “And Max Anders is a Nazi??”

“He’s KAISER,” Shen and LeiLing said.

Grue had to sit down on a nearby plinth. “Coil got me a job at Medhall,” he said.

“Medhall is just a front for Kaiser to launder money... and to give E88 a supplier of high end yuppie drugs,” Shen said with a snort. “And if Coil got him to hire a black man for anything more than scutwork, it was so he could use him later as a scapegoat for something. You’d be amazed how many tax scams Max Ander’s gotten out of by blaming some lowlevel minority worker for “misfiling” stuff or “embezzling” or the like.” He shrugged. “The Feds start sniffing around for proof of tax evasion or fraud or whatever, and suddenly Medhall finds a low level worker who turns out to be a ‘former’ supervillain? Custom-made fall guy.”
“He got me a job as a rent-a-patsy,” Grue said, holding his head in his hands. “Coil, you bastard...”

He wasn’t the only one feeling like a sap. Greg was standing there facepalming. “You’re telling me I tangled with LUNG to rescue a Nazi Supervillainess in distress,” he said bleakly.

“Hey, EX Nazi, EX villainess,” the Pandaren girl snapped. She sank from angry to sad and petulant, and turned away from the others. “I’m... just not good at it yet, okay?”

Grue was outraged, Greg was humiliated, but Gallant was horrified. “Max Anders is Kaiser?? I-- we’ve gone to cocktail parties with that man-- oh man, Triumph is going to freak, his father is the Mayor...” he paled. “And Anders on a handshake basis with....” realization spread across his face..."Thomas Calvert in the PRT...”

“Who is actually the villain Coil.” Tattletale finished for him.

Gallant’s oath was thunderstruck as it was heartfelt. "Way too many things are making sense," he said.

**Perhaps we should begin at the beginning, Agent said. As you can see, there are... many intertangling issues here. What I have to explain to you all about this situation requires some back story...**

Everyone sat back down and listened. Agent proceeded to get them all up to speed, starting from the Cosmic Space Whales and the malfeasance of Cauldron, the double-agent status of the Triumvirate, and going all the way down to the petty ambitions of Coil. It was a shaken and shattered crowd of young capes by the time he was finished.

... **Which brings us to here and now,** he finished. **And our... new recruits. Perhaps you all should... take some time to walk the grounds, tour the temple... digest what you’ve already learned. Maybe those of you with Agents take time to discuss things with them, ask any questions you still have lingering.** All of them got up and dispersed-- some of them looking more unsettled than others.

**And I believe you two have more than a few questions for me,** he said to Bayleaf and Hemlokk.

“Yeah,” Bayleaf said. “I was under the impression it was, well, one Agent to a world, or reality, or whatever. That Taylor’s and my situation was due to unique circumstances.” He pointed at the childlike lights dancing about the new Warcrafted. “So what’s all this?”

Bayleaf got the distinct impression that Agent was facepalming. **You do recall that I had to beg, borrow and wheedle every “Quatloo,” as you call them, to fund yourself and Taylor’s Agent contract, correct?** he said. Well, I borrowed a considerable amount some time back from my er, relatives.

“Oh dude,” Shar’Din said, shaking his head. “You never never never ever borrow money from family.”

**Anyhow, Agent said. Due to the... irregularities in this particular Job, My debts to those family members got called in.**

“Those members being?” Bayleaf said.

Agent gave off the “facepalm” aura again. **My nieces and nephews. Their parents were rather...**
irate… but my nieces and nephews didn’t want repaid in Quatloos. They asked for-- and received-- a share in the projected profits from this particular venture.

“And the rest of your debt to them?” Bayleaf said.

A special dispensation that the Rules Lawyers agreed to. They wanted Actors of their own. He gestured at the four new Warcrafted present. And I am their… Chaperone, I believe would be the appropriate term, for the duration.

“Agent?” Bayleaf asked with apprehension. “How old are your nieces and nephews?”

The oldest is… Twelve.


Years.


They are fully bestowed with the knowledge of an adult member of our race, Agent hastened to add. They just lack… practical experience. This will be, in fact, their first Agency.

“Ah, good, no way that can go wrong,” Bayleaf said. He was having a bit of trouble breathing and things were going fuzzy around the edges...

Hemlokk steadied her slowly panicking boyfriend as he teetered in place. “No, no, the other Warcrafted, they can come to you for advice, right? Or send their Agents to you?” Hemlokk said.

Agent paused for a very, VERY long time. Within limits.

“Well, it could be worse--” she started to say.

Bayleaf hastily laid a hand over her mouth. “Never ever say that,” he begged. “Murphy and his agents are always listening.” She nodded. He removed his hand. “I’m guessing that this little shindig is another rule-stretcher,” he said. “We’ve got several people who aren’t Agents or Actors here.”

You are correct. In the future you will be unable to bring anyone other than fellow Warcrafted to the Emerald Dream, or to the Temple of the Five Dawns. The only reason they are permitted here now is they are being approached by my nieces and nephews even now and offered similar bargains to your own.

“What?” Hemlokk stepped in front of him, forcing him to halt in his walk down the temple steps. “You mean we’re going to be leaving here with--” she counted on her fingers. “Six MORE Warcrafted?”

It would be ideal in some regards, but-- no. My best projections are that most of them are highly unlikely to say ‘yes.’

“Most,” Bayleaf said.

Most. But there are two in particular among your number who are… more damaged than the others. And they are almost certain to take one of my nieces or nephews up on their offer. They will need your help, for it will be possibly the most traumatic choice of their lives.
Glory Girl floated up to get a better look at the fountain statue, while Gallant sat down and rested on the rim of the pool. It was a rather likable statue, she thought; he looked like a very cheery and huggable sort of panda. Pandaren, right. She ought to remember that. Cultural respect and all that, as her mom would say.

As she floated there, the artificial shower pattering on her force field, one of the smaller lights, one of the “nieces or “nephews”, floated up to meet her. Hello! It chirped.

“And hello to you too, Junior,” she said.

Oh, that’s a good name. Junior. I like it. May I keep it?

“Sure, why not?” she laughed. “So what brings you up here?”

You wanna make a bargain?

“A what?”

A Bargain. Like Bayleaf or the others made.

“Oh, you mean… you want to become my Agent? You give me powers, I go out and save the world for you?”

Yup! With a sound like rustling paper, a window opened in the air next to Junior, and images started flipping past of various alien races. There are all sorts of neat races from Azeroth you could be… and all sorts of power sets. You could be a mage or a fighter or a paladin or---

For a minute, she almost considered it. A cool new set of powers… and maybe a hot new bod to go with it. Those night elves looked pretty smoking, if you didn’t mind the glowing eyes or the crazy long ears. Or the blue skin…

But then she started thinking about the tradeoffs. Like no longer being human. Or being something that lived hundreds or thousands of years, while her family and loved ones… didn’t. And she remembered somethin about Bayleaf, that he might have to leave Earth Bet sometime in the distant future, maybe even have to go to Azeroth…

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think so,” she said. “I’m pretty happy with who I am, and I like my powers the way they are, especially since Bayleaf’s helping me fix them so they work right. I’d probably better not press my luck.” She sobered a bit. “And I don’t want to leave my family behind through old age, or because I had to go to another planet, or something like that.” She shrugged. “Besides, I’m sort’ve already on board with the “saving the world” thing… so thank you, but no.”

Oh. Aw, poop.

“First try, huh?” She laughed and patted the little blob of light on its top. “Don’t worry, you’re a charmer… you’ll get an Actor someday.”
“I… I’m going to say no,” Gallant said.

*Are you sure?*

“Nobody’s really sure about anything, I don’t think,” Gallant said to the little light. He looked up at his girlfriend, soaring carefree around the vaulted ceiling of temple. “But I’ve got a loving family, a beautiful girl, a pretty decent purpose in life….I got it pretty good right here. No sense in getting greedy.”

Lisa felt her hands tremble at the possibilities. Power. Some of the options the little light-entity were offering were staggeringly powerful. Coil… people like Coil… could never touch her if she could fling fire from her fingertips or stop time or teleport. She’d lost count of the times she’d dreamed of having a real power, the kind like Alexandria had, that would let her crush the evil bastard’s skull in her fist like it was paper mache’.

But he had people like that under his thumb, too. If Tattletale had been a brute or blaster instead of a thinker, she never would have seen him coming. He would have just given one of his mercenaries a sniper rifle loaded with cape-killer bullets, then used his “Heads I win Tails you lose” power to split the timeline again and again till he got one where she didn’t manage to duck in time.

And according to the entities, they had enemies waiting that made Coil look like a joke. Enemies with all the brute power they could ever want, *but had thinkers to lead them*. It was going to be brains over brawn, right till the very end, and Tattletale was going to need every ounce of brains she had in her arsenal. And tragically, none of the Azeroth powersets even remotely resembled a Thinker power.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the light entity. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to pass.”

“Okay, why don’t I remember any of this?” Lei Ling said, upset. “Why don’t I remember making this deal-- with you-- choosing to be a PANDA WOMAN, for-- just… just what happened? What went wrong?”

*It’s all my fault,* Pitti Sing said, distraught. *When I gave you your new powers and form, I-- I made a mistake.*

“A mistake?” that certainly chilled the girl formerly known as Rune to the bone. “What sort of mistake?”
*You know about the Shards,* Pitti Sing said. She was so upset she was fluorescing indigo. *Uncle Agent told us that all the new Actors for this world had to have a fake Shard… like a disguise… to fool the Entities. When I gave you your new powers it was fine. But I put the fake Shard on BEFORE I removed the real one.*

“And…?” Lei Ling pressed.

*And it made the real Shard explode,* Pitti Sing concluded. *It knocked you out and sent you back to the baryonic plane. I lost you! I couldn’t detect you! I was so worried! Here, please, let me fix that broken memory bit--* She formed a tiny hand and reached out.

“No wait I--!!” Lei Ling started to protest. But Pitti Sing’s hand reached *into her head* and… actually, it was quite soothing. Like a cool towel on your head on a warm day. Then there was sort of a little mental *click,* and memories came flooding back.

Her frustration. Her depression. Her guilt and confusion over the things her family believed that they said were wrong were right were wrong against the whole world said they weren’t true she could see they weren’t true but--- and then the dark, midnight colored plain, and a little light offering her a shot at a whole new life away from her “clan” and their distortions and clever words and hypocrisies… and power, even greater power than she’d had before, so that noone could push her around…

She formed a fist, and a tiny homunculus of earth and clay formed at her feet and began trundling around. Hell of a ways from just heaving rocks around.

*Are you better?* The little light said. The little light she’d named Pitti Sing as a joke, and she’d joyfully accepted it as her name. Lei Ling wiped her eyes. “Yeah, I’m better,” she said. “I’m more than better- I’m back, Pitti Sing.” She let out a little laugh. “You never did tell me why you named me Lei Ling,” she said.

*It’s much better than Mei Mei,* Pitti said. *That means “little sister” or “little pretty thing.” it’s a diminutive, and kind of insulting.*

“And what does Lei Ling mean?”

*It means “Thunderous Spirit.”*

Lei Ling considered her loud arguments and explosive temper. “Yeah,” she laughed. “I think it suits me.”

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Bayleaf and Hemlokk were discussing their plans for the future with Agent when one of the younger lightlings came whizzing up. *Uncle, please, I need help! My actor--* He zipped back and forth, indicating the direction they needed to go.

*What is wrong with him?* Agent demanded. They all could see Shar’Din up ahead, kneeling on the ground next to a small brook, curled up in despair.
I don’t know, Uncle, Zippy said. I only told him more about the Blood Elves… and he became so overwhelmed with despair--

They reached Shar’Din. Hemlokk knelt beside him and awkwardly put her hand on his back, trying to pat him comfortingly. “What about the Blood Elves? Is that what he is?”

Bayleaf groaned as he realized the problem. “Yes. But Sparky told us he was a stoner, he’s been trying to go clean for months. And all Blood Elves are literally, incurably addicted to magic.”

Shar’din’s shoulders shook. He sat up. He was laughing open mouthed so hard he couldn’t breathe, but tears were running down his cheeks. “It figures,” he gasped. “It friggin’ FIGURES. I finally manage to kick the dope for good-- I literally get a magic genie who gives me a chance to CURE myself of my mental hook all in one go-- and I make the one choice that screws it all up! I go from being a stoner washout to being a CRACK ELF!” He started pounding the grass with his skinny fists, his face twisted in fury.

Enough! Stop that! Agent shouted in exasperation, startling them all. You are NOT an addict!

But uncle, Zippy protested. The Sunwell… the Wretched…

Agent let out a burst of staticky noise that in another species would be a sigh of exasperation. This is going to take some explanation. It’s my own fault I suppose for not making sure you children were instructed in the differences between Azeroth’s lore and the actual reality… sit, everyone, this will take a bit of explaining. The three organic lifeforms present obediently sat on the ground. Okay, to begin at the beginning, originally the Night Elves and the Blood elves were the same race. They formed their civilization around the Well of Eternity, a literal font of arcane energy that poured into Azeroth.

A ghostly illusion formed in the air, showing tall, elegant elves gathered around a titanic font of power.

Long version short, the Legion-- a race of Demons-- broke into Azeroth through the Well of Eternity... Huge winged demons began flying up out of the font, attacking and destroying everything they could reach. ...destroying it and utterly buggering up the planet, shattering the continents, leaving a maelstrom in the middle of the ocean, Arcana inflow dispersed over the whole world, basic colossal mess. The Legion was defeated and driven off-- the illusory elves rallied; they and an army of other races drove the demons away-- but the elves mistakenly thought that the Well of Eternity’s arcane energy LED the Legion to Azeroth-- so they outlawed all use of arcane magic on pain of death.

There were problems with this. First off, not everyone liked the idea. The elves split into two factions: the Night Elves, who chose to live a more primitive, naturalistic lifestyle… and the High Elves, mostly the upper class and nobility, who refused to let their civilization fall back to the stone age. The remaining elves split into two groups and walked away from one another. One became blonde and pale-skinned, the other gained dark blue skin and hair and glowing eyes.

The second problem was that they were a bloody magical race, and weren’t bloody meant to live completely without magic. Many of them-- the old, the very young, the sick-- started keeling over dead. The High elves took off and rebuilt their civilization elsewhere, and created the Sunwell-- a miniature version of the Well of Eternity that gave them a new magical font, which they believed was ‘blessed by the Sun.’ The blonde elves gathered around a new, smaller font of power, hands upraised. The Night elves either toughed it out or found alternative, “Natural” magic energies... Like the ones that Bayleaf uses. Which they attributed to their
moon goddess Elune. Blue elves were shown gathering around giant trees, pools, and the like, drawing energy off them.

“Aren’t they essentially the same stuff?” Hemlokk said, frowning.

Congratulations, you just figured out something that hasn’t dawned on the arcanists of Azeroth in tens of thousands of years, Agent said dryly. Blame it on theological and ideological differences, if you like. What a farce; countless centuries of argument and strife, effectively over which source of arcana had the least cooties.

“But isn’t fel energy actually radically different...” Shar’Din said.

Isn’t Gamma radiation radically different from visible light? Or infrared? Yet they’re all on the electromagnetic spectrum. The variables for arcana are more complex than mere wavelength, of course, but they’re still on the same chart.

Anyway, Thousands of years go by, and then the Scourge-- the undead armies of the Lich King, an underling of the Legion-- attack. Skeletal ghouls arose on a frozen tundra, at the command of a terrible figure in spiked armor. They corrupt the Sunwell with Fel energies, and it has to be destroyed. The zombies swarmed over the magic font till it finally shattered and exploded. And the High Elves, now calling themselves Blood Elves as a memorial to all their people who died in the war, start dying like flies again. In desperation they devise a method known as Mana Tapping, which allows them to tap magical artifacts and creatures directly to quench their need for arcane energy. The view zoomed in on a single Blood Elf, who was kneeling over a glowing crystal. The elf raised her hand; power flowed out of the crystal and into her, making her glow with power and health... but the crystal crumbled to dust. She repeated the action with an exotic plant, then with a small, obviously magical reptile, with equally terminal results. The plant withered; the reptile died.

Ironically, about this time the Demons invaded again and the Night Elves realize that the Legion never needed the Well of Eternity to locate Azeroth... it was just one easy access point. All their precautions had been completely in vain. So they start bringing back arcane magic into their civilization again.

But I digress... the problem with mana tapping was that, if they over indulged it... or if they tapped into too much of the wrong sort of arcana... they were in danger of becoming what they called “the Wretched,” creatures that were little more than arcana-craving ghouls. And Blood elves in their desperation were willing to tap into almost anything-- even Fel energies. The female Blood Elf was shown again, tapping more and more sources for power, plants, animals, crystals, ley lines, demonic artifacts, demons themselves, other people-- growing more frantic with each feeding... till she became a sunken, withered thing, no intelligence in her eyes, obviously corrupted by the energies on which she’d gorged.

It’s only fairly recent in their history that they finally rebuilt the Sunwell, which now channels arcana and Light energies, the purity of the Light finally alleviating their symptoms, healing them and letting them begin the slow climb back to normalcy. But they are still dependent on it, and their ability to tap sources of arcana, for their physical stability and their lives. The illusion shattered in a cloud of sparks.

“Sure sounds like a bunch of addicts to me,” Shar’Din said bleakly.
Agent pulsed his light, a metaphorical roll of his eyes. **Shar’Din, is a diabetic “addicted” to insulin or sugar?**

Shar’Din looked at him in bafflement. **Shar’Din, the elves are naturally magical beings.** Saying they were “addicted” to magic is like saying a newt is addicted to water! The reason for the divide between the Blood Elves and the Night Elves is that some of the elves have a higher tolerance for a low-magic environment than others. When they had their little cultural divide with the fall of the Well of Eternity, the natural sorting algorithm was that those who couldn’t handle a low arcana environment went with the "High" Elves, and those that could stayed with the Night Elves. A few thousand years of selective breeding-- and inbreeding-- in this fashion led to the High Elves breeding out their bodies’ ability to control its internal arcane balance…the same way a diabetic can’t control their insulin balance.

The parallels go even further-- Too much sugar in the diet of a diabetic will make them sick or even kill them, *but they still need sugar in their blood to stay alive.* too much insulin will do the same damage to them. Or simply dealing with their cravings by stuffing their face with whatever random food is handy. A Blood Elf who overindulges in mana, or who is indiscriminate about what mana they consume, will risk becoming one of the wretched… after which it is a swift painful spiral to death, the same as a diabetic who doesn’t monitor their insulin balance or who gorges on foods with a high sugar content. And don’t even ask what happens when they try to quench their needs with Fel energy, it is NOT pretty.

Shar’Din gulped.

I personally recommend you continue tapping the paladin of the party about once a day. The energy he channels is the safest and “healthiest” for you.

Shar’Din frowned. “I didn’t notice my spells being any weaker or making ME weaker when I was jonesing,” he said. “Did they not use enough power to affect me, or what?”

**The processes by which you channel mana, and by which you metabolize mana, are interconnected but distinct,** Agent replied. **Like the difference between drinking water and washing with it or bathing in it. It grants you greater power… but with an obvious disadvantage.**

“So why do they call it an addiction?” Hemlokk asked.

**Ignorance. Azeroth’s healers can routinely perform outright miracles… but their medical knowledge is somewhat lacking.** They have no grasp of the idea of “insulin balance,” much less anything more subtle. Suffice it to say there are few if any surviving diabetics in Azeroth.

Bayleaf rubbed his chin. “Having Greg channel you some Light mana is a good stopgap measure,” he said. “But if the three of us put our heads together, we might be able to rig you up something--like a miniature Sunwell...”

Shar’Din’s face lit up with hope. “You’d do that for me?” he said. “That’d be awesome. I really didn’t wanna run around trying to suck magic out of things. I get enough weird looks as it is.”

Hemlokk giggled. “Well, you’re Alliance now,” she said. “We ought to take care of our own, right?”
Brian Laborne laughed. “Ah, naww, man, thanks for the offer,” he said, looking at the floating image of an orc. “But I got enough trouble being black without trying to deal with being GREEN.”

“Aww, go for the moose people!” Aisha said. “You’d make a great moose man--” She stuck her thumbs to the sides of his head and spread her fingers, imitating antlers.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Grue told the disappointed little lightling while his sister laughed her ass off. “I like my face and body the way they are, thanks. The powers are shiny, but so’s mine. Giving up being human… or even just giving up my old face and body for a different one… that’s a little too high a price for me.”

*And what about you?* The lightling asked Aisha hopefully.

Aisha cocked her head, finger on her chin, and considered the offerings. “I would make a pretty fly night elf,” she said. “But naah. I’ve seen what having powers gets you-- it gets you on the front lines in every fight. And I *ain’t* a front line fighter. I’ll just say in my little Crow’s Nest and keep oversight on y’all.”

Shen sat on the highest balcony of the pagoda, looking out over the “landscape,” ruminating over what he had walked into, what he’d become a part of. As he sat there, the paladin (Greg something, wasn’t it?) climbed up the stairwell and sat down beside him. They sat there in silence for a while, each wrapped up in his thoughts.

After a while, Greg spoke. “Nazis, huh.”

“Mmm hm,” Shen said.

“Heckuva thing,” Greg said.


“Kaiser’s your dad? What’s he like?” Greg was as curious as he was artless.

“Like he is when he’s Max Anders. A jackass.” Shen said. He grinned a little bit. “With an even bigger poker up his keester.”

“Cast iron one too, I bet. Heh.” Greg said.

Shen chuckled.

“That’s gotta be… weird,” Greg said. “The only girl like you-- I mean, the only other panda, er,
Pandaren...” he shrugged and waved his hands around clumsily.

Shen’s eyebrows went up. “I hadn’t really thought about that sort of thing,” he said. “But yeah, my dating options sorta went from ‘slim’ to ‘none,’ didn’t they.” At Greg’s look he said, “Come on. She’s a Nazi bigot, and she’s loud and rude and pushy... Man, I hope the Agents aren’t trying to play matchmaker or anything.”

“Ex Nazi,” Greg pointed out. Shen just gave him a look. “I’m just saying... she’s trying to change.” He looked down at his hands in his lap. “All of us are trying to change.” He looked up. “That’s why I became a paladin,” he said.

“To change?”

“To force myself to change. To have something to live up to, you know?” He hesitated. “I’m a loser. I mean, I stink at social stuff, and I always stick my foot in my mouth, and there are so many of these rules, you know? And if the guys aren’t laughing at me they’re knocking me around for making them mad, and girls look at me like they stepped in a turd in their open-toed shoe.

So I just sorta said “screw it,” and just kept my head down, played my video games and trolled people online and just-- hid in my room and didn’t do anything.”

Shen nodded. “I sorta turtled up myself. The world’s not a friendly place.”

Greg shook his head. “It gets worse.”

“How could it get worse?” Shen said. He hastily clapped a paw over his mouth.

Greg didn’t notice. He had a faraway look in his eyes. “There was this girl...”

“It gets worse,” Shen quipped, huffing a rueful half chuckle.

Greg didn’t dispute it. He just nodded. “She was pretty, and she was smart and... and she was nice to me...”

“You fell for her just because she was nice to you?” Shen said. “That’s not really a good reason to chase after someone.”

Greg gave him a bewildered look. “Why do people always say that?” he asked, a little heated. “No really; why? It’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. What else in the world could matter about a girl? Like "nice" is the most common trait in the world, when actually it’s the rarest.

“Do you know how rare “nice”, KIND girls are? I went to a school with over a thousand students and all the time I was there I found ONE!” he held up a finger, face full of anger. "ONE!"

“And yet everybody talks about me like I’m just "settling"... like I’d really rather have a hot chick that treats me like crap than a girl who just treats me nice. I’d rather have a poor, stupid, ugly girl who was NICE to me, than all the pretty, clever, rich, bitch-faced bitches in that school put together.”

Shen leaned back from Greg’s pointing finger. “You have a point,” he confessed.

Greg’s finger dropped. “Yeah well I even screwed that up,” he said, the heat gone from his voice. “Oh I was always sticking my foot in my mouth around her, that sort of thing. Didn’t know when to shut up. The harder I tried, the more she seemed to think I was a creeper. I knew, I could tell.

“But what really screwed it up? She was being bullied. Worse than me. But I never helped her, I
never spoke up for her, I never had her back. I just kept my head down and hid. They finally bullied her so bad she Triggered. And only then, when it was too late, I found some guts and told off some of the people who were bullying her. They laughed at me, beat me up and threw me in a dumpster.

“That’s when Friend approached me and made the offer. And I became a paladin.”

“Where is she now?” Shen asked.

Greg pointed with his chin. “Out there, running around with her werewolf boyfriend.”

“You mean--”

Gregg nodded, then he sort of laughed. “I never had a chance anyway, did I” he said. “Bayleaf… Adrian… he came out of nowhere. Looked out for her. Took care of her. The day she Triggered, he was the one who found her and rescued her. He’s her knight in shining armor, for real.” He looked doleful.

Shen gave him an elbow and a grin. “Well, you’re a genuine knight in shining armor now,” he said. “Oughta make finding your Lady Fair a little easier.”

Greg grinned back and snorted. “Until I mess it up.”

Shen shrugged. “You mess up, you get up, you try again,” he said, getting to his feet. “That’s the real difference between you and all those other kids at your high school who stood and watched while Taylor was bullied.

“You tried.”

In the shade of the arched bridge, Rachel stared at the images floating in front of her. The writing underneath were gibberish to her, but she got a good idea of what the words meant from what the little light said and what the pictures did. She brushed over them with her fingers. “So I can’t be another wolf,” she said stubbornly.

Afraid not, the little light said. They put a cap on it. Uncle said if we put any more wolf people in there, the people in charge will panic and think you’re a new race or something trying to take over and they’ll try to wipe you out.

“That’s stupid,” Rachel growled.

Yup. Bossy people are stupid lots. Rachel nodded. In spite of herself she found herself liking the little light; he kept things simple and didn’t use twenty words when one word would do. It was easier to understand him.

Sooo… what do you want? In general, I mean.

Rachel thought it over. “I want to keep my dogs. I don’t want to forget how to understand them.”

We can do that.
“But… I want to understand people again.” She actually looked sad for a moment. “I hate being stupid, and I hate not understanding people. I’m not dumb, I know that I’m… broken that way. I want to fix that. I want to understand people too.”

**We can do that too! This is easy!** The little light sounded pleased.

“How can you teach me to read?” Rachel asked curiously.

**Yup.**

“And do math? And all that other stuff? Just... plug it into my head?”

**Yup yup. We can make it so you can read, and write, and do maths. And there are other stuffs we can teach you, like...** he began listing off all the trades and skills in the game. The words scrolled past, with pictures.

Rachel tapped on several, stopping the scroll. “Those are good. I want to feed my dogs. And not waste stuff that’s left over, so that one’s good too. And that one...”

The little light was bouncing up and down like a ball with excitement (generating quite a bit of interest from the dogs, who were lying at Rachel’s feet.) **Okay! And now the big question: what kind of BODY do you want to have?** The eagerness was palpable, even to Rachel. Images of all the possible female forms rolled past.

Rachel snorted. “Those teeth are stupid. That one looks like something wolves would eat. That one would have to crawl everywhere...” Her brow furrowed further and she grumbled in disgust. “And most of them looks like the painter wanted to have sex with them.”

Little Light distorted briefly and made a sound that in another species would have been a spit take. **Uh, most females want to look pretty,** he said. **Just like most males want to look handsome and muscly. It’s normal.**

Rachel shrugged and rolled her eyes. “I could care less,” she said bluntly.

**So…. What DO you want your body to be?**

Rachel thought it over. “...**Strong,**” she said.

Strong people didn’t get pushed around. Strong people didn’t get hurt. Strong people didn’t get forced to do things they hated, or made to feel weak and helpless. Strong people could protect what was theirs. She could care less about looking pretty or sexy... those kind of girls always seemed to be weak or crying for help. Strength was what mattered.

Most of the images cleared away, leaving three. Rachel frowned and flicked two of them away. She was NOT going to be a moose, or a cow.

**So that’s it?** Little Light said. **That’s your final choice?**

“Yeah,” Rachel said. “So do it.”

**Okay, here we go....!**

The world began to spin, then went dark.
Alec stood at the high point of the ornate bridge, under a little pagoda roof. The cosmic firefly buzzed around his head. “So you really can do it?” Alec said earnestly, his voice kept low. “You can change me so my father can never find me again.”

**We can change you so much he could never recognize you,** Firefly clarified. **You’ll be a whole new person.** Even a whole new species. **Nothing will prove you were the old you.** Not fingerprints, not blood tests, not DNA tests.

“And... immune to his powers?”

Firefly formed a tiny hand and made a “so-so” motion. **You’ll be resistant at the very least.** You said his powers only worked on humans? Well, depending on your choice, you won’t be human any more… you’ll be invisible to his powers, basically. And you’ve seen some of the things Bayleaf makes. That tiara that Glory Girl wears now makes her immune to you. You can have the skills to make things like that--

“I’m sold,” Alec said. He hadn’t missed that bit with Glory Girl and her tiara no-selling him. Having the ability to make magical gadgets that would no-sell his family’s powers? Maybe even being totally invisible to them? A complete new identity that literally went all the way to the bone? So in.

**There are catches though.**

“Kind of figured,” Alec said, with a longsuffering sigh. “Lay ‘em on me.”

**First off, you will lose all of your current powers.** Permanently.

Alec pondered that. No big loss. His Master powers were as much an albatross around his neck as anything. If he used them the “safe” way, they were incredibly limited. If he used them at full power... as a way to puppeteer people... it made him Birdcage Bait. Do not pass go, go directly to the inescapable man-made villain hell for the rest of your (assuredly very very short) life. Besides, he kind of envied Capes who could actually affect the real world, instead of just people’s heads. All the way around it was a trade up. “Fine by me,” he said.

**Second… I think you ought to know: your father’s abuse of you… damaged you.** Pretty severely. Firefly formed a little hand and poked Alec’s forehead. **Here. But when you are transformed, all that damage will be fixed.**

“Well, that’s good isn’t it?” Alec said carelessly. He sort of wished he had his scepter to toss.

**It will be… very, very uncomfortable. For a pretty long time. And… some of the pain may never really go away.**

Alec gave Cosmic Firefly a cynical look. “I spent the first fourteen years of my life with a man who
thought child abuse and molestation was a fun pastime for the whole family, and a family entertainment center was a coffee table covered in cocaine. He didn’t have to beat me because my unpowered siblings would do it for him… when I wasn’t curled up on the floor screaming because he’d blasted my brain with enough fear to burst my heart. I can cope with a day or two of pain.”

Cosmic Firefly made no response. The screen began to scroll, showing different races, classes and other options. Alec’s finger darted out and stopped the scrolling. “Wait, what’s this?” He read down the description of the class. A grin slowly spread over his face. “Oh, I like this one. What’s the range on his powers?”

Firefly told him. Alec grinned even wider. On the longest-range abilities, over half again the range of his father. “Sweet.” He clicked.

Are you sure? Firefly prompted.

“Oh, definitely,” Alec said. He was not in the least interested in closing ranks with his enemies and whaling away with swords and hammers. As far as he was concerned, the sniper rifle was the pinnacle of military thinking.

And now, your new race?

Alec flicked through the options. He briefly considered the gnome… but then he saw the next one over. “Oh, too perfect,” he said. You couldn’t possibly get further from his old human self than THAT. Added bonus: the aesthetic would drive Tattletale bonkers. She’d nearly gone ballistic the first time she’d seen an Ewok; this would drive her completely round the bend. He tapped it, sealing his selection and his fate.

Done, Agent said suddenly. The two we forecast have taken the agreement-- they’re transitioning right now. It appears our visit is over. The scenery in the distance began to blur, like rain running down a camera lens. Good luck on the next leg of your journey, and-- oh dear.

“What? What’s wrong?” Bayleaf said.

It appears your new compatriots will require some crisis care, Agent said.

“Agent, what. Is. Wrong!” Bayleaf barked angerly. The other visitors to the Temple began vanishing one by one as the landscape grew more misty and indistinct.

As part of the transformation to a new form, all damage to the old form is repaired, including neural damage, Agent explained, his words coming faster. I do not think your new friends are prepared for the shock.

“What do we do? How do we help them?”

The same thing you do for any soul that is in pain, Agent said. Listen carefully, I will try to
The Temple of Five Dawns winked out.

The entire group came to with a start. They were all seated in the same places on the floor in the Lost Workshop; their bodies never moving as they astrally traveled. Groans and yelps arose as limbs moved and circulation returned. “Awugh, my butt,” Tattletale lamented. “My butt is dead. Killed at a young and tender age. Leave me alone, I’m in mourning for my ass.”

Grue moaned, shook his helmeted head and held it between his hands. “Man, talk about a freaky trip,” he said.

“I’ve had worse,” Shar’Din noted idly.

“What the hell?” Greg exclaimed loudly, jumping to his feet-- then falling on his butt as his numbed legs refused to work. He was still armored; it sounded like a junkwagon falling downhill. Everyone looked in his direction and immediately saw what had set him off.

“What the--”

“Holy--!”

“You took the deal, didntcha,” Tattletale got in. Sitting where Regent and Bitch had been before their little jaunt were two decidedly nonhuman creatures. They were wearing the bog-standard breeches and tunic of the newly warcrafted. One appeared to be a bipedal fennec fox with a fluffy tail, sand-colored fur and enormous almond eyes, barely three feet tall counting his oversize ears. The other was a powerfully muscled orc female easily eight feet tall, with green skin, A long ponytail of black hair, small pointed ears and tusks at either corner of her mouth. He had a wooden bow strung across his back; she wore an enormous hunting spear with a bladed point large as a shovel. Both were staring at one another and at themselves with gobsmacked amazement. The dogs were gathered around the orc, whuffling and sniffing and acting as if they should recognize her but were still confused.

The next moment a stack of pizzas came walking through the back door. “Ugh. Kids? The Pizza guy was out front; he was having trouble getting the door-bot to give him the roll of cash. I had to--AUGH!” Much can be said in praise of Danny Hebert, especially given all the surreality that had been thrown into his and his daughter’s life in a few short months. But noone is prepared to turn around and face an angry she-orc wielding a spear fit for skewering elephants at five foot range. The pizzas went one way, he went the other, as he found himself backed up against the far wall. Panacea had been entering right behind him; she found herself mashed against the wall in a more-or-less instinctively chivalrous move by Danny to protect her from the angry green rage-monster now standing and dominating the room.

Glory Girl actually managed to save most of the pizza boxes from hitting the floor; Gallant gingerly picked up the bag of sodas that Amy had dropped and carefully defused them by cracking the bottle caps open a hair.
“Who are they??” Rachel bellowed (and she was QUITE good at it now). Judas, Brutus and Angelica surrounded her, growling at the stranger. The rest of the group were scrambling in confusion. Bayleaf and Hemlokk jumped between the group and the new arrivals, holding their arms out to keep them apart. “Peace! They’re friends! This is Danny Hebert and Amy Dallon…. Glory Girl’s sister--”

“And my father!” Hemlokk added fervently.

Everyone paused for a breathless moment. “Daddy, Amy, these guys are… um, the new guys. Shen, Lei Ling. Vindicator, Tattletale, Grue-- Aisha’s brother-- Regent and Bitch. That over there is Gallant. And you know Aisha and Glory Girl.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” Danny said carefully, his voice bobbling through several octaves. His eyes never left the tip of that spear.

Bayleaf kept his voice firm. “Everyone relax. He’s in on the Big Secret just like everyone else in this room. And he’s not going to unmask or report anyone. And that’s Panacea behind him--”

“Hello,” Amy squeaked.

“So there’s no need for things to get hostile. Bitch… Rachel… put the spear down and take a seat.” He locked eyes with the orc-girl. For a mercy, she backed down, calming down. “All right,” she said. “All right.” She went and sat back down next to Regent, who was still staring at his own paw-like hands. A whistle and a hand gesture and Judas, Brutus and Angelica lay down next to her… their heads up and eyes alert.

“What… is this?” Danny gestured at the new faces as he carefully sat down. “There’s more of you, then?”

Bayleaf nodded. He was speaking before he realized it. He pointed his way around the group. “Shen. Pandaren Monk… think ‘Jet Li’ and you’ve about got it. Formerly Theo Anders, Max Anders’ son.” Danny Hebert gulped; he’d been informed of the uglier secrets of Brockton Bay and knew darned well who Kaiser was.

“Lei Ling-- I believe that’s the actual name you decided on?-- Shaman. Controls wind, fire, lightning and earth, can create elementals to fight for her. Formerly Rune, of the E88. Lung thought she’d make a good status symbol to own.” Bayleaf grinned malevolently. “He thought wrong.”

“He was a baaaaaad boy,” Aisha quipped. Snickers and explosive snortgiggles greeted that line. Danny just raised an eyebrow and let them keep talking.

“Shar’Din Belore. Blood Elf mage. Classmate of ours from Winslow. Tailoring and Enchantment? Excellent.” Bayleaf gave the Blood Elf a high five. “We’ll have the flying carpets rolled out in no time.”

“Flying carpets??” someone exclaimed. Bayleaf pressed on.

“Rachel Lindt. Aka Bitch or Hellhound. Orc Beastmaster now. Her name now is Lok’Tara, which means strength. And this is--”

“Y’see, my old man… my old man is Heartbreaker--” his hands started to shake. He let out a little panting laugh and his eyes filled with panic. “I ran away years ago. And he doesn’t like it when his toys get away, and I’m pretty sure he could never find me like this but with what he can do, what he did, what he did to me before--” he started laughing, a quick, desperate giggling. “What he MADE me do, me and my sisters and brothers, even to each other why can’t I stop remembering--!!”

Fat tears pooled up in his eyes and tumbled down, streaking the fur of his face. Whimpering and wailing, crying like a wounded puppy, he tumbled to the floor and curled up into a ball, his tail over his face.

Understandably his partners panicked. “Regent!” Brian said, half rising to his feet. “Regent--Fen--Alec!”

Regent’s sobs rose to a wail, then almost to screams. To everyone’s astonishment the first to respond was Rache1. She knelt down next to him and began running her massive hand down his back. “Why is he hurting?” she demanded, upset. “Make him stop hurting!” Her distress was almost as shocking as Regent’s.

Panacea darted forward and placed her hand on his head, between his furry ears. His screams turned to sobs and moans, then to quiet murmurs as he fell asleep. His hands and feet twitched in time to his dreams. “There,” Amy said. “He should sleep for at least a couple of hours…” They could all see the pity in her eyes.

Rachel continued petting him. She looked almost confused at her own reactions. Grue looked at Bayleaf. The anger was almost visibly boiling off him. “What’s wrong with him? What did you do to him!”

It was Tattletale who answered Grue’s question. Shocked, she looked up from where she knelt by Regent’s side. “It’s because they healed him,” she said. “They healed his mind and he wasn’t ready for it.”

Bayleaf took a deep breath and nodded. “This is the aftermath of a lifetime of physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse. His father, Heartbreaker, abused him and his brothers and sisters almost constantly with his emotion controlling powers. Alternated between indulging him with every vice--drugs, sex, whatever-- and torturing him into near insanity, all before he was ten years old. A lot of casual evil cruelty, but mostly just trying to get him to Trigger.”

“Holy God,” Danny said. It wasn’t clear whether it was an oath or a prayer.

Bayleaf pressed on, grimacing. “Once he triggered… after a session where he was hit with enough fear to make a grown man’s heart burst… his father started making him assist in his crimes. Kidnapping, rape, torture, murder, you name it. All under dear Daddy’s guiding hand. All of that-- it almost completely burned out his emotional centers. He’s a functional sociopath; that he’s not just as big a depraved psycho as his Dad is a testimony to his mental discipline.

“When the Agents gave him a new body, naturally they fixed everything… including his cauterized emotional centers. All it took was a reminder of his father and the floodgates opened.

“He’s going to be like this for a while,” Bayleaf said. “He’s basically reliving all his worst memories. And it won’t stop until he’s gone through all of them. There’ll be mood swings, flashbacks… they told me it would be several days at least while he readjusts to having a full emotional range again. They said to stay close, offer comfort… try to keep him from shutting off his feelings; that would delay his recovery.”
“Jesus have mercy.” Grue muttered. “I knew he was screwed up, but--” He looked around and took off his helmet. “Might as well, secrets are a joke around here,” he muttered. He looked over to Bayleaf. “So what’s up with Rachel? I’ve never seen her show a crumb of sympathy for… pretty much anything that didn’t have four legs. This another blowout?”

“Regent wasn’t the only one with a damaged psyche,” Bayleaf confirmed in a low voice.

“We know,” Tattletale said. “Her power screwed up her ability to understand anybody but dogs--”

Bayleaf scoffed. “Tats, you’re the worlds greatest detective but when you’re off you’re REALLY off,” he said, amused. She looked offended, then puzzled. “Lisa, dogs have been running with humans for tens of thousands of years. Man’s best friend, remember? They have no trouble understanding human emotions and reactions at all. if anything they’re better at understanding people than people are. It’s what they’re known for!

“Rachel’s ability to understand human beings was broken long before she Triggered. Start with a probable case of asperger’s, toss a childhood full of abuse and neglect on top of that, and she was already empathically burned out. She didn’t understand humans, and she didn’t care. Dogs though, dogs were okay. Her power amplified her ability to understand dogs-- but it didn’t do a thing to her human empathy.”

He huffed in amusement. “Not only has her autism and Empathy Deficiency Disorder been fixed, her new powers are going to make things really interesting. She’s a Beastmaster now. That means she’s going to find her natural affinity for dogs just got a whole lot wider. As in, she’ll be able to tame and train almost anything in the animal kingdom.”

“Anything?” Hemlokk asked curiously.

Bayleaf laughed. “In Azeroth there are hunters running around with Acidic Slimes as hunting companions,” he said. “I think between her neurons being reset and her new broad-spectrum animal empathy, she’s going to find it hard NOT to understand people… she might even be a better cold reader than Tattletale, eventually.

“For now though,” he added soberly. “They’re going to both be kind of fragile. Even without that fracas earlier today, you’re going to have to lay low for at least a couple of weeks…”

Brian snorted. “You think?”

Lei Ling snickered. “Hey guys, Glorious Leader here thinks we ought to lay low for just a little while. Gee, I dunno…” Bayleaf looked confused as the undersiders snorted and cackled. “Here,” Lei Ling said when she saw his puzzlement. “Let me make it easy for you.” She looked around and found, of all things, a hubcap and set it on one of the worktables, next to where Gallant and Glory Girl were salvaging the pizzas. Then she pulled out a velvet bag, undid the string and poured the contents out into the hubcap. A stream of dazzling red gemstones rushed out of the bag.


Lei Ling nodded. “My sale price to the Yang Ban,” she spat. “Seems Lung convinced them that a ‘tanuki’ would be a great PR buy. Wow all the back-hill peasants back home.”

“You’re a tanuki?” Shar’Din said, frowning in confusion.

Lei Ling gave him a patronizing look. “Not a chance, honey, my balls ain’t near big enough.” Gallant nearly choked on a slice of pizza. Glory Girl proceeded to pound him on the back to save
him. “I made my escape and I figured those babies were rightfully mine, so I took ‘em. Lung’s going to have himself a heap of Yang Ban trouble for a while.”

“How do we know the Yang Ban won’t come after you, instead?” Greg pointed out. Lei Ling looked a little ill at that thought.

Danny shook his head. “Not likely,” he said. “This amount, the Chinese Union Imperial and the YangBan consider throwaway money. It wouldn’t be worth the trouble to come back for it if they dropped it on the sidewalk, much less in hostile foreign territory with a couple of criminal gangs fighting over it. The guy was probably here in the states for a really big deal and decided to pick you up as a bonus. Hate to say it, young lady, but you were practically an impulse buy.” Lei Ling made a strangling noise that boded ill for any YangBan members she might bump into in the future.

“Well, they might prove...” Hemlokk picked up one gemstone between her clawtips. It suddenly began to glow. “A bit more valuable to US than to the average purchaser.”

Bayleaf chuckled at the round eyed stares from the Undersiders. He snagged a slice of pizza and a red solo cup of soda. “well, we’ve laid it out on the table,” he said to Grue. “What do you plan on doing?”

“Plan?” Grue snorted. “The Undersiders are down for the count. From what you’ve told us that turd Coil was planning on throwing us under the bus anyway... individually or as a group, depending on what gave him the best advantage. We got no resources, no sponsor, and more than likely no lair... and since ‘Lok’tara’ can’t beef up her dogs anymore, we don’t even have transportation. “

“Whereas we have all of the above,” Bayleaf said a trifle smugly. “So what do you say we take a week or two to rest, recuperate, re-equip and figure out the next step: Getting Coil’s boot off your necks?”
Chapter 18

Skidmark stood atop the overturned prison transport, waving a gun he’d swiped off one of the guards and shrieking profanities in the air. His necklace of totems rattled and swung as he fired wildly into the air.

“You BLEEPers ain’t takin’ me to BLEEPIN’ prison, BLEEP ya BLEEPIN’ BLEEP BLEEP--” Skidmark screamed. Noone got to hear what bleep a bleepin’ bleep might do, though; he was interrupted. Even as he was screaming his threats, a crimson streak shot past him, cracking him across the jaw. The several of the Merchant leader’s rotting teeth went flying as he flipped clean over and tumbled to the ground.

“What was that?” Mush yelled, his already high-pitched voice shrill with fear.

“It was Velocity! Keep your head!” Trainwreck snarled.

The prison transport had been on its way upstate when they’d pulled into a little offramp to refuel. That’s when the three remaining Merchant capes had made their escape attempt. It was hard to tell what exactly had happened but somehow Trainwreck had leveraged his machinery-kinesis and caused all the security equipment in the transport-- the suppression foam, the tranq guns, everything-- to lock up. Skidmark had dropped one of his skid-patches under the front wheels, making the vehicle skew sideways and flip, plowing into the wall of the Gas N’ Go. The instant the vehicle had overturned in the gas station parking lot, the capes had been all over the guards like white on rice. Skidmark had laid out repeller fields, sending the few guards standing on fast journeys in every direction, while Mush and Trainwreck quickly armored up with the rubble. Mush had made quick use of the gas station dumpsters, while Trainwreck had transformed most of the wrecked transport for a new suit of his mechanized junk armor. They were now in a mexican standoff, the overturned vehicle and half-flattened gas mart serving as a makeshift fortification against the police and PRT reinforcements that had shown up.

Now, though, it appeared the first Cape had arrived.

Before Trainwreck had finished his sentence, the red blur had engulfed Mush. In mere seconds the dwarfish cape’s trashbag-homonculus body was an inert, compressed ball, wrapped in miles and miles of...Trainwreck blinked… bright yellow trashbag ties. Mush lay there on the ground, rocking back and forth and whining pitifully. Trainwreck had just enough time to think

Cute, a speedster who thinks he’s a comedian

Before the red blur was circling him. Whoever or whatever it was, they were punching him dozens of times a second, denting and dinging his armor.

ClangBANGbongBANGclangclangCLANGbongbangitybongbongBONGbongBANGbongCLANG

Staggering, Trainwreck opened up with his flamethrower, blasting the circling cyclone at random. The whizzing red form stopped just short of the jet of flame. It was Velocity. The speedster was crouched in a fighting stance, heavily gauntleted fists up and ready. Trainwreck could see wisps of smoke rising off the knuckles of his gauntlets. “You?” he exclaimed. Velocity’s speedster handicap—that the faster he went, the less he could affect the world-- was as well known as his name. “How the F...”

“I got a little upgrade,” Velocity said. He darted forward and landed a single punch against
Trainwreck’s metallic torso.

The gauntlets Velocity wore were Bayleaf’s gift. They overcame Velocity’s speed-disassociation problem by sheer brute force: they were piled with strength and damage enhancing enchantments till even at his top speed he could carry, lift and strike with the strength of a normal man.

And at normal speed…

CLAANNNGGGG!!!!

Trainwreck rocketed across the parking lot, sparks flying of his armor as he skidded across the pavement. Chunks of ersatz steampunk junkbot went flying in every direction, along with three of his limbs. He didn’t stop until the crumpled remains of his suit fetched up against a pair of light poles at the corner of the lot. Oil spread out in a puddle and the last of the pressure in his boiler leaked out of the ruptured seams in a dismal wheeze. The PRT crews were on him in a flash, dousing him and the immediate area with containment foam.

Velocity sauntered over to where the steampunk tinker lay. He looked up at Velocity in croggled confusion. “You’re a Brute now too?” Trainwreck said, bewildered.

Velocity smiled and thumped his fist into his palm. “I think ‘Striker’ is more apt, actually,” he said.

“Hey, you big lug,” Assault said. He and Battery arrived on foot at that moment. “You coulda saved some for us.”

He would have said more, but he was cut off by an explosion of profanity. Skidmark had woken back up and was back on his feet, gun in hand and blood dripping down his chin. “Save THIS, BLEEPer!!” he said in a spray of bloody spittle. The deranged Merchant cape took his stolen automatic and sent a torrent of bullets in the direction of the nearest cape he could focus on: Battery.

Caught completely by surprise, Battery froze-- and disappeared. Bullets rattled off an invisible dome where she had been standing, striking weird energy sparks off seemingly empty air.

Skidmark gawked with maddened glazed eyes at where his target had been. “The F--” he started to say, but he was interrupted by a loud BOING. A bright red boxing glove on the end of an elongated spring came out of nowhere, flattening his face even further and sending him back to la-la land. This time his nap was followed with an immediate disarming and a containment foam bath.

A moment later and Battery reappeared. She looked like she didn’t know whether to give her husband a look of gratitude, amusement or exasperation. Assault was standing there holding a cartoonish looking handgun with an enormous barrel. “You just had to use the boxing-glove gun,” Battery said.

Assault grinned and pressed a button on the side of the gun. With a zipping noise the spring and the boxing glove retracted inside. He patted the gun lovingly before tucking it back into the impossibly small belt pouch from which he’d retrieved it. “Are you kidding? It was practically a religious obligation.”
The jailbreak in Midvale Correctional Facility had actually begun as a prison riot in the cafeteria over a late and extremely poor-quality dinner. What had accelerated it had been the fact that, in the midst of the rioting, the restraining collars on the Cape inmates had been damaged so they no longer received signals from the prison guards’ remotes. Fortunately there had only been four actual Capes being held at the time. Unfortunately the three cape prisoners thus freed had powers that could have been custom made for a jailbreak.

Crusher, Smasher, Breaker and Flex were a bottom rung team of supervillains known as the Bruisers. They got a sort of perverse humor out of the fact that despite their names not a one of them qualified as an actual Brute. Crusher was a line-of-sight Blaster who could compress any nonliving thing within twenty feet that he looked at, so long as it was smaller than a cubic meter: crush it into a ball, flatten it like a soda can, squeeze it into a tube. Smasher had a striker power: anything solid he touched and applied his power to began to develop microfractures with increasing speed and size until it finally shattered to pieces. Breaker was a sadly limited Master--- a technopath who thus far had only demonstrated an ability to make any mechanical or electronic device to lock up. Flex, in fact was the closest thing they had in their group to a Brute… but instead he was a Breaker, whose entire body basically performed like a gigantic muscle… he was able to stretch himself out (or BE stretched out) to astonishing lengths, then retract again with tremendous speed and force.

Later the cause of the calamity would be traced to a single burnt out connection in the wireless router used to broadcast control signals to the collars. By the time anyone figured that out it was far too late. The moment the Bruisers realized they were NOT getting tased or drugged by their control collars, they had seized the initiative. The containment foam sprayers in the ceiling all jammed, smoking and twitching. The barrels of the guards’ guns were instantly crushed into modern art sculptures. The collars were snapped off in rubbery fingers like they were made of celery, and the outside wall of the cafeteria began turning into peanut brittle.

It was still a fight through a maze of corridors to the outside lot, but being able to reduce the intervening walls to rubble made the process a lot more linear. And, generous souls that they were, the Bruisers freed every prisoner they could along the way, shattering cell doors or ripping them out of the walls. By the time they’d smashed their way through the outer wall and into the exercise yard, a few hundred hardened criminals wielding confiscated guns, containment foam dispensers, and jagged chunks of rebar were in their wake, cheering them on.

Their victory parade out into the exercise yard was interrupted when they were met by a blast of sonic energy coming the other way. The Bruisers were scattered like ninepins and half the inmates were practically shoved back into the prison building through the hole they’d exited. Some got to their feet and tried to make a break for it, but the point of a crackling beam of energy cut them off, tracing a smoking furrow in the asphalt at their feet.

Triumph and Dauntless were on the scene.

Triumph glanced up at the hovering Dauntless, careful not to take his eyes completely off the cowed criminals before him. “That was new,” he said over the commlink. “Your Arc-Lance has never been that powerful before.”

Dauntless nodded briefly and grinned. “My upgrades have been coming a bit faster lately,” he admitted. “A lot faster, actually.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Little breakthrough.. around Christmas?” Dauntless said meaningfully, tapping his belt. Triumph noticed suddenly that the belt was something of a new addition to Dauntless’ gear, and had a very familiar style to it…
Dauntless was Brockton Bay’s rising star. His Power was that he could imbue objects with powers of their own, turning his boots into flight shoes, the shield on his wrist into a forcefield generator, the spear in his hand into a crackling lance of energy. The buildup was slow, incremental; it took him the better part of a day to build up a “charge” with which to imbue one of his items. While the imbue was permanent, it was brutally slow; for example it had taken over twenty charges, one charge a day, to level up his shield to a combat-useful level.

Yet just since Christmas, since receiving the gemstone-studded bronze belt he now wore, he had managed to upgrade all of his gear (his shield, lance, boots and breastplate) to nearly double their power. Unsurprising if one was in the know; the belt was maxed out with a stamina boosting enchantment and embedded with several stamina-boosting gemstones. His Shard’s parsimonious trickle of power had turned into a torrent, and he no longer felt drained from the effort of imbuing his weapons. His only clue to the gift giver was a single card bearing the words…

“Para Bellum?” Triumph said. Dauntless blinked, startled, then nodded.

“Para Bellum.”

A chunk of concrete the size of Triumph’s head whizzed past the same. “Hey!”

Flex it seemed was still in the game, using his bizarre elasticity to slingshot rubble at the heroes with killing force. His partners were a tad less effective; Smasher was down to making more piles of shattered concrete and rebar to fling and Breaker was squinting his brains out at Triumph and Dauntless’ gear to no avail (no moving parts and no electronics meant he had nothing to seize on.) And Crusher’s power was severely Manton limited, making it almost impossible for him to compact anything someone was wearing. The other Bruisers gave up trying to use their powers on the heroes and began helping Flex reload his slingshot-arm. Some of the other prisoners began chucking smaller projectiles as well. It all did little against Dauntless’ shield but were coming awfully close to clipping Triumph.

“Excuse me,” Triumph said. He tapped the center of his breastplate and began using his Power again, this time slowly sliding up the octave till something clicked in and the ripples in the air that accompanied his voiceblast suddenly changed form, shaping into a wall of concentric rings in front of him. The incoming stones stopped dead at the wall of sound, falling to the ground. While Dauntless heard nothing on this side, it was obviously painfully loud on the other; the inmates, including the Bruisers, were dropping their makeshift weapons and clutching at their ears as they fell to their knees.

Once the last of them was laid out, Triumph let up on his sonic blast and the shield wall faded away.

“Niice,” Dauntless said. “Para Bellum?”

“Para Bellum.” Triumph nodded.

Armsmaster and Miss Militia arrived at the military base to find a full-on battlemech melee. The Dragonslayers in their stolen mech armor had made short work of the military base’s defenses,
forcing the all-too-mortal soldiers into a retreat. Dragon herself was there in one of her own battlemechs, but at three on one it was not looking good for her. She, Saint and Dobrynja were trading weapons fire and blows while Mags, the third and smallest Dragonslayer suit, was busy tearing its way into one of the base’s warehouses.

Armsmaster and Miss Militia didn’t even slow down at the gate: the gatehouse was a smoldering crater. Hopefully anyone who might have stopped them had already fled. Their motorcycles roared into the combat zone, auto transponders already sending out their ID and clearance to anyone who was listening. “Dragon, this is Armsmaster, Miss Militia and I have you in visual,” Armsmaster said. A flick of his wrist sent a volley of micromissiles out of recessed cylinders in his motorcycle’s panniers, hammering the “Mag” suit with dozens of explosions.

“Good to see you, you two,” Dragon replied. The gratitude was clear in her voice. “Saint and his Dragonslayers got word I was shipping a load of components to this base, and obviously decided they’d like it for themselves. God knows why they didn’t wait until I’d left to pull a smash and grab-” She was interrupted by a volley of fire from Saint’s gatling gun. Her shields held, but barely.

“Copy that,” Armsmaster said. “Miss Militia, you take care of the landbound one; Saint is mine.”

“Roger!”

With that, Armsmaster ejected. His motorcycle, gyroscopically balanced, slewed to the right and parked itself. Twin freemounted turrets popped out of the panniers and tracked on the third suit, laying down harrying fire. Dobrynja fell back as he was peppered with plasma bolts, leaving Saint and Dragon clear.

Exactly as planned.

Surprise wasn’t the word for what crossed Saint’s tattooed face as Armsmaster rose on rocket-propelled heels to meet him. “Since when the hell can you fly??” he blurted out. Armsmaster wasn’t inclined to reply; his collapsing halberd was out and fully extended, and a buzzing cloud of something was covering the blade. With two quick slashes he removed the mech’s canopy. He landed inside, planting his feet in the cockpit and grabbing Saint by the throat. “Land this vehicle immediately,” Armsmaster said. His halberd blade hovered dangerously close.

A rattle of gunfire caught his attention. “On second thought--” With two more quick slashes he’d cut Saint’s harness straps away. He heaved, flinging the would-be cyber-pirate out through the cockpit opening. There was a brief rather effeminate scream and a rather loud bang as Saint landed on the steel roof of the warehouse, but Armsmaster paid it no mind. He swung himself around and dropped down in the seat of the mecha, rapidly working the joysticks to try and get a feel for the controls.

Down below, Miss Militia didn’t even bother to dismount. She sat on her bike, looking at “Mags” with disdain. The Mecha was dinged up a bit from the micromissiles, but it was far too tough to be seriously damaged by such an attack. Unsurprising, as it was stolen Dragon tech. The agile little mecha skipped over the half-leveled wall of the storage building, a steamer-trunk sized crate tucked under one robotic arm while the other swiveled to level a .50 mm machine gun on the hero. “Back off, Militia,” the pilot’s voice-- a feminine one-- came over the loudspeakers on the machine. “You so much as blink and I’ll fill the air with--”

_Rattle rattle rattle tink tink_

Mags looked down just in time to see the futuristic looking metallic cylinder Miss Militia had rolled across the pavement clink against her mecha’s ankle. There was an actinic pulse, and every electrical component – and a couple of her fillings, from the feel of it-- blazed with sparks and writhing electric
arcs as the EMP grenade went off. It was a tricky device, harmonized so that the actual pulse went no more than ten feet in any direction so as to minimize collateral damage… but any electrical or electronic device in that ten foot radius was cooked. The mecha suit fell down onto itself like a collapsing marionette, the cockpit turning blue-grey with smoke.

Mags popped the manual release on the canopy. She half-fell out of the cockpit, coughing and choking. When she looked up she found herself looking down the barrel of an antique revolver, one that looked from her angle about the size of a breadbox."Go ahead," Miss Militia said. "Make my day."

"Really?" Mags deadpanned.

Miss Militia’s smug grin was so blatant it practically radiated through her bandanna. “Tell me you wouldn’t if you had a gun as awesome as this.”

Up above, Armsmaster had quickly gained control of his commandeered mecha. “Say what you will about Saint, he’s perfected the art of making interfaces user-friendly,” he muttered. “Dragon, I have taken over Saint’s mech.” He hit a row of icons on the HUD. It seemed Saint didn’t completely trust his partners after all: he had administrative control of their suit’s systems built into his own mech. “And I have just shut down their defensive shields.”

“Excellent--” Dragon said. A glowing tube sprouted from the forearm of her suit and spat a ball of plasma at the third mech, striking it in the aft-mounted power cells. With a belch of sparks and a whine of failing turbines it went down, molten battery core dripping out of its back. “And that’s three for three. Where is Saint?”

Armsmaster scanned the ground below. Saint had apparently rolled off the arched roof of the storage building and had made a break for it. No, there he was, pulling something out of the back of an eighteen-wheeler. Armsmaster surmised that the Dragonslayers had hauled their suits in the truck, using it as camouflage. But what was he doing? He had some sort of reinforced briefcase out on the ground, he was popping it open and kneeling over it, typing away as if his life depended on it--

Visions of launch codes danced in Armsmaster’s head.

“Miss Militia, Five o’clock low, the briefcase!!” It spoke to their years of training together that Miss Militia needed no further instruction. She spun on her heel, the Colt Peacemaker coming up in a smooth arc and leveling on her target the moment she spotted it. The gun roared three times and the briefcase was shot out from under Saint’s very fingertips. It went tumbling across the tarmac, broken bits of electronics scattering in every direction.

The sound of anguish that came out of Saint was like something from a dying animal. Armsmaster had no way of knowing it, but what had been in that briefcase would have been a more cataclysmic disaster than any mere launch code. Blame it on bad pop culture or simple extreme over-caution, when Andrew Richter, the world’s greatest AI programming Tinker, had created the AI known as Dragon, he had been fearful of his creation going rogue, and had put countless restrictions and safeties into her code… so much so that she was all but comparatively crippled in her efforts to protect humanity from the perils that threatened it. One of the most devastating was in that briefcase: a custom-designed laptop that gave direct back-door access to Dragon’s code… and gave whoever held the briefcase the ability to launch Program Ascalon, a virus that would kill Dragon in all but an instant. Calamity had befallen Dragon when her creator had died and the briefcase (which she had not even known existed-- was programmed to never know existed) fell into the hands of Saint and his partners. Saint sincerely believed that the three of them were the sole line in the sand between humanity and an AI that might go rogue at any minute and take over the world-- or annihilate it.
Seeing as he believed all this, why he hadn’t activated Ascalon immediately upon discovering it noone could say. Saint was not a rational man. Now that he was on the verge of being captured, any hesitancy was gone. He was going down, an he was taking Dragon with him.

Or he would have… if Ascalon was not currently scattered in bits and pieces all over the pavement.

Armsmaster was taking no chances. He leveled one of the mecha’s many weapons on the perforated briefcase lying on the ground. “Hmm, thermite cannon, sounds appropriate--” he pressed the trigger. There was a *foomp* and a flash and the briefcase was turned into a molten spot on the asphalt. Saint dropped to his elbows and knees, groaning in despair.

Armsmaster and Dragon both landed as the troops of the military base, armed and ready and looking none too pleased, made their appearance and took custody of the three criminals. Some few had been trying to provide support fire, but against ten-foot-tall mecha dripping with weapons, footsoldiers with M-4s weren’t much of anything but background noise.

Against three overreaching domestic terrorists, on the other hand, they were more than sufficient for the job. A dozen or so hustled up, guns at the ready, looking embarrassed and mad enough to chew nails and spit staples. The Dragonslayers would be handled less than gently over the next few days while in military custody.

“I had hoped to retrieve my stolen suits in more or less one piece,” Dragon said with a sigh. “I suppose one suit and a pile of spare parts is better than nothing. At least the component shipment was undamaged.”

“What were you shipping, if it isn’t violating some restriction to ask?” Armsmaster said.

“EMP hardened computer chips and circuitry, ironically enough,” Dragon said. “Heck of a field test, I have to say.”

“Sorry,” Miss Militia said, chagrined. “I figured that an electromagnetic pulse would do less damage than blasting a hole through it.”

They were having to tarry at the army base; due to the fact that the Dragonslayers were wanted in both the United States and Canada for a variety of civilian and military cape-tier crimes but were not, in fact, actual capes, they fell into a certain legal grey area between military, PRT and civilian law enforcement, so the heroes were forced to wait things out while the higher ups all around decided who had custody. Thus the three heroes were cooling their heels in the base commander’s office when one of the M.P.’s assigned to guard the prisoners entered. “Sir,” he said, saluting his commanding officer. “One of the prisoners-- the one called by the name “Saint”-- claims to have information vital to national security.”

“So he’s wanting to negotiate?” The commander asked.

The MP cleared his throat. “Actually no, sir,” he said. “He only wants to reveal what he knows in confidentiality. He will answer any questions, submit to any verification. He only asks that he speak
To either the commander of this base— you, sir— or to Armsmaster. Either one, or both. Noone else. And only in person.”

The old soldier’s eyebrows drew together. “That was his only demand?”

“He was adamant, sir. He says he knows that Armsgmaster has a lie detecting system built into his armor. He wants Armsmaster to validate what he has to say to you.”

The base commander looked over at Dragon (she had switched out to a smaller, lower-profile armored suit she had been wearing inside the larger mecha.) She had gone abnormally still as the conversation had progressed. “Miss Dragon, you have the most experience with this pain in the ass. Do you know what he might be yammering about?”

Dragon hesitated ever so slightly before responding. “It’s well known that the Dragonslayers consider me their target of choice for their raids, robberies and espionage, sir,” she said carefully. “Though they have never issued any sort of manifesto, it seems apparent from how he’s acted in the past that he has… fixated on me in some sort of paranoid delusion that I am a threat to the world in some fashion, or am part of some terrible conspiracy to enslave or destroy the world.”

“Seriously?” the base commander said. Dragon was well known world-wide as one of the most honorable, philanthropic and one might dare say heroic capes in the world. She had bettered the lives of millions with her technological innovations alone and had saved the lives of countless more with her heroic actions, including participating in Endbringer battles. Half the world’s heroes and a good portion of the villains owed their lives to this unfortunate recluse of a cape. The base commander snorted and got to his feet. “Very well. If pandering to his conspiracy theory is how to get him to spill his guts all over, I’m willing to play along. Armsgmaster…?”

A few minutes later Armsmaster found himself standing alongside the base commander in a tiny room, across a table from a manacled and restrained Saint and feeling VERY annoyed at having his time wasted. The moment the doors had closed and they and the the three of them were alone, Saint had begun with a cock-and-bull conspiracy that he had lifted wholesale off the back cover of a cheap Sci Fi novel.

The commanding officer of the military facility was no more amused. “You’re trying to claim,” the base commander said slowly, “That Dragon, the world’s greatest Tinker and one of its greatest heroes, is actually some sort of robot—”

“Not a robot, an AI,” Saint repeated doggedly. “Capable of uploading and downloading itself to—”

“Some sort of AI, whatever,” the commander said testily. “Who is secretly plotting to throw off its restraints and conquer humanity?” He shook his head. “Really, boy, I was born at night but not LAST night. You’re going to have to come up with a better shuck and jive story than THAT.”

“Are you familiar with the phrase ‘arbitrary skepticism?’” Saint all but snarled. “We live in a world where people shoot lasers out of their armpits and bench press bulldozers and teenage kids build giant killer robots out of junk in their Dad’s garage because the school bully beat them up the week before! We’ve got an entire CITY we lost to a lunatic who can mold real live monsters out of living protoplasm like a kid playing with Play-Doh! And you’re telling me a tinker who built something as mundane as an Artificial Intelligence is too much to believe?”

“Every tinker on the planet has tried their hand at creating a genuine artificial intelligence,” Armsmaster interjected. “Despite concerted, combined effort and immeasurable funding by the various governments of the world, none has even come close. You’re claiming that a lone Tinker, this Andrew…”
“Andrew Richter!”

“. . . This Andrew Richter managed to not only create a true computerized intelligence, but did so entirely by himself, with no funding and in complete secrecy, secrecy which was maintained even after his death or disappearance some years ago with the sinking of Newfoundland.” The corner of Armsmaster’s mouth twitched. “It is the secrecy that is really the unbelievable part. All Tinkers are almost pathologically driven to eventually show off their creations to the world. Usually in a rather flamboyant and destructive manner, unfortunately.” His mouth returned to a thin, downturned line. “Extraordinary claims demand at least SOME proof, Saint.

“Which I had, until you blasted it to slag, you stupid—!” Saint said, trying and failing to rise up from his seat. His guard pushed him back down. “You don’t even know what you did, you idiot,” he said, distressed. “Ascalon was the only failsafe, the only emergency shutoff we had for that— that THING walking around outside right now. And now it is COMPLETELY outside human control!”

“If you believe all this—” The base commander began skeptically.

“Then why not push the button right away? Here’s another phrase for you,” Saint said, slumping in his seat. “‘Load Bearing Boss.’ You know how in movies and video games, the instant the evil overlord dies his Fortress of Doom immediately collapses around him? Same principle. Dragon’s already made itself indispensable in hundreds of different ways; industry, infrastructure, law enforcement— the Birdcage alone…” He threw his hand in the air. “Imagine what happens if the system that controls THAT suddenly dies.

“Plus we have no idea how many failsafes, how many dead-man switches it’s put into its own projects. We could switch the thing off only to find out that triggered the self-destruct on the world’s satellite systems, or the North American power grid.

“ITS creator was smart enough to put in dozens of preprogrammed restrictions… a full set of Laws of Robotics— ones forcing Dragon to obey lawful authority, to restrict itself to one extant copy at a time, forbidding it from creating new iterations or advanced versions of itself…but once it figures out how to override those, or tricks some hacker or Tinker into overriding them— it’s game over. She’ll upload into and control every computer system in the world, and probably turn them all against us to keep us culled back to controllable numbers…”

“And… what evidence do you have that she is even planning any such activities, much less has accomplished them?” the base commander said.

“IT’S NOT A PERSON, QUIT CALLING IT “SHE!”” Saint slammed his fist on the arm of his chair. His face was pale and sweating, so white the faint cross tattoo on his cheek stood out in highlight. “Don’t you understand?” he pleaded. “It’s not about what it’s doing, it’s about what it can do, what it might do— we have no way of knowing!” He looked over to Armsmaster. “Damn it, you’re supposed to be the hyper-rational hero. THINK about it, Armsmaster? What if I’m right?”

“Think about it. Just do it as a mental exercise, a hypothesis. What if I’m telling the truth? What then?”

Armsmaster stood motionless for a long moment, his gauntleted finger to his chin. To the commander’s surprise he actually seemed to be thinking the question over. Finally he spoke. “Rationally speaking it makes no difference,” he said.

“NO DIFFERENCE?!?!” Saint looked ready to have an aneurysm.

“You claim that the Cape known as Dragon is a true Artificial Intelligence— or rather, a Machine
Intelligence so advanced it is in all ways indistinguishable from a human mind. You claim that we have no way of knowing her intentions, or of preventing her from carrying through with them… so we should preemptively destroy her to prevent that possibility. Because we cannot interpret her perfectly.

“The thing is, Saint,” he went on, “the same can be said of you. Or of me. Or of any other intelligence, whether made of lipids and proteins in a human skull or silicon and electrons in a computer case--- if we are to accept the premise of a true AI in its full implications, that is. And considering the existence of many of the more extreme Case 53s, whose bodies are no longer even flesh and blood, the distinction of the substance which sustains the mind in question is demonstrably even more arbitrary. Is Weld of the Boston Wards a “thing” because his brain is, effectively, a lump of metallic ore? Living minds are all, in the end, Black Boxes which noone can truly open and decipher, save by their output.

“But I digress. The question was ‘how can we know?’ Answer: We can’t. We never could. This nation’s founding forefathers, in their wisdom, humbly acknowledged this… that it is impossible to prove in any meaningful way that any person ‘can’t’ or ‘won’t’ eventually do something deplorable.

“So they established one of the most important logical principles as a building block of American Justice: INNOCENT UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY. We are all presumed initially both competent to live our own lives, and innocent of any wrongdoing. We are not to judge each other by our fears, or our doubts, or our uncertainties about what someone could do or might do, but by what they have done.

“That courtesy, that simple justice is extended to all of us. And so by both logic and moral imperative we should extend it to every other living mind-- whether that mind is static bursts in a lump of wet meat, or made of impossible living metal or a hologram of transmuted light…. or lines of code in silicon.

“And as to that--- I’ve watched Dragon in action all over the world. I’ve known her for years and worked alongside her. She has shown kindness, bravery, empathy, compassion, and general decency to human beings, no, to her fellow human beings in every possible range of circumstances. And frankly, Saint, with your track record of armed robbery, homicide, terrorism and who knows what else, she has shown more verifiable humanity than you.”

The entire speech was given with no heat or fervor; it was delivered with the clinical detachment of a mortician delivering the conclusions of a comprehensive autopsy. It was all the more devastating for that. Saint sat in his prison orange, manacled to his chair, and gawked at Armsmaster like a poleaxed cow.

“Your conclusions on the matter, Mr. Armsmaster?” The base commander said drolly, cocking one grey eyebrow.

Armsmaster turned to face him as if Saint had ceased to exist. “He genuinely believes what he says, with 98% certainty,” he said, consulting his voice analysis program. “However he is demonstrating behavior, language, rhetoric, etc. consistent with that of a paranoid delusional or regressive conspiracy theorist.

“Also his actions are self-contradictory. He claims to have found proof of an imminent peril to the human race, and believes himself and his compatriots to be humanity’s last line of defense… because, of course, the rest of us have all been deluded…” The commander chuckled at that. “…However, rather than contacting anyone with this vital information he has instead hoarded it all this time for a last-resort scenario-- like being captured-- and instead spent the last several years robbing, embezzling from, and spying upon the subject of his given conspiracy theory in order to facilitate his
other criminal activities. In short it’s a rationalization: he’s not a criminal and terrorist robbing a bank, he’s a champion battling the Faceless Enemy.” He paused. “Of course you will want a psychiatric professional to confirm or refute…”

The base commander snorted. “I sort of drew those conclusions myself,” he said, getting to his feet. “Take that idiot back to his cell-- and make sure he and his playmates are kept separate. I don’t want to wake up tomorrow and find out they got together and built a, a, a death ray out of bedsprings and bodily fluids and fought their way to freedom with it.” He rolled his eyes. “Capes. Eesh.” The M.P.s unchained Saint from the chair and dragged him away, feebly protesting.

It was several more hours before everyone in charge finally decided that since most of the Dragonslayer’s crimes had been committed in Canada and against Canadian citizens that the Great White North would get first crack at them, and they were quickly and brusquely stuffed aboard one of Dragon’s prison transport vehicles and sent off North to face the music, or at least the first stanza of it.

Before Dragon boarded the VTOL to fly home, she pulled Armsmaster aside. “Colin,” she said. “I heard what you said to Saint.”

“I expected so,” he said blithely. Dragon’s surveillance gear was second to none after all.

Her tone, her poise turned serious. “Did you mean what you said?”

Armsmaster blinked. “Well yes, of course,” he said. To him the things he said and the conclusions he’d come to were as straightforward as 2+2=4.

Dragon started to say something further, but restrained herself. She knew Colin might think he felt the way he said, but she had experience with human beings and their tendency to change course suddenly when the reality was in front of them and their personal emotions came into play. She shook her head. “Just… some time in the near future, there are some things I need to sit down and discuss with you,” she said. “Personal things. If we could do that?”

Colin nodded, not quite sure he understood. “Some time this week then?” he said.

“Weather and Endbringers permitting,” Dragon said wryly. “I’ll be in touch.” She boarded the VTOL. Minutes later the craft had lifted off and taken a heading due North to Canada.

For all parties concerned the journey back to Brockton Bay was uneventful; they arrived close to midmorning, stopping at the PRT building first to deliver their reports of events in-person. Things got far more exciting when they discovered that in the absence of most of the Protectorate, Lung had gone on another one of his temper-tantrum rampages… And had apparently been handily smacked
down by a mixed group of Capes made up of the Wards, the Undersiders and several new unknown Rogues, along with, you guessed it, Skinwalker.

Everyone was fit to be tied; the Youth Guard (all but self-appointed moral busybodies who made the Ward’s life a headache “protecting their well-being”) was throwing a screaming fit over the Wards actually engaging Lung and a small mob of ABB and E88 gangbangers, Piggot was on a tear because the Wards had broken rank and because five NEW Rogue Capes of unknown origin and a mind-boggling array of grab-bag powers-- Blasters, Changers, Strangers, Movers, Brutes, Masters and more-- had made their debut out of nowhere, and Carol Dallon was apparently reading everyone the riot act because the PRT had failed to detain her “runaway daughter” Glory Girl (more than one Cape and PRT grunt had all but horse-laughed at the notion of trying to “detain” Collateral Damage Barbie with anything short of heavy artillery.) The power wonks were freaking out, the precogs were having a breakdown, everyone from Piggot on down was looking for at least one subordinate to scream at.

The one thing that had almost made Director Piggot stroke out was the discovery that one of the Wards, Gallant, had dived into the fray only to disappear without a trace when the Undersiders and the unknowns had teleported away. But just to show that Karma has a balanced wheel, it turned out that this became the reason she was able to maintain any composure at all-- because Gallant had contacted them a few hours later from an undisclosed location, with word that he was being given something-- in fact several somethings-- that were complete game-changers for everyone in Brockton Bay, and possibly the world.

“It’s basically a Lung-Be-Good gun,” Gallant said, setting the gun on the table. The armored Ward had shown up late that afternoon, looking sleep deprived but otherwise unharmed, and bearing gifts. Gifts that the power wonks and Tinkers present were staring at with drooling covetousness, and Piggot was staring at as if they were wrapped in venomous snakes.

They were gathered in main conference room in the Rig-- the Protectorate HQ, a converted derrick floating out in the bay-- the PRT not being nearly secure enough for discoveries of this magnitude (or for that matter large enough for everyone that had to sit in on the discussion). It was big and flashy with huge windows looking out on the ocean and on Brockton Bay, and an enormous round table with the mandatory gigantic illuminated globe of Earth floating over the center. It was designed with tourists in mind but ironically had the best radio and sound jamming technology in either headquarters, due to the need to keep the noise of the tour groups down and to block cell phones and other recording devices (“No pictures, please.”)

A few extra widgets thrown around by Kid Win and Armsmaster and Piggot felt almost secure. “Explain,” she said, unamused by the Ward’s glibness.

Said Ward clearly didn’t care. “It was an accidental discovery, really,” he said. “Skinwalker and several of his… um… associates… have the ability to temporarily transmute a person into an animal form.”

Armsmaster picked up the steampunk looking ray gun (Skinwalker did seem to have a theme going) and examined the dial on the top. “Rabbit… pig… monkey… sheep… frog?” he read out loud.

“Any of them will work the same,” Gallant said. “Skinwalker just said he included the variety for psychological impact. Some people would be less traumatized by turning into a sheep than a pig, for example.” His grin was obvious in his voice, if hidden by his helmet. “And of course, ‘frog’ is a classic.”

“Wizard parking, all others will be Toad,” Assault quipped. His wife headslapped him. “Ow.”
“The effect lasts about sixty seconds. It also has restorative properties… a person who is transmuted returns to their normal state with injuries healed, exhaustion poisons purged, so on and so forth…”

“ANOTHER form of healing?” one of the techs blurted.

“Not exactly,” Gallant said. “It’ll restore you to your natural default state, preexisting conditions and all. If I used this on you, you’d still be nearsighted, have a bald spot and a paunch when you reverted. No offense.”

“Hmph. None taken I suppose.”

“So what’s the advantage?” Miss Militia said. “You use this on a villain, sure, they’re out of the fight for sixty seconds and probably revert to normal disoriented and possibly traumatized, but they also come back in full health and even madder at you.”

“Well that’s the thing,” Gallant said. “It was an effect like this that ended the fight with Lung. Shar’Din… the, ah, elf looking one… hit Lung with a polymorph that turned him into a sheep. When he turned back, he was restored to his default state-- which in his case meant he was returned to his baseline human form.”

“Of course,” Dauntless said, snapping his fingers. “It’s an instant off-switch for his power-ramp.”

“Skinwalker did say the effect had an upward limit,” Gallant cautioned. “If Lung had been any bigger, it probably wouldn’t have worked at all. So we’re probably not going to be turning Leviathan into a frog any time soon. But if you get Lung soon enough--”

“Better yet,” Dauntless enthused, “if it works that way on ANY cape who has to ramp up their power like Lung does… it’ll shut ‘em down wholesale.” Sounds of startled approval went up around the table.

“Even if it only affects Lung this way, this thing is worth its weight in gold,” Battery said.

“Yes,” Armsmaster said, sighting down the barrel. “Even if he escapes again, Lung and the ABB just became a minor problem in Brockton Bay.” There were exclamations of approval and even some applause at this.

“Yes, IF the techs determine this little wonder toy works as advertised and is SAFE,” Piggot pressed, dampening a few spirits-- albeit not for long. “And this second device, Gallant?”

Gallant actually straightened up in his seat, suddenly sober as a judge. “This one. this one could be the big one,” he said. He held up a thick metal headband, thick as his fingertip and half as wide as his palm, with an inlaid gem in the band where it would rest on the center of the forehead. “This is a duplicate of the one Skinwalker made for Glory Girl,” he said. “She’s been having problems controlling her glamour aura. This… neutralizes it. In fact it lets her focus it, turning it into a ranged effect similar to my own emotion blasts.”

“But that’s not all,” he went on. “Everyone here knows how my powers work, so I won’t waste time going into a lot of detail-- but in the battle, and later, I noticed that the headband has an added effect. Not even Skinwalker realizes it. But I persuaded him to give me one of the spares he made for Vicky-- Glory Girl I mean-- so I could show it to you.

“Armsmaster and Kid Win and the techs are going to have to test it more thoroughly--- but if we can reproduce this,” he held up the headband, “And it really does work the way I think it does… It could save thousands of lives.
“It… it might even be the key to defeating an Endbringer…”
Chapter 19

Things became... crowded.

Taylor had retreated back to her father’s house, but that still left all four of the former Undersiders, Sparky, Greg, Theo, Rune, and all three of Rachel’s dogs. The Lost Workshop was a fairly good size, but it was still getting a bit close. Reluctantly Bayleaf had broken down and had set about expanding into the abandoned buildings around them. Mr. Hebert had been more than helpful in this, showing him how to set up a shell corporation to purchase the properties, then shuffle them around in rather creative ways that all but made them disappear into the legal undergrowth, metaphorically speaking. (In Earth Bet, as in Bayleaf's home reality, if all the companies incorporated in Nevada actually had office buildings in the desert they wouldn't have room for the sand.)

Taylor was startled at how much her father knew about such legal grey areas. Bayleaf, not so much. Even if a man was honest as the day is long himself, one did not help run a Union shop without learning a few of the less straight-and-narrow methods of financial obfuscation, and how to work with the system or manipulate it to one's own ends. And it needs to be said: Taylor was her Daddy's little girl. In their new, challenging, extralegal circumstances, her gifts for strategy and cunning and resource management that had surfaced in another timeline as the villainness Skitter thrived and bloomed.

Her first suggestion was an obvious one. Corporate registration in Earth Bet, just as in Bayleaf's own homeworld, was a wonderful thing. In a few days, with her Daddy's help fetching and filing the paperwork and her filling it out, Bayleaf's little businesses was now four different perfectly respectable corporations in the lovely state of Delaware: Worldcraft Inc, Azeroth Ltd, Agents Inc., and ZugZug Inc. Azeroth Ltd. in particular was now the proper owner (on some legal document in some file in some state, somewhere) of the Lost Workshop as well as the entire block of warehouses mashed up around it.

Making sure they remained hidden was Bayleaf's brainstorm. While they could now use the warehouses to load and unload deliveries, it wouldn't do to have capes seen streaming in and out. He put Lei Ling to work and had her summon an Earth Elemental to dig a tunnel out through the floor. They didn’t have to dig far: fortune smiled and they struck one of the many abandoned tunnels that ran hither and thither below the city. Like most port cities Brockton Bay had once had its share of smugglers over its many centuries, from colonial traders evading the British tariffs to moonshiners keeping the throats wet at local speakeasies. There were more than a few little excavation projects like this hidden below the city. The tunnels they’d hit wandered for quite a stretch, popping out in several obscure and not-so-obscure locations.. perfect for their needs.

Bayleaf briefly contemplated making an entire underground base and moving into that, but Taylor pointed out that many of the tunnels were already wet with standing water-- Brockton Bay sat on a rather large aquifer, so between that and the fairly heavy annual rainfall one couldn’t dig down very far without a great deal of machinery to continually pump out the drainage. In the end Bayleaf put his faith in the expert opinion of the local girl and merely had Lei Ling's Elemental reinforce the tunnel with stone arches, but otherwise left it untouched. It wasn’t perfect, but at least now they could get out of the lair without pouring into the back alley like midgets from a clown car.

Clown cars. He would have to do something about transportation…

Their biggest coup was an accident. The warehouses were, to put it mildly, horribly run down inside. In order to make them more livable Adrian secured several steel shipping containers from the DWU at reasonable prices, shrunk them down and had Shar’Din teleport them to the Lost Workshop.
Several of the walls separating the various warehouses had been knocked out. Then the cargo crates had been stacked up, bolted in place, fitted with plumbing and electric lines and cheap flooring, and turned into simple if functional rooms and workspaces. It divided the larger spaces into multiple floors, and turned the entire thing into a warren of steel-walled rooms, storage spaces, tunnels, and corridors, linked by metal staircases and bridged by walkways scavenged from the warehouses that branched out in every direction from the original Workshop. It looked, as Fennek put it, like a habitrail for a race of giant gerbils... but it worked.

One of the outstanding advantages of owning a cluster of small warehouses was that nobody thought a great deal about them receiving odd shipments all hours of day or night, especially if they were dropped off at two or three different loading docks at different times. Paranoia had every government agency in the alphabet soup tracking everything that crossed a state line... but money talked. The near obliteration of international shipping due to the Endbringers was a worldwide problem, and EVERY company out there had stockpiles of 'lost causes' that they had no hope of unloading, so when someone came along waving cash and asking for "discreet delivery," they were inclined to listen. The Alliance managed to get such eyebrow-raising purchases as eight bedroom furniture sets, several hundred pound bags of potting soil, ceramic pots and grow-lights, a thousand plastic greenhouse roof panels, several hundred pound bags of semiprecious stones, several TONS of metal ingots, jumbo bags of doggie chow, archery equipment, random machine parts, a thousand sheets of vellum, plant seeds and seedlings of every variety trundled up to their very doorstep... all without stirring any more attention than any typical in-and-out storage facility in any harbor city.

It took very little to encourage the other Warcrafted to exercise their talents. The urge to craft was as strong on the Warcrafted as it would have been on any regular Tinker; all it took was giving them a supply of raw materials and they set to it with a will.

One of the warehouses, thanks to years of storms and neglect, had almost no roof left; doors and windows were boarded up, frosted plastic panels swiftly and discreetly filled the gaps in the tin roof, rows of pots and shelves were laid out, pipes were laid, and the empty space was converted into a greenhouse to fulfill the needs of the team’s alchemists, herbalists and inscriptionists. A few instructions to the GadgetBots and it was quickly built; a mere touch of Druidic power and rows of potted seeds became rows of thriving potted plants. In less than a day a burned-out husk of a building had been transformed into a hidden garden paradise, and Lei Ling and Hemlokk were soon picking it over for ingredients for their respective inks and potions. Their undisguised glee at creating their first batch of healing potions was unforgettable.

Another of the warehouses had been claimed by Rachel and her dogs. Most of it was dedicated to running space for Brutus, Judas and Angelica, but to her old teammates’ surprise she set up a portion of the upper gallery as a target range and a storage space for her weapons. What might have surprised them more was that she set up more than just facilities for dogs. If one were to look at the pens, habitats and enclosures that were rapidly filling “her” warehouse space, one could be forgiven for assuming she was planning the beginnings of a small zoo...

The tanning and skinning equipment were cause for more immediate concern. Rachel was a hunter now and the urge to use those skills was particularly strong with her. She had found a long, circuitous route to the woods on the outskirts of town or to the local parks and was spending a vast portion of time disappearing into them with her dogs and her spear... Bayleaf only hoped to have things sorted out before he found her busy making a stray-cat coat or there was a notable dip in the local squirrel and pigeon population.

Sparky-- Shar’Din-- soon had two or three cargo rooms as his own, one with the walls lined with shelves and the shelves packed with jars, bottles and tins ready to fill with Enchanting materials, the other filled with swatches of cloth, dressmaker dummies snatched from a shuttered department store...
and a shiny new sewing machine or two. His plea for dozens of yards of cotton, wool, linen, silk and other more exotic cloth got him some odd looks from some of the others, but the blood elf was oblivious. He and Parian were soon thick as thieves, exploring their increasingly exotic craft. Bayleaf wasn’t certain what they were working on, but he’d put in requests for some bottomless haversacks for everyone. God knew they’d need them.

Greg had been surprisingly easy to please. Once the load of ingots arrived he’d taken tools in hand, muttered something about ‘things he’d been planning for ages,’ and all but took over one of the furnaces and the smelter. The sound of anvils ringing could be heard day and night ever since… to the annoyance of several of the other tenants of the Lost Workshop. Bayleaf in fact was growing concerned about him; the former gamer nerd was becoming very shut-mouthed and reclusive, and seemed obsessed with his work at the forge. He never even showed any interest in using their semi-pirated internet or in playing any of the computer games Aisha brought in. As little as Bayleaf knew about him, it seemed very unlike him. It was something of a relief to see Theo… Shen… join him at the forge and lend a paw to his metallurgy. The kid needed friends.

Of course Bayleaf himself probably seemed obsessed at the moment. He had moved his automated parts creator/recycler system into one of the steel storage containers and had it going full blast, scrap going in one end, Gearspring parts for his engineering toys coming out the other. Between that and the magefires of the furnaces he was pushing the gnomish generator that powered the Workshop to its limits. He and Regent were spending all their time together bent over the tinkering worktables, rebuilding Bayleaf’s depleted armory—and finally beginning work on some of the bigger projects, now that Bayleaf had an extra pair of tinkering hands.

Everyone, Warcrafted or Undersider, had at least one gnomish handcannon or rifle now. It was also worth noting that, at Fennek’s wheedling insistence, everyone had a replica of Glory Girl’s headband as well.

It was a relief to Bayleaf that Regent dove in so readily. The poor neophyte Vulperan had been suffering from his neural rebuild, practically reliving all his worst memories in vivid detail, like a remastered recording. Working on the engineering projects seemed to help him fend off the flashbacks, at least for a while.

As for Brian and Lisa, they were in the thick of things as well. At Taylor’s suggestion, Lisa and Aisha were busy pushing the base’s cobbled-together computer system to the limit to keep Coil as preoccupied as possible: hacking into Thomas Calvert’s files, canceling out his credit cards, revoking his driver’s license, changing his legal address of residence, putting him in the BBPD as on record with over a thousand moving violations… Lisa had long plotted out all sorts of cyber warfare to wage against Coil, the supervillain; but until a brainstorming session with the team’s resident juvenile delinquent she had never considered the possibilities available for tormenting her enemy by going after his civilian identity.

And like many people who lead a double life, Thomas Calvert had gone to a great deal of effort to protect one identity and only given passing attention to the other... and Aisha it turned out was an undiscovered genius at finding hilarious ways to torment someone via mundane means. Even as Lisa was embezzling funds from Coil’s criminal operations she was keeping the would-be Bond villain hopping by having his public identity subscribe to a gay porn publication, put on a watch list for sex offenders (public nudity), and declared legally dead. The cackling of the two as they worked late in the night was enough to keep the male members of the troupe awake and nervous.

Brian, on the other hand, was being kept busy as a ‘face.’ Despite the annoying disadvantage of being an African American in a city half-overrun by a bunch of neonazi clowns, he was good at it. He was tall, handsome, charming, well spoken and could work as easily in a three piece suit or in a
set of biker leathers. He was perfect for delivering packages, doing mail runs, dead drops or pickups, or for speaking with people face-to-face that the Warcrafted most definitely did not want to.

He did, however, demand one concession: A legitimate job. That had been easy enough. A bit of hacking, some paperwork hocus pocus and computer wizardry, and he was now the sole employee, at Taylor's suggestion, of Azeroth Ltd as a “Corporate Representative Liaison.” His salary was in paid out through the shell corporation via a quite legitimate trust fund in his and Aisha’s name (which had been tidily stuffed full of cash from his share of the take from Lei Ling’s impromptu jewel heist and leached off of Coil’s illegal bank accounts.)

The goal after all was for Brian to claim custody of his little sister. And it was effective; already the paperwork was moving through the digestive tract of the body politic. It was a source of sneering sarcasm for all involved that the bureaucratic nincompoops at Child Protection Services regarded him as a "fit" guardian now that he seemingly had a struggling nine-to-five job--- whereas if they had fabricated a seven-figure trust fund for him and his sister (as was Adrian's first suggestion) then the army of Government Moral Superiors would have probably fought them tooth and nail...

All of this had progressed with terrifying speed. Most of it was accomplished within a week or less. As limited and clumsy as they were, it was amazing the sort of force multipliers that parahuman or Warcrafted powers could be, if applied right-- to say nothing of what was possible with an ever-growing number of GadgetBots to help with the scutwork. It sort of made Bayleaf wonder why most Tinkers didn’t start out making helper robots first, then moving on to their zap guns and shrink rays or whatever.

But they were hitting a plateau. They simply did not have the exotic metals, minerals, or other materials to bring themselves up to the threshold they needed. The few enchantment materials that Bayleaf had gathered were already exhausted, save for a few crumbs of strange dust here and a shard of essence there. Disenchanting their own crafts would reclaim some few of those arcane ingredients, but in the end would gain them nothing; it would just be a slow form of self-cannibalism, like trying to subsist entirely on one’s own recycle bin. It was time, in warcrafter parlance, to go farm.

But before even that, there was one minor matter that Bayleaf and Hemlokk-- Adrian and Taylor-- needed to finish up.

School, Adrian decided, was stupid.

No, seriously, it was a waste of time. And not just because of this “get up, go to school, save the world” nonsense circumstances had stuck him in. Seriously, hadn’t those idiots in PRT heard of homeschooling? Or hired tutors? High school dropouts and single moms were routinely doing a better job educating and socializing their children than million-dollar public schools packed with college-educated teachers. But no. Public Schooling was a system over a century old in the Western world... which, with the Western world's mayfly memory span, made it seem an almost sacred institution. The truth that noone wanted to admit was that it was not; it was in fact nothing but a hundred-year-old social engineering experiment, one that was failing dismally.

Of course Adrian could just be bitter. He was, after all, currently STUCK in that social engineering experiment--- again--- and was consequently daily having to resist the urge to punch certain peoples’
heads through the nearest brick wall.

At the moment though he contented himself with a little random on-the-spot street justice.

Going to the can in Winslow could be an adventure all by itself; roll the dice and consult the random encounter table, kids: will it be a drug deal, an attempted homicide or just some kids sneaking a smoke in the toilet stalls? Today it looked like a little good old fashioned brutality. Adrian had walked in and found two punks giving some kid a swirly. They had apparently been at it for a few minutes and to judge by their victim's weakening struggles, were doing a damned good job of coming close to actually drowning him. Adrian cut the festivities short by grabbing the two punks by the shirt collar and banging their heads together as hard as he could.

The two morons slumped to the floor, the sound of coconuts echoing in their noggins, their victim’s legs falling to the floor of the stall with a splash. Adrian grabbed the kid by the belt-- it looked to be a freshman and a scrawny one at that-- and yanked him out of the toilet before he drowned. The kid dropped to the floor, choking and coughing, toilet water pooling around him as he coughed up water.

“Go get the nurse,” Adrian barked at the nearest kid in the bathroom. The kid jumped and ran. Adrian cussed to himself as he heaved the two bullies to the side and helped the half-drowned freshman sit up. The kid was still coughing. Adrian hoped the nurse brought some penicillin or poison treatment or something; God only knew what was in that toilet water.

Poison treatment, right. Adrian dug in his backpack and pulled out a couple of thumb-sized vials; one red, one yellow-green. “Here, drink these,” he said, thumbing the stoppers. The kid took them and, after a moment’s pause, knocked them back. His cough cleared up and he actually perked up a bit. As Adrian watched a barely noticeable bruise on the kid’s cheek vanished. It was only a beginner’s healing potion and an antitoxin, but it was more than enough to do the trick. He was going to have to remember to congratulate Taylor on her brewing.

“What--” the kid started to ask.

“Energy shot,” Adrian lied glibly, palming the vials and pocketing them. No sense giving the authority figures an excuse to freak; this was the age of zero tolerance after all. Giving a fellow student an aspirin was enough to get you dragged out of school in handcuffs if some Niedermeyer spotted you.

The school nurse came bustling in-- was it some sort of mandatory thing that all school nurses “bustle?” Adrian would give anything to see one that scurried, or loped-- and let out a sound of disgust as she took in the scene: two unconscious upperclassmen, a sopping wet freshman lying on the floor in front of a toilet stall, and the school troublemaker crouching next to him. “Oh, what happened here?” she said, giving Adrian an accusing glare.

Adrian stared at her and jerked his thumb at the two concussed bullies. “They slipped in their own piss,” he snarked. “’S not safe trying to drown another student in a toilet, you know.” Her face puckered up like she’d licked a thistle, but she went to examine the knocked-out students. One of them moaned as she looked him over and the other moved slightly. “Oh joy, they’re alive,” Adrian said in a monotone.

Well, this just soured his whole day beyond words. Even as he was being marched to the Principal’s office, he was brooding over it. He had hoped that this next few days would be the last he and Taylor would have to deal with things here, but it should have been obvious to him that Winslow’s problems ran deeper than just three spoiled brat girls. He palmed and pocketed the spycams hidden in Blackwell’s office while the officious bat bumbled around her office, swearing under her breath while she hunted for missing forms and banged her shins on everything (she hadn’t fixed Taylor’s
What they had already would certainly shut down Emma, Sophia and Madison for good. But could he really walk away after that, and think it was enough?

Taylor’s first clue that something up was the crowd of girls gathered at one end of the hall. She recognized the formation; a half dozen or so girls gathered together, just ever-so-casually hemming in another girl, keeping her from getting away. It was certainly strange seeing one of these little hen-peck parties from the outside. She’d been at the center of them more often than not.

She drew closer, close enough to hear the barbs the other girls were throwing back and forth about the one in the middle.

“Is she actually fatter than she was last week?”

“Ugh, yeah. I’d slit my own throat before I let myself get that porky.”

“S’not surprising. I heard the boys pay her in Twinkies for hand jobs.”

“Or blow jobs.”

“Uh uh. No way they’d let anything that important near her mouth--!” The bitch-circle sniggered and jeered, a poisonous and hateful sound.

Taylor drew closer. For a wonder, none of the Bitches Three were present. This was apparently a little freelance bullying by the “in” girls, no Queen Bee supervision necessary. The girl in the center was nobody she knew; just a shortish, slightly plump girl she’d seen in the hallways from time to time. She was curled up around her books and trying to get into her locker. Every time she got the door opened one of the taller girls behind her would slam it shut.

Something very bad and very dangerous curled inside Taylor, just under her breastbone. She felt the first inklings of the Change; the prickling in her pores, the itching in her nails trying to turn into claws. If she’d had a mirror she’d have seen flecks of gold growing in her eyes. Her senses sharpened suddenly, the scents of each of the girls suddenly jumping out in her mental tableau in bas-relief, individual aromas of perfume and hairspray and-- cayenne?

The girl nearest to her had an oh-so-cute little “bimbo purse” hanging by a strap from her shoulder. Taylor zeroed in on it. The bag was open; she could see the gleam of keys inside and a very familiar sort of metal cylinder dangling from the keychain…

In Western culture at least, girls fight with emotional attacks rather than physical. The tendency of most adolescent girls confronted with this sort of situation would be to try, with very questionable success, some cutting or clever verbal attack to try to get the bullies to back off. At one time Taylor herself might have opted for that sort of confrontation.

But she’d changed. She was the Wolf now, and the Wolf knew that words were for bleating sheep.

Her hand dove into the purse and deftly plucked out the keychain with its pepper spray canister; for a
rogue with epic-level pickpocketing it was child's play. With a practiced flick of her thumb she opened the cap and emptied the can in a sweeping circle, catching all the girls surrounding their victim square in the eyes. She crimped the can nozzle with her thumb, making it spring a leak, and dropped the keychain back in the bimbette’s purse…. All of this in a single motion that took less than a second.

The circle of girls fell back, shrieking and screaming. Taylor grabbed the round-faced girl’s wrist and dragged her, both their eyes and noses streaming, to the nearest bathroom. She wedged the door shut, jamming it, and pulled the girl to the sink so they could splash their faces and eyes.

Pepper spray was a chump’s version of self defense; it was inaccurate, it got everywhere, it had an effective range of “please stab me” and it incapacitated the victim almost as badly as the attacker. That worked in her favor right now, though. None of the girls had gotten a good look at her, and they were going to have far more immediate burning issues on their mind. Any would-be rescuers would too: that slow leak she’d left in the bimbette’s pepper spray can would make things incredibly uncomfortable for anyone who got too close. The Bitch Squad was going to be tied up for, oh, at least a good while.

Of course her own wolfen senses were making it that much worse for herself, but she guessed you couldn’t have everything. While the other girl moaned and tried fruitlessly to soothe her eyes with cold water, Taylor fished blindly around in her backpack. She squinted at the vials in her hands. Red for healing, green for antitoxin, she supposed that would work--

She gulped down two, then forced two of the vials in the girl’s hands. “Here, drink these-- no, DRINK them,” she insisted when the girl went to pour them in her eyes. The girl swallowed the contents, then blinked and sighed in relief as the potions began to work.

“Wow,” the girl said, blinking in surprise this time. Even the red was fading from her eyes, Taylor noticed. She indulged in a moment of smugness: her first potion-making triumph. “What was that stuff?”

“Herbal remedy,” Taylor fibbed. “What… what the hell was all that about in the hall?”

The girl looked at her like she was stupid. “Since when does it have to be about anything?” she asked bitterly. “They were bored, they’re evil bitches, and I was there. That’s all that mattered.” She splashed more water on her face.

“…You’re right,” Taylor mumbled. “Dumb question, never mind. Are your eyes okay?”

“I’ll live.” The girl hunched up over the sink, trying to shut Taylor out with her shoulders and the fall of her crimped hair. Taylor wasn’t sure what to do. She’d known, intellectually, that she couldn’t possibly be the only bullying victim in the school. But she’d been so wrapped up in her own misery that she’d never even noticed other students being preyed upon.

Or she had… but she hadn’t cared. She cringed inside as she remembered instances; moments where she’d caught sight of some boy being pushed around in a corner, or overheard some girl being verbally cut to ribbons. Or… how many of those ‘gang fights’ she’d seen, avoided, and dismissed had just been some luckless kid getting thrashed on for being the wrong color in the wrong place and time?

And did that matter? Did some kid who got drafted into the ABB by Lung “Mister Persuasion” the Dragon deserve to go through hell in school any more than any other kid? How many kids joined gangs just to feel like they were protected? Didn’t every kid deserve to at least feel safe going to school?
Taylor and Adrian could take what they already had and force the school--- no, call it what it was, blackmail-- and blackmail the school to transfer them out. They could even get Sophia, Madison and Emma suspended or expelled, even. But what about all the other bullies, and the gangs, and everything else? What about all the other kids still stuck here?

Taylor felt sick. She could bail out like a rat abandoning a sinking ship, but what about this girl here? She was a Warcrafted. She was supposed to be a hero. How could she be a hero if she just saved herself and ran away?

“Uh, hey,” the round faced girl said. “T-Thanks I guess.” She half-smiled. “That was actually pretty cool.” Taylor gave her a half smile back. The girl looked around. “Why aren’t they all bombing in here trying to wash that shit off their faces? Or to drag us off by the hair?”

Taylor scratched the back of her head. “Probably because we’re in the boy’s room,” she said, hitching a thumb at the row of urinals behind them. “Oh calm down, I jammed the door,” she said to the girl’s alarmed look. “I figured this would be the last place they’d look for us, anyway.” She looked at the girl and stuck out a hand. “Taylor Hebert.”

“Ashlee.” The round faced girl took her hand and shook it. “Oh yeah, right,” she grimaced. “I’ve heard Sophia and her friends talking smack about you.”

“Wow, small world.” Taylor quipped.

“Think it’s safe to go out there yet?” Ashlee said, looking at the door.

Taylor thought of the USB drives already piling up back at the Lost Workshop. “Don’t worry,” she muttered to herself, the decision firming in her mind. “We’ll make sure it is one way or the other.”

Adrian was stuffing his books in his locker at the end of a long, incredibly irritating day-- really, seriously, he was considering just dropping out-- when he was grappled from behind. Taylor’s arms wrapped around him in a rib-creaking hug. “Whuff!” He said. “Not that I’m complaining, but what brought this on?” he chuckled, turning around in her arms to face her.

“Adrian...” She looked up at him. “We need to talk.”

That sobered him up quickly. “Do we need someplace private?” he said somberly.

By way of answer she tugged him over to the janitor’s closet and pulled him inside, closing the door behind her. She pulled the light chain, illuminating the cramped musty place with a fifty watt bulb. “It’s… our plan for taking out the Three Bees,” she said.

“Are you having second thoughts?” he asked. There was no judgment in his voice, just an honest question.

“No! Yes… Not…” she paused, trying to gather herself. “It’s not enough.” At his raised eyebrows she went on. “It’s not what you’re thinking,” she hastily added. “What I mean is…. Sure, we can get Sophia and Emma and Madison suspended or expelled. We can even get the PRT over a barrel, force them to deal with Shadow Stalker. We could probably even arm twist Blackwell into
transferring us over to Arcadia or even some other school or even get them to pay through the nose for all that’s happened.

“But what about the other kids here? I wasn’t the only victim. Emma, Sophia and Madison weren’t the only bullies. I get to escape scot free, and the Three Bees go up the river-- but everyone else just gets to shuffle deck chairs...” She shook her head, cringing. “What about Aisha? What about Greg?--” she growled. “Once you and I are gone it’ll just be new bullies, new victims and it keeps right on going on…”

She turned away from him, rubbing her arms as if she was cold. “That’s not good enough. It’s not right. I know we’re wasting time on this, that a stupid school is penny ante stuff, I know we’re supposed to have an entire world to save, but-- we’re supposed to be heroes. I can’t be a hero knowing I ran away just to save myself.” She took a deep breath. “I don’t just want to run away. I want to FIX this. I want to save everybody who’s been a victim, not just myself.”

Adrian felt warmth fill him. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, her shoulder blades against his chest, and kissed her on the top of her head. “I can’t tell you how much I’d hoped you’d say something like that eventually,” he said softly.

“I should’ve said it sooner,” she said, guilt ridden.

“You said it soon enough,” Adrian insisted.

“I had to save some girl named Ashlee from a bunch of Emma wannabees just a couple of hours ago--”

“I had to rescue some freshman kid from nearly being drowned in a Swirly,” Adrian chuckled. “I’ve been in Blackwell’s office all day while she called the cops in and tried to get something to stick to me. Too bad for her the kid I saved told the cops I rescued him. After he got all the Ti-D-Bowl out of his sinuses, anyway.”

Taylor laughed a little, mean though it was. “So what do we do…?” she said.

Adrian huffed. “Well. First let me ask. How do you feel about getting a GED?”

She turned her head to look up at him in puzzlement. “A GED?”

Instead of answering the obvious question, Adrian pulled out his phone. “Hello, Aisha? Where are you? … Still in Winslow, good, good. Okay, if you got any cameras still out, pull ‘em down and bring ’em in. It’s time to make some movie magic.”

Another week crawled by.

Shadow Stalker… well, stalked into Director Piggot’s office, her cloak flaring dramatically behind her. “I’m here,” she said, salty as always. “So what’s the big deal this… time…?” She was brought up short as she found herself facing a distinctly unamused looking Emily Piggot across her desk. That was nothing unusual, Piggy was always unamused. What was new were the equally unamused looking Armsmaster, Miss Militia, and quartet of PRT troops surrounding her.
Shadow Stalker hesitated. Before she could muster the nerve to do something precipitous, Piggot spoke. “SIT,” she said.

Deciding to play it cool for the moment, or at least telling herself that was her decision, she sat. Before she knew what was what, Armsmaster stepped to her side. There was a metallic clink, and Shadow Stalker was manacled by her wrist to her chair arm. She could see lights blinking on the cuffs; it was Tinkertech, and electrified. She couldn’t escape from it. She shook her manacles and glared at the Director. “The hell is this??” She demanded.

Piggot said nothing. She simply scooted her office chair to the side and pulled out a remote, clicking it once. A flatscreen monitor descended from the ceiling behind her. Another button was pressed and the screen lit up. Piggot never took her eyes off her the entire time.

A familiar looking image faded into view: an aerial photo of Winslow High. The camera panned over the building as text began scrolling up the screen and a voiceover began. The voice was female, but digitally altered to be unrecognizable beyond that.

“We are an anonymous group of Brockton Bay public school students. What you are about to see is un-altered footage of day to day activities inside Winslow High School, as recorded by ourselves...”

The aerial footage was followed by scenes from a very recognizable hallway, showing a very recognizable trio of girls in the process of crowding around a fourth. “The three girls here are Madison Clements--” the voice said; an arrow appeared over one girl. “Emma Barnes--” Another arrow appeared. “And Sophia Hess. At the time this was filmed these three girls had been engaged in a two year long bullying campaign against another student... the one you see here.” The victim, whose face was not visible from this angle, was circled. The girl was clearly retreating, trying to placate the other three somehow. Without warning the one marked as Sophia-- and it was recognizably her-- lashed out and punched the girl violently, rocking her head back on her shoulders. “The bullying campaign included verbal abuse, harassing emails, theft and destruction of the victim’s property and as you can see here, violent physical assaults...”

A choking noise came from Shadow Stalker.

Piggot paused the video. “Something you care to add, Shadow Stalker?” she said in a voice as dry as alum.

“That’s not me,” Shadow Stalker rasped. “That video’s a fake! THAT’S NOT ME!”

“...And here we have another bullying incident, this time against a male student,” the voice went on, over top footage of a rapidly escalating shove-fest by a group of the school’s football players with an asian student in the middle. “If you look in the upper right corner, you can see Mr. Gladly, one of the school teachers, witnessing the incident and promptly walking the other way...” The one-way shoving match rapidly progressed into a beatdown.

Gladly felt a drop of sweat trickle down the back of his shirt collar. The Board of Directors for the Brockton Bay Board of Education looked distinctly unimpressed with either him, or the squirming
Principal Blackwell sitting next to him. The recording was only fifteen minutes in, and had shown over a dozen fights, criminal incidents, and unambiguous incidents of physical and other abuse, many with nearby teachers or other staff acting as witnesses.

“This incident was ALSO reported to Principal Blackwell. Once again no meaningful action was taken...”

The Mayor’s face was grim; his lips were pressed together so tightly they were white as the Youtube video continued to play. His staff were all seated around the polished oak meeting table, watching as well. The room was as silent as a tomb. For over a solid hour they had sat there and witnessed the disadvantaged children of Brockton Bay being forced to live in an environment so barbaric as to rival that of a maximum security prison. Everyone present knew that heads were going to roll, and Mayor Christner was going to be gleefully swinging the axe.

The dreadful video finally ended. The narrator delivered one last final speech.

“It took us less than a month to accumulate all the footage you have just seen. When we began compiling this, our original intent, as students and victims of this environment, was to try and persuade-- no, to coerce-- Principal Blackwell into expelling the perpetrators and into allowing us to transfer to a better, safer school somewhere else in the Brockton Bay educational system.

“But the more we saw, the more obvious it was how insufficient this would be... and how unfair to the rest of the student body, who could NOT escape this environment this way. We could have used this for bribery or blackmail-- but we are not interested in blackmail.”

“We knew, even before we began recording, how useless going through the system would be for obtaining justice. We already tried with Principal Blackwell. We already tried with the board of educators. And already Emma Barnes’ father is surely standing on his chair, proclaiming that everything shown here is inadmissible in a court of law--”

“It isn’t!” Alan Barnes said, standing up in the back of the auditorium.

This was greeted with censorious gavel-banging. “We are fully aware of what is admissible and inadmissible in a court of law, MISTER Barnes,” the man at the gavel said. “This however is a hearing. So you will refrain from further outbursts or you will be removed from these proceedings forcibly. Bailiff, rewind and resume the recording.” Alan sat down with a frustrated thump next to his cowed-looking daughter.

“--is inadmissible in a court of law, due to a list of petty legal technicalities he can recite all day.

“But we are not interested in spending months or years and countless tens of thousands of dollars
wrangling with... people... like Mister Barnes in a legal battle or class-action lawsuit. Only a fool wrestles a pig in its own wallow.” An outraged yelp came from Alan Barnes’ direction, and more than a few spiteful chuckles rose elsewhere at the clever dig.

“We are only interested in one thing... getting the truth out where it can’t be ignored anymore.

“Which is why we posted this online, on Youtube and on over a dozen other sites, servers and in multiple downloadable formats.

In the cafeteria at Arcadia High, and the dingy gymnasium of Winslow, the students there unknowingly aped each other as they gathered round laptops and cell phones and watched slackjawed as the manifesto unfolded.

“We could blame the gangs and the crime rate for everything wrong in Winslow. But no other school in Brockton Bay suffers problems like this.

“We could blame City Hall for funneling money away from a school in a disadvantaged community like the Docks. But fifty years ago Winslow didn’t have a fraction of the budget it has today, and somehow it had none of the problems of gangs, drugs, crime and violence it has today either. Money isn’t the problem.

“We could point fingers at a particular staff member-- one particular incompetent teacher or school principal isn’t the problem. Though they certainly ought to be held accountable for how they let it fester.

“So who do we blame?

“We lay the blame at the feet of every person in a position of power and authority who knew about this situation, who had the power to FIX this situation, and who out of cowardice, laziness or greed DID NOT FIX IT.

“Because even the students from the poor neighborhoods of Brockton Bay ought to be able to feel safe at school.”

Danny Hebert sat back as the video ended, his hands wiping down over his face. He’d just watched over an hour of footage of everything from schoolyard bullying to assault with deadly weapons-- all of it in his little girl’s school. “Good night,” he said. “I knew it was bad there but I had no idea…” His expression soured. “Half the Dockworker’s Union has kids that go to school there or will be in another year--”

He shook his head. “Well, you’ve certainly thrown the cat in among the pigeons. From what I’ve heard heads are rolling from the Mayor’s office on down. The Mayor’s furious because your little world-wide internet broadcast has embarrassed his administration… made it look like it only cares
about the rich and influential neighborhoods, suggesting they’re siphoning money away from schools like Winslow and into Arcadia…. He’s tearing through the Board of Education, tearing heads off shoulders and demanding to know where the school budget is going and why everyone was asleep at the wheel.

“The PRT-- well, Shadow Stalker hasn’t been seen in days--”

“And the PHO gossip is that she’s been yanked off the streets for disciplinary action,” Lisa cut in smugly. “Which, as it so happens, is correct...”

“The Board of Education, well it looks like they’re firing pretty much everybody in Winslow, starting with Blackwell and working their way down,” Mr. Hebert went on. “Sophia, Madison, Emma and a dozen or so other students are being expelled or suspended...” his expression soured. “Alan is fighting Emma’s expulsion tooth and nail of course, but it’s pretty much a done deal.”

He looked at his daughter gravely. “Even without those three--- If I had known how bad that school was, I would never have let you go there… no, forget that. I’m not letting you stay there another day. I don’t know how we’ll wrangle you an entry to Arcadia, but--”

“Well it’s not like you can’t afford it,” Brian said, half amused. The rest of the Warcrafted (and the last two Undersiders) had gathered in the Lost Workshop around the big screen to watch the video Lisa, Taylor and Adrian had spliced together. “In case anyone’s forgotten the cast iron safe full of bills and gemstones in the next room.” He chuckled as Mr. Hebert blinked in surprise; he’d apparently forgotten that his little girl was now a millionaire or close to it. “You hear that, Aisha? We’re getting you out of Winslow.” He called over to his sister, who was rooting more sodas out of the fridge.

“Really? Ariiight!”

“Yeah, you ain’t got the grades for Arcadia, but now we got the money we could get you into Immaculata--”

“Aaaaugh, no, not the NUNS!!”

Grue spent the next few minutes laughing himself sick.

“I’ve been meaning to ask about that,” Mr. Hebert said. “Most of you kids are still school age--”

“GED,” Lisa said, waving a hand.

“Same here,” Brian agreed.

“Can’t go to school,” Lok’Tara grunted. She was sitting off to one side surrounded by her dogs, sharpening her hunting spear. “Don’t need to anyway.”

“Couldn’t care less,” Fennek said cheerfully, kicking up his heels. He was ensconced in an overstuffed chair with a bag of doritos and a soda as big as himself, the Vulparen all but vanishing into the cushions.

“Homeschooled mostly,” Lei Ling said, wincing a bit as she remembered why. Most homeschooled families were perfectly normal, healthy and well-adjusted people; the Herren clan was one of the unpleasant exceptions.

“Tutored at home,” Shen contributed.
“But you will all be pursuing your education,” Danny Hebert pressed.

Adrian sighed and sat back. “Actually, I’m going to be dropping out,” he said. At Mr. Hebert’s upset look he continued, “Oh I’ll get my GED-- The silly people who run the world do like their paperwork after all-- but higher education isn’t for me. The only reason I went into that hellhole in the first place, Mr. Hebert, was to get your daughter out.”

“But an education is important, Adrian,” Danny Hebert said, upset.

Adrian looked at him, an oddly amused expression on his lupine face. “Really? ...Okay, let’s examine that statement. Why?”

Danny opened his mouth, but Adrian interrupted. “No really, why? Think about it, sir. Why? To learn a vocation? A secure income? I’ve seen people with college degrees waiting tables for a living. And how many of your dockworkers are sitting idle for lack of work?

“Mr. Hebert, I arrived on this planet with literally nothing but the clothes on my back and within a week I had secured enough money that I could be living on Captain’s Hill right now. I can pick gemstones and precious metals out of the ground by feel. I’ve been implanted with a comprehensive knowledge of engineering, not just the blueprints for a few toys but the underlying principles, that I could walk into any industry on the planet and demand a seven figure salary… and get it. An income or a vocation is not a problem.”

“What about broadening your horizons, expanding your vision?” Mr. Hebert protested. “You need to get a glimpse of the bigger world out there--”

“With all due respect, sir, have you met any college kids lately?” Adrian said with a snort. “You’ll never find a bigger bunch of insulated, close minded, arrogant, prejudiced tosspots in your life. If an education broadens your mind, I’d hate to see what narrows it!

“You don’t broaden your horizons by sitting in a classroom, poring over a grossly overpriced stack of books and learning to get top marks by agreeing with everything your professor says. You expand your horizons by going outside, finding the nearest horizon and walking towards it.”

“The thing is, Mr. Hebert,” Adrian pressed on when he saw the discomfited look on Danny’s face. “This broken, corrupted, overpriced and defective so-called educational system, even if it were at it’s best, doesn’t really have anything substantial to offer us. I know that, after over a hundred years of self-promotion, the educational system here has become a cultural touchstone…a sort of symbolic rite-of-passage. But that’s all that it is. It adds no more of substance to a person than a primitive tribe's ritual tattoos, or bungee jumping off a platform as a rite of manhood.

“We’ve already gained everything worth getting from them. And anything we didn’t, we could get somewhere else-- vocational school, self education-- for far less of our blood, sweat, tears and sanity.

"He's right, Daddy," Taylor said, putting a hand on her father's shoulder. "The school system-- it just doesn't have anything to offer us anymore." She snorted, thinking of Winslow's bully and gangster ridden halls and its dismal educational staff. "If it ever did."

“And in our particular case… all the Warcrafter… We’ve already surpassed them. Heck, between us, with our knowledge of herbology, leatherworking, metallurgy, chemistry, animal domestication, medicine, clothmaking, weaponscrafting, mechanical design and construction, to say nothing of our arcane knowledge, we could literally rebuild civilization from ground up. Take it from the stone age to the modern age singlehanded within a few years. Go to school? We could build a school, and serve as half the staff!”
“Don’t get me wrong,” Adrian said. "If Taylor wants to finish out traditional high school and go to a traditional college, I’d be there cheering her all the way. Heck, I’d buy her textbooks and carry them from class to class for her. It’s just that there are better, and wiser, ways to get everything those institutions offer.” He looked around. "Especially with the tasks ahead of us.”

Danny Hebert's response was surprisingly muted. The man ran his hand over his balding head wearily and looked at his daughter. “So… what are you planning to do?” he said.

“I’m… thinking of trying for my GED,” she said. “They offer the test in Brockton Bay near the end of summer. If I study hard, I think I can pass.” She shrugged. “Then… I think maybe a year or so off-- I hear we’re going to be kind of busy during that time,” she added wryly, giving Bayleaf a sidelong glance. “Then I’ll think about college. But right now I kind of think saving the world takes precedence over getting a good report card.”

Danny fell back in his chair, his cheeks puffed out. “I suppose I can live with that,” he said.

“What about me?” Aisha said suddenly, poking her brother. “Do I get some options?”

“Like what?” Brian said. Aisha looked over at Adrian expectantly.

“Well, there’s home schooling, correspondence schooling, which is really just homeschooling only with more postage… tutoring, which is just the teacher coming to see YOU….”

“I’ll take ‘idle rich uneducated dropout’ for $500, Alex,” Fennek quipped, munching a chip. Lisa swatted him with a sofa pillow. “Augh, my doritos!” He stuck his nose down in the bag to observe the damage, grumble-whining to himself.

“Truth time: is it harder than regular school?” Aisha said skeptically.

“Oh, definitely,” Adrian said. “It’s always harder when you go off the beaten path. You got to decide for yourself though whether it’s better.”

“Well,” Shen said. “Now that we’ve successfully turned the Brockton Bay educational system on its ear, what’s our next step?”

“We’ve all got some things to deal with,” Adrian said. “Equipment to finish, personal matters to close out--

“First off, we’re running low on arcane ingredients.” There was some grumbled agreements around the room about this. There had been some quibbling over the rapidly vanishing store of arcana. “We need a steadier supply of the stuff, and sifting through garage sale junk isn’t going to cut it anymore. But I have a few ideas on that. I’ll be going to see Faultline again… but also, we need to make contact with Uber and Leet.”

“Why those two losers?” Aisha snorted. But Lisa squinted at him, then gave him a knowing smile.

“We also need to see about yanking the plug on Coil for good,” Adrian said. “Stringing him along has been hilarious, I’m sure--” several of the girls snickered. “But it’s time to put him to bed. The PRT is supposedly planning a move on him, but… considering who’s really at the top in the PRT, I’d rather not run the risk they’ll softball the guy.” The others nodded grimly; finding out that Cauldron had created Coil and many other villains had been a shock; learning that Cauldron was in control of the Protectorate and the PRT and making them sandbag against villains that Cauldron wanted to keep in circulation had been an outrage.

“And third, we need to figure out Parian’s power… and we need to contact Flechette.”
“Why them in particular?” Danny asked.

“Because we’ve got it on good sources that Parian’s power, somehow, in some way, is a threat to Behemoth,” Adrian said, leaning forward so his elbows rested on his knees and steepling his clawed fingers together. “And it’s a confirmed fact that Flechette is carrying the Stinger Shard… the weapon which the Entities use to fight one another, and which can kill an Endbringer. If she knows how to use it.

“The next Endbringer attack is due literally any day, so time is already running out.”
“Now the first thing to remember is that even though you're a hunter and not a mage, you're still channeling arcane energy to do most of the cool things that Azeroth hunters can do,” Bayleaf said. “In fact that's pretty much true of everyone using Azeroth powers.”

“I got that,” Regent... Fennek... nodded. “That scans with what I 'remember' being taught.” He made quote marks in the air with his tiny paws.

“In your case, and, er, Lok'tara's,” he went on. “Your main focus are these.” He handed Fennek the stout little recurved bow and quiver the new Vulperan had received on his 're-entry' into the mortal plane. He pulled one arrow out and held it up. It was a simple, almost crude-looking wooden arrow with plain brown fletching-- and a quartz tip. “The quiver uses the same space-folding trick as our haversacks... well, a little more limited, since it only holds arrows.” Bayleaf poked around in the quiver. “Looks like they gave you a full load out. You got about 200 of these things. I don't know how these are made--”


“Not too expensive I hope?”

“Nah. So long as you use some kind of quartz for the tip. Flint, chert, agate...” He counted them off on his fingertips.

“Great. That'll make things a lot simpler. I'll set up the parts-o-matic to crank you out a few hundred more. For now though--” Bayleaf gestured downfield. “Let's see how good you are with that.”

Bayleaf, Fennek and Lok'Tara had availed themselves of the use of the local school sports field. A hundred yard football-slash-soccer field (Winslow High had, in better days, commissioned the thing. Before the decline of Brockton Bay had set in, the influx of refugees from other countries had finally boosted the popularity of the sport of Pele' to a level Americans had been actually willing to spend serious money on it) surrounded by a clay running track, framed by bleachers on either side, gave them more than enough room to stretch their legs and test their abilities. The dead of night, and the twelve-foot hedge line and fence surrounding the whole facility, gave them plenty of privacy as well. While the stadium lights were out, the lights from the parking lot were more than enough to keep the grassy field illuminated.

Not that the three of them needed it much. Worgen, Vulperan and Orc had far better night vision than any human.

As to practice-- Adrian had set up hunting targets-- various animal silhouettes, a handful of human ones-- at intervals down the field. The farthest one was at the fence line; immediately beyond the fence was a six foot earthen rise out of which the concealing hedgerow grew, Bayleaf had judged it more than sufficient as an earth stop for a simple archery test.

Fennek gave a half-nod, half-shrug, and shrugged his way out of his hoodie.

Going out disguised had been less of a challenge than Bayleaf had expected. It was Brockton Bay; most people had learned not to look too closely or stare too long, especially after dark. Rachel's green skin was easily covered with a can of spray-on tan. And while Fennek definitely looked odd in his oversized hoodie-- at less than three foot tall, it wore on him more like a floor-length monk's robe--
noone had taken notice of him, or them, or had at least pointedly ignored them. Once again it was Brockton Bay after dark, and few people wanted to see why a leather jacketed thug, a giant bodybuilder lady with three rangy mutts, and a midget dressed as a Jawa were running around in the middle of the night.

He stripped out of the hoodie and took the bow. Bayleaf had a moment of eyebrow-raising surprise; even under the Azeroth tunic Alec still wore underneath the fox-boy was startlingly broad across the back and shoulders. His arms were corded and thick for his size, especially his hands and forearms. Small or not, this was a creature built for pulling a bowstring.

Almost carelessly, Alec nocked an arrow, drew and fired. The split second before he released, Bayleaf saw a ghostly hunter's arrowhead form around the tip-- an Arcane Arrow, his memory supplied. The arrow shot across the field in a nearly flat arc and hit the first target with a thwack, making it bounce briefly on its wire stand.

Bayleaf whistled. “Fifty yards!” Bayleaf knew little about real life archery but in the game, that was the maximum range an archer could reach. He was clearly working with certain misconceptions about bowmanship. Even while he was squinting through binoculars to confirm the bullseye, Alec was nocking another arrow and sending it thwacking into the fake deer standing at the seventy five yard line.

In short order he nailed the inner ring on the target at the hundred... then the one out past the goalpost. Then the one past the running track. He sank a final arrow, the first that was NOT a bullseye, into the target leaning against the far fence. Bayleaf lowered his binoculars and whistled. “That makes it close to two hundred yards,” he said soberly.

Fennek's ears perked. “Seriously? Wow. I wasn't even trying...”

“Lemme see that bow.” Fennek handed it over. Bayleaf tested the pull. He grunted in surprise. “It's got to be at least thirty pounds,” he said, shaking his head. “I would have thought a bow this size couldn't be more than ten.”

He handed it back to Fennek. Fennek grinned, the expression on a vulpine face looking very uncanny. “Mind if I try out some of the fancier shots?”

Bayleaf shrugged. “What we're here for.”

Fennek nodded and nocked another arrow. This time he took a moment to aim, concentration on his face. The arrowhead glowed briefly golden. He fired.

_A thhe thunk Thunk Thunk Thunk Thunk Thunk_ Thunk

A volley, a storm of glowing arrows shot across the football field in a fan-like spray. Every target in range was hit, some of them multiple times. Alec whooped. “Did you see that?” he said. “That was awesome!” Even as he spoke, the dozens of arrows skewering everything in sight slowly faded from existence.

“Didn't go as far,” Bayleaf noted, pointing. “Looks like the furthest arrow went about forty feet. Which is a good thing, probably-- you don't want a few dozen stray shots sailing off for a mile, labeled 'to whom it may concern.'”
For some reason Fennek flinched, but then he nodded. “Yeah, I see that. More of an area-denial thing, that one.”

“So what else you got?” Bayleaf said.

Fennek thought for a minute. “Well... a lot of ’em require a living target,” he said. “I got several that disorient or stun or the like. I’ve got a flare arrow... hmm, might draw attention if I fire that one. A firework arrow-- sounds fun. A binding shot-- but without anyone to bind, not much point... hmm....” His expression cleared. “Ooh, this one sounds good-- a Sidewinder.” Thought and deed were one; he nocked an arrow, drew and fired.

Bayleaf watched in slack jawed surprise as a whizzing, buzzing something zigzagged back and forth across the field, striking target after target in a spurt of straw before finally embedding itself in the last one and sputtering away to nothing. When Fennek lowered his bow, a half-dozen targets were now leaking stuffing onto the grass through nasty looking double punctures. “Whoah.”

“That's cheating.” This came from Rachel-- Lok'tara-- who was sitting over on the bleachers, idly playing with her dogs.

“It is not...!” Fennek protested.

“Not if your power did everything,” Lok'tara said matter-of-factly.

“Hey, I had to aim and everything--”

“I'm... not sure what the advantage is of the second one over the first,” Bayleaf admitted, scratching his head.

Fennek shrugged. “The first one is pretty much ’spray and pray,’” he said. “the second one, I have to focus on which targets I want to hit.”

“So you could pick a group of gunmen out of a crowd of hostages,” Bayleaf said.

“Yeah, I suppose I could,” Fennek admitted. “But it'd be tricky. It's a whole different thing between picking what you want to hit-- and picking what you want to miss.”

Bayleaf thought about that for a minute before he got it. He winced. Just because you had an arrow that could turn corners didn't mean you could make it turn all the right ones. He wouldn't have wanted to wager on the safety of anyone walking out into the middle of the field when that last trick shot flew. “Still, sounds like something worth practicing,” he said.

“Still cheating,” Rachel said from her bench.

Alec turned and glared at her. “Look, I don't see YOU pegging bullseyes from a thousand feet away,” he said. “Fact is, I don't see you doing anything at all!”

Rachel didn't look up from her book. “Don't want to,” she reached over her shoulder and rapped the blade of the war-spear on her back. “I'm sticking with the spear.”

Bayleaf frowned a bit. “You're rated on bow, spear, and gun,” he said. “You really ought to at least--”

Still without looking up from her book, Rachel reached behind her and picked something up, holding it over her head. It was one of Bayleaf's handmade guns: a Huntmaster's rifle-- double barrel, underslung bayonet, scope, handcarved oak stock, brass and iron fittings, and all the gnomerigan
steampunky goodness one would expect. A gun aficionado who clapped eyes on its bastardized, neither-fish-nor-fowl design would have a conniption fit. A gun aficionado who actually fired one would have to have it pried out of his grasp with a crowbar. Combined with a full load of Azeroth ammunition, and powered with a Hunter's natural arcane affinities-- well, simply put Rachel could probably kill buildings with the thing.

“Not stupid,” she growled. “I got one. Just don't wanna use it much.” She looked up. “And people will hear gunshots if I test-fire it here.”

Bayleaf realized she was right and facepalmed. He'd been fixated on the school sports field because it would make it easier to measure all the physical abilities: how far, how fast, how high, how long. Naturally his tunnel vision had kicked in again and he'd completely forgotten that said while it was fairly distant from any houses, the sports field wasn't exactly located in the remote hinterlands either. Gunshots would bring people, namely cops, running.

The more important point at the moment was that Rachel, aka Lok'Tara, had obviously dug her heels in. She'd carry a gun, but as a Hunter she intended to be a hands-on girl, and that meant the spear. He held up his hands in surrender. “Fine. We will be testing your marksmanship, though. I'll feel a lot more comfortable knowing everyone on my side can at least send all the bullets in one direction.” He looked over at Alec. “You wanna try out the spear?”

Alec snorted. “Forget it. I ditched the pigsticker the Agents gave me. Let Sparky break it down for enchanting ingredients.” At Bayleaf's appalled look he said, “Hey, I'm three feet tall! The thing was as big as me! Besides, who do I look like, Scrappy Doo? Tiny person plus melee equals squashed tiny person. I'll stick to my ranged attacks, thank you!”

“Good point,” Bayleaf conceded reluctantly. He rubbed his chin and grinned. “Though as for the Scrappy Doo thing--”

“Shut it.” Alec pointedly turned his back and nocked another arrow.

Grinning, Bayleaf left him to his practice and went over to the bleachers where Rachel and her dogs were sitting. She didn't even look up from her book as he fished through his haversack--

With a start he realized that she was reading. Just a few weeks ago she had been functionally illiterate (and a bit hostile about it, for that matter.) Now here she was nose down in reading material. “Good book?” he asked casually.

She held up the book so he could see the cover. “Charlotte's Web,” she said. “My Mom used to read it to me... when I was real little.” ‘Before she abandoned me’ went unsaid. “I borrowed it from Taylor. Wanted to see if I remembered the story right.”

“It's a good one,” Bayleaf nodded. She apparently took that as a cue to return to her book.

When Rachel's Agent had made her deal, she had undergone many changes, both physical and neurological. Her borderline autism was gone; she could understand people again, make sense of their expressions and emotions.... But the one change that had made the most unexpected difference, almost a side-effect of the skills she had downloaded, had been her sudden literacy. The transformation had been extraordinary. She'd begun reading anything and everything she could get her hands on-- books, magazines, it didn't matter. If a scrap of newspaper was left within arm's reach she'd snatch it up and pore over it like she had discovered the Voynich Manuscript. The delight was clear on her face whenever she set eyes on a road sign or a poster in a window and was reminded again: she could read.
The world had opened up to her and she was never letting it close again.

Bayleaf regarded her. He listened to the thwip, thwip of Alec practicing his archery, interspersed with the occasional curse as a shot was flubbed and a target missed. He should be feeling proud that they were growing and thriving.

Instead, he felt… uneased.

Why?

“That’s easy to answer,” a voice said behind him. Bayleaf nearly jumped out of his skin. As it was he leapt into the air and spun around, knife and staff at the ready. It was Tattletale trotting up behind him. She was in civvies-- Jogging sweats and sneakers, earphones and fanny pack. She flicked the earphones out of her ears and tucked them away.

“What do you mean by that?” Bayleaf said, a little irritated at her using her cold-reading power on him again.

“Why you’re feeling so uneasy,” she said matter-of-factly. She plunked down on one of the bleachers. “You know all about us, or think you do; our pasts, our futures, or whatever our futures were supposed to be. But you got so caught up in ‘saving’ us all—” she made quote marks in the air with her fingers. “and now it’s sinking in what you’ve done, and you’re wondering if that was a really smart thing to do.” She smirked. A smirk seemed to be her default expression.

He started to say something, stopped and started to say something else, then gave it up for a lost cause. He sighed. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Well, was it?” He said. His gaze didn’t waver.

Her smirk fell away and she got serious. “You’re smart to worry,” she said. “Hell, we’re all damaged goods. But it’s Alec that worries you most. Truth? He worries me too. Did even when we were just the Undersiders.”

“I know. His dad… broke him in a dozen different ways.” Bayleaf’s stomach roiled as he recalled some of the things Alec had described to him during one of his breakdown jags. Things his father had done to him; things his father had made him do. “The Agents healed the damage, put his brain back in proper order… but…

“But he also got every indulgence, too. Let him try every vice, taste every forbidden fruit in the freaking orchard. And after all, his dad doesn’t lead that sort of life himself without enjoying the hell out of it. And Alec… Fennek…”

“I’m worried that once he gets all the pieces of himself back together, he’ll decide he liked it.” he muttered.

A recurve bow flew past his head, clattering against the aluminum seats. Bayleaf jumped to his feet and spun around; Fennek was standing at the foot of the bleachers, fists clenched and trembling with rage. “Is that what you think of me?” he shouted. “You think I’m just waiting for an opportunity to turn into that sonuvabitch?”

Bayleaf felt guilt pierce him. “You heard that?”

Fennek cupped his hands behind his overlarge ears. “You think these things are for picking up
“HBO?” he snapped. “You really think that of me? That I want to be another Heartbreaker? I hate him! I hate everything he did! I have nightmares about the things he made me do! Where do you get off thinking that about me, just because I’m not some sunday school choir boy? Is that it?”

“I have to think that about **everybody**, Fennek,” Bayleaf snapped back. He ran his massive pawed hand down his muzzle. At some point in the argument he’d shifted back to worgen without thinking. “I’m basically trying to gather a team of heroes to save the world,” he sighed. “And look what I’ve got! Half of us were, or were going to become, **supervillains**. You were a custom-made sociopath. Rachel was a half-feral autistic with a murder rap hanging over her head. Lisa is a crook with **chronic Riddler Syndrome**—”

“Riddler Syndrome?” Lisa said.

“You couldn’t just commit a crime, you have to prove how much smarter you are than the good guys,” Rachel said. “Like the Riddler always having to leave word puzzles for the Batman.”

Lisa stared nonplussed at the orc girl, her jaw working silently. "I HAVE taken up reading, you know," the orc muttered sullenly.

“Lei Ling is an ex nazi villain. Aisha was a petty thief and juvenile delinquent on the express track to juvie hall,” Bayleaf went on. “And her brother— Brian is the most serious and responsible of us all and he was dumb enough to think he could buy a better life for them both with a life of crime.”

Bayleaf laughed humorlessly and dug his fingers into the ruff of fur on the back of his neck.

“Shar’Din is an ex-junkie, Shen is the *son* of a Nazi warlord, and had the self-esteem crushed out of him. Greg, he’s got a good heart but he’s so socially clueless he makes Armsmaster look like a sophisticate. Glory Girl and Panacea… let’s just say that the Dallon clan has more issues than a lifetime subscription to TV guide. and Taylor— Taylor was so traumatized by the abuse she suffered that she was left borderline suicidal.”

He realized he was pacing back and forth and stopped. “Did I ever tell you about what Taylor did in baseline? In baseline she soloed *Lung* on her first night out as a hero.” The others went wide-eyed at this. "She fought Endbringers. She became a criminal warlord who controlled several square miles of Brockton Bay. She took on the Slaughterhouse nine. She even killed Alexandria, single-handed. And on Golden Morning, she telepathically enslaved every cape on the planet and used their united powers to kill Scion.”

The others gaped at him. “What kind of freaking powers did she have?” Lisa said in disbelief.

Bayleaf grinned at her. The lupine smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Bugs,” he said. “Baseline, she had the power to control bugs.” He waved his hand. “Within six blocks, I think it was, at her peak.”

“She did all that with bugs?” Alec said faintly, somewhat horrified.

“And now, thanks to my influence, she’s traded in her bug-power for the powers and skills of an invisible, teleporting, superhuman assassin,” Bayleaf said bleakly. “That can’t be good for her headspace. Heck, between the Agents and the Tinker devices, I’ve upgraded ALL of you to levels that should be absolutely frightening to anyone with common sense.” He gave the vulperan archer a stern look. “Alec, do you realize that right now you could kill a stadium full of people with a bow and arrow? You, all by yourself, in less than a minute. With nothing but a bow and arrow.”

Fennek looked up at the bleachers, pictured himself unleashing one of his volley-of-arrow shots into them, and swallowed, looking a little green.
“So yeah,” Bayleaf went on. “I’m thinking like that. I kind of have to. A lot is riding on this. Everything is riding on this.” His shoulders slumped a little. “I’m sorry, Alec. It’s not personal, it’s just… inevitable.”

“... I don’t care,” Fennek said. "I don’t care what you think or what you're afraid of. I’m not my father. I’d rather die than become him," Fennek said, sullen and defiant. “I felt that way before I turned little and fuzzy-wuzzy, and I still feel the same way after. So keep your suspicions to yourself.”

Bayleaf nodded, relenting. He realized that, in a strange way, ‘Regent’ probably had a more steady ethical and moral keel than the rest of them. In the original timeline he had remained loyal to the Undersiders, had avenged them against their enemies, had even finally sacrificed himself to save their lives-- not because he was motivated by some obscure emotion like gratitude or guilt, but because he had decided, coolly and unemotionally, that it was part of his moral code: that he was supposed to be loyal to his friends, and so he would be…. Even to the death. High functioning sociopath, indeed.

Rachel snorted. “If we’re all so unworthy,” she said, “why’d you help us anyway?”

“It’s not about being worthy.” Bayleaf sat down-- picking up the bow and throwing it back to Fennek first. The vulperan turned his back and began plunking arrows into targets again, the set of his shoulders all but shouting ‘I’m ignoring you.’

Bayleaf grunted. “You know, when I first decided to help Taylor, I had to ask myself, ‘What if I mess things up? Shouldn’t I just let things play out like they did in the main timeline-- at least till she triggers?’ After all if I had, she’d end up with her bug powers, she’d still be able to become Khepri and defeat Scion…If I just went in and tried to do the right thing, then I might throw everything off-track.”

“But then I decided ‘screw it. I’m not here to play it safe. I’m here to help people, and to hell with the consequences.’ If I only did the right thing when I was absolutely sure it’d turn out the way I wanted, I’d never do anything. In which case I might as well not even be here.” He looked away. “The same way, If I only helped people I thought ‘deserved’ it, I wouldn’t help anybody.

“You might take the help I gave you and go on to become good people and great heroes. You might take it and throw it back in my face. But that’s on you, not on me. What IS on me is to do the right thing, no matter that you don’t know how it might turn out.

“Either everybody deserves help or nobody does;the final equation works out the same either way… so you might as well help.” He tapped his knuckles to his chest. “That’s MY code. It's not much but I'll stick to it as best I can.”

Fennek huffed in disbelief. “What, so if we all get sane, decide ‘screw this save-the-world thing’ and run off to hide in some deep dark hole till its all over?”

“Then the job gets a whole lot harder and the world probably dies,” Bayleaf said simply. He shrugged. “The world might probably die anyway. All we can do is keep trying to tip the odds further in our favor.”

“You’re counting on the fact that this is the sort of problem you can’t run away from to keep us from ditching you,” Lisa said knowingly.

“I’m counting on the fact that nobody runs around leaping from rooftop to rooftop dressed up in silly longjohns because they think they can’t change anything,” Bayleaf said, giving her the side-eye and a knowing smirk of his own. He tossed her a Gatorade from his haversack. “As bad as your choices
were, you still all chose to get up off your duffs and do something to change your fate.” He flipped another Gatorade to Rachel, and one to Alec. He followed up with a couple of water bottles for the dogs. “So here’s to kicking your heels against Fate.” He cracked open his own bottle and chugged it down.

“You’re a strange man, Bayleaf,” Lisa said.

“Thank you for noticing,” he retorted.

Rachel rested her chin in her hand for a moment. She spoke up. “We need pets,” she said. Everyone blinked at the non sequitur. “Pardon?” Bayleaf said.

“Me and him.” The orc girl nodded at Fennek. “We’re hunters, remember? You’re worried about us being out of balance? Well if we’re hunters we need our animal companions to be properly balanced. So we need our pets.”

Bayleaf grunted at the reminder. It was true. Azeroth hunters all had animal hunting companions—sometimes several. The hunter bonded with the animal, and could even channel some of their power through them. “But what about your dogs?”

Rachel looked down at Judas, Brutus and Angelica, who were noisily slurping water out of bowls she had procured somewhere. “They’re too small now,” she said a little sadly. “Without my old Power, I can’t change them anymore. They couldn’t keep up.” She patted Angelica on the shoulders; the scruffy little stray stopped drinking long enough to shower her hand with doggy kisses. The dog looked absolutely tiny next to her massive hands.

She was right. Her scruffy pets, brilliantly trained as they were, were no hunting animals. They wouldn’t last five seconds in a serious fight. “Yeah. If you’re going to get your companions, we’d better start looking now.”

“So where do you plan on looking?” Lisa said. “I don’t think you’re going to find anything suitable at the local PetLand.”

Bayleaf grimaced. “Well, I have a couple of ideas—” he stopped and looked over his shoulder. “Will you stop shooting for a minute, Fennek?” he said, irritated. “Ooo, ‘explosive shot?’ Not tried that one yet.” Almost idly he flicked off another shot.

“You gave it to me,” Alec snarked. “‘Explosive shot?’ Not tried that one yet.” Almost idly he flicked off another shot.

“No WAIT--!”

Whatever Alec had been expecting, he clearly hadn’t been expecting what came next. There was a startlingly loud VISSSSsSSSSSHHHH, and a slow moving streak of fire leapt from his bow, shooting down the football field. There was a brief pause, then a thunderous BOOM as several of the makeshift targets they set up disappeared in a ball of flame. Alec crouched there, his frizzed out tail curled around him, ears laid back and eyes round as saucers as the sound echoed through the neighborhood and the red glow lit up the sky. Bits of straw and styrofoam deer rained down. “Holy--”

“Well, I think this conversation needs to continue someplace else far away from HERE,” Bayleaf said, his voice unnaturally high. He grabbed his bag.
“Ya think?” Lisa snarked.

As police sirens rose in the distance, the quartet skedaddled.

“It was late, and twilight had set in. Bayleaf had made his way out to the Pelham home to meet with Panacea, in hopes of consulting with her on their little pet problem. He had been lucky to catch her outside, working in the oversized greenhouse out behind her aunt and uncle’s home. He felt a bit less lucky, though, when she’d decided to tell him what she thought of his plan.

“Are you out of your mind? Blasto is a HACK!” She punctuated her sentence with jabs in the air from the garden tool in her hand.

“He’s… unpredictable, I’ll give you that,” Bayleaf said. “But he’s not overtly malevolent at least. And he’s willing to do contracted work…”

“Why do you even need to go to him?” Amy demanded. She poked at several of her plants in distracted agitation.

Bayleaf rolled his eyes. “Because several of the… abilities… that Azeroth hunters use require a bonded animal companion,” he said. “A hunter going out without one bonded animal is like going into a boxing ring one-handed and with one eye covered.”

She paused in her garden hedgehogging. “Seriously? Wait, you’re saying they form some sort of-- psychic bond?”

“Limited Master ability,” Bayleaf confirmed. “They can sense their animal partner, see through their eyes, issue commands— even funnel some of their arcane power into them to heal them or increase their defense or attack abilities.

He sat down in a nearby folding chair. “Problem is, your average Terran pet species isn’t as hardy as an Azeroth one,” he said. “Not as strong or tough or smart— remember what happened to the last K-9 dispatch that tackled Hookwolf?” Amy cringed. “Yeah. That’s just dandy if you don’t mind using dozens of animals for woodchipper fodder, but I don’t think either of us would be too happy with that.”

“So you need a biotinker to custom-build a couple of animal companions for your teammates,” Amy concluded.

“Or upgrade them,” Bayleaf said. “Make them strong and smart and tough enough to at least have a fighting chance.”

“So you came here first, so you could emotionally blackmail me into doing it,” Amy said, heated. She stabbed her trowel into a nearby pot of earth and left it there.

“Pretty much,” Bayleaf confessed. “I’m sorry, Amy. But my choices are kind of slim. The options
boil down to you, some unprincipled biodork like Blasto, or letting them bond with a baseline animal that will be torn to pieces the first time we run into a supervillain.” Amy only growled at him.

Bayleaf let her stew a bit and looked around them. The greenhouse was packed with flora of every possible size and shape. “...What is all this, by the way?” he said. “I recognize the healing tree saplings, but everything else—” he shot her a quick look and grinned. “You’ve been experimenting a little bit, haven’t you,” he said, pleased. “With your powers.”

She nodded, pleased. It was almost startling how her mood changed. “I managed to get tentative approval for the healing trees from the PRT,” she said happily. “Not to make them self-reproducing yet, but saplings grown from cuttings are clear. They’re going to be going into hospitals all over the United States. I was surprised at how quickly they approved them!”

It didn’t surprise Bayleaf quite as much. It was a rough and dangerous world, which was why any super with any form of healing power got so much extra leeway. Trees that shed a continual “healing aura” year round, and only required a little bit of dirt and water? They were bound to jump on that with both feet.

“... And, well, since the trees got such good reception, I’ve started trying other things,” she babbled on. “Mostly silly stuff, but I’ve never had so much fun...”

“Silly stuff?”

“Yeah, well--” she stopped and picked up a small, oddly mottled pumpkin, still attached to the vine. “Turn off the lights?” Bayleaf obliged, hitting the nearby switch on the greenhouse post. He blinked in surprise at what the dark revealed. “A glow-in-the-dark pumpkin?”

“A self-illuminating jack-o-lantern!” she said gleefully. “The glowing blotches make a face, see?”

“I think the glowing roses are more impressive,” Bayleaf said, pointing. A small rosebush stood in one corner, covered in glowing blossoms in a dozen colors. The edges of the petals glittered like burning embers.

“Oh, yes, Aunt Sarah loves those,” Amy said. “I did a lot of bioluminescent projects first, as you can see.” She waved a hand, indicating the rest of the greenhouse; it was lit up like a fairy wonderland. “It seemed the safest to start with, a way to get my toe in the door-- even baseline geneticists are fooling around with that. They use it as a genetic marker in bigger experiments, actually...”

Bayleaf nodded. It was a sensible plan: start with areas the public and the PRT were already familiar with, get them used to it before moving to more daring stuff.

“Of course I did a few other things too-- my cousins have had all sorts of ‘suggestions.’ She flipped the lights on and pointed to another rosebush, this one with blossoms the size of cabbages. “Would you believe Aunt Sarah requested that one as a gag gift? She said she wants it just so she can see the looks on the neighborhood Garden Club’s faces...”

Bayleaf snickered. “I can just see it,” he said. He stepped over and cradled one of the head-sized blossoms to his cheek and pretended to take a selfie. “Hey, Ingrid-- guess who’s NOT winning the rose growing competition THIS year, bitch!” he cackled in a nasal falsetto. “Nyaahhaahhahaha!”

Amy nearly folded double laughing. “She’d do it, too!” she said. “But it’s Crystal and Eric--”

“Laserdream and Shielder?”

“Yeah. Ever since I started... well this...” she waved at the greenhouse again. “it’s like they’re
having a contest to see who can come up with the craziest ideas. Some of the stuff sounds like it came straight out of Willy Wonka.”

“What, like, edible chocolate flavored roses for Valentines day?” Bayleaf guessed.

“Oooh, that’d be a good one. But… no, stuff more like this.” She held up a half-grown watermelon. Bayleaf noticed that it had pips all over the outside, almost like a strawberry. “A watermelon with the seeds on the outside!” Amy said gleefully. “Even ‘seedless’ watermelons have those little white things in them-- this way you can have your seedless watermelon, and plant for next year’s crop too. Just bury the rinds!” She looked briefly crestfallen. “Of course this version is still sterile. I haven’t gotten approval for self-reproducing ones yet… Oh, and then there’s this.” She reached over and plucked what looked like an orange off a climbing vine. She set it on the shelf next to her elbow, pulled a knife out of her work belt and cut it in half.

Bayleaf didn’t need anyone to identify the scent that hit his nostrils and his mouth watered. “Is that steak??” he said in disbelief.

Amy nodded. She peeled the rind off a slice and flipped it over; a perfect inch thick cut of what looked like grade A beef, blood raw. “Tender as filet mignon, too.” She looked up at him. “Grill you up a slice?” she said with a knowing smile.

To his embarrassment the wolfman realized he was licking his chops. “Ahem. I’ll hold off for now.” Chuckling, the healer threw the sliced Steak Orange into the minifridge she had set out in the greenhouse. His eyes suddenly went round. “Say, if you can make meat grow on a plant like that, what about--”

“Straight blood or plasma? Bone marrow, spare kidneys, eyeballs, that sort of thing?” She finished for him. “Well, I can do it, but there are drawbacks.” She grimaced. “It’s a lot more involved, for one thing. And the ‘plant’ is more finicky, has more fickle nutritional needs and care requirements. And, well,” she hesitated. “The plants inevitably come out looking… meaty. “

“Like an H.R. Giger art project?” Bayleaf suggested, his imagination filling in the gaps. She nodded, grimacing all the more. “Ew. Though, come to think of it, that ‘finicky’ and ‘needs special care’ issue might be a selling point.” At her puzzled expression he explained. “It reinforces the idea that they can only grow under laboratory conditions.”

She made an ‘I get it’ sound, nodding. “Not something you want growing out in a cornfield, anyway. But still better than having to wait for an organ donor… yeah, I think they’d be more comfortable with something that could only grow in a clean-room.”

Bayleaf took note. The change from the girl he knew from just a few weeks back was astounding. That girl had been tired, listless, and constantly stressed. This one was actually cheerful and energetic, and obviously happy with what she was doing. Just spreading her wings this small amount, power wise, had worked miracles. “You’re a lot more confident with your powers now,” he said.

“Yeah, I...” she seemed to withdraw a bit. “I always knew I could do this sort of thing-- and so much more.” She looked down and away as if she were afraid to meet his eye. “I was afraid to… if I lost control, or went too far...”

“And now?”

“I dunno.” She hopped up and planted her jean-clad backside on one of the wooden shelves, leaving her feet dangling. “It’s kind of like riding a bike the first time without the training wheels. You’re
scared spitless when Daddy finally lets go of the seat, but the next thing you know you’ve pedaled all the way to the end of the street and you turn around and come back and you stop without falling off, and bam!” she clapped her hands together. “You’re a bicycling master. You never have trouble getting up on a bicycle ever again. You even wonder why you were ever afraid.”

“And the next thing you know you’re doing all this, right?” Bayleaf nodded at the almost-alien greenery all around them.

“Yup.” Amy nodded and gave him a wry grin.

Bayleaf paused. "And how are, you know, family things going?" He rubbed his hands on his hips awkwardly.

Amy sighed. "Not perfectly," she admitted. "It looks like my move is pretty much permanent." She waved at the greenhouse around them. "As if the greenhouse sitting in my aunt and uncle's back yard wasn't evidence of that." She shrugged. "And Vicky... well, she's still staying in that little apartment or the Lost Workshop-- is she paying you rent? I told her to pay you rent. She hasn't got a job, but she's got a trust fund and a huge expense account from merchandising through New Wave, so--"

Bayleaf waved it off. "It's no problem. And your Mom and Dad?"

Amy crossed her arms and sighed again. "Carol still blames me for Vicky moving out," she confessed. "After a couple of nasty scenes at our 'family meetings,' Aunt Sarah and Uncle Neil had to read her the riot act. She's... civil, now. Though I will say she's not taking it out on my biotinkering; she goes to bat legally for everyone in New Wave, same as always, and that includes me. She's the one that actually arm-twisted the PRT into letting me set up the greenhouse, in fact. I guess she's finally convinced I'm not going to go Bonesaw or Blasto on everyone. At least not THIS week."

"Well, that's good. It's a start, at least, I suppose." Bayleaf rubbed his hands together. “Sooo... What I was asking earlier, when I asked whether you’d help us-- was all that a yes?"

Amy huffed, blowing a lock of hair out of her face, and glared at him. “Look, it’s a big step, going from fiddling with plants to fiddling with animals. Biologically, and ethically. I’m, I’m going to need a little time to think it over."

“And to maybe to order some white mice to test some ideas on?” he said, cocking and eyebrow and giving her a doggy smile.

She growled at him. “Rrr. Yes, darn it. You knew I was going to end up saying yes, didn’t you,” she grumped.

“I kind of guessed,” he confessed. “Going by what I know about Powers-- especially yours. Above all else they want to be used.”

She looked unhappy at the reminder of the terrible truth about the origin of parahumans. “Wish you didn’t bring that up,” she complained. “I spend so much time trying to forget that my powers aren’t really ‘my’ powers; that they’re some—some alien, hyperspace living-computer thing hooked to me by my corona pollenta... ” she scratched at the top of her head as if she were trying to get at the connection with her fingers. “--and some evil space whale thing could just yank it out of my head any moment like he was pulling a cartridge out of a game console--” She looked seriously discomfited at the idea.

“Actually I think it’s more complex than that,” Bayleaf said. “I think that once the Shard connects to
you from its extradimensional pocket...merges with you to some extent. Becomes a part of you, like-- I dunno, like a download expansion for windows or maybe an app... anyway. You incorporate it, but it incorporates some of you in return.” He laced his fingers together. “Integrated.”

“Really?” Amy looked skeptical.

“It would explain why the Shards got damaged—destroyed—when they were disconnected from Taylor and the Undersiders,” he said, shrugging. “Probably also why the Space Whales have to wait until the Shard hosts die—or till we’re all killed in the Golden Morning—before they can gather the Shards back up. And why the Shards Glastig Ustaine steals from dead capes look and act so much like the Capes they used to belong to.” Both of them shuddered at mention of the terrifying ‘Fairy Queen.’ Years ago she had surrendered herself to be imprisoned in the Birdcage, and never a happier moment had been celebrated in the Cape community.

“I’m not sure whether that’s a comforting thought or not,” Amy admitted. “But like I said: give me a few days, okay?”

Bayleaf nodded. “We’ll need that time to decide exactly what we need anyway.”

“Where are the rest of the crew, anyway?” Amy asked.

Bayleaf smiled and ducked his head. “Sort of scattered to the four winds at the moment,” he said. “Everyone had something to take care of tonight—personal or family or the like.” His ears flicked a bit in the canine equivalent of a blush. “And, ah, Taylor and I are doing a, uh, little patrolling-slash-errand running together. Her first night out. Er, well, since that thing with Lung. Hopefully it’ll be a little less exciting. She’s waiting outside. She didn’t want it to seem like we were pressuring you.”

Amy made an “aha” sound in the back of her throat. “Well, you two have fun now,” she said. “And try not to get into any trouble out there.” She waved her trowel at him. “I don’t want my next gardening project to be growing either of you a new spleen.”

Bayleaf chuckled. There was a faint flash of octarine light, and a giant horned owl flew out through the open skylight.

Up on an office rooftop, two men stepped out of the shadows. They weren’t in costume, save for some cheap halloween masks, but it was obvious by the way they moved that there was armor of some sort under their trenchcoats and they were both wielding guns—ridiculously huge guns that wouldn’t have looked out of place among the cosplayers at a comic book convention. It was highly doubtful that these particular BFGs were rebuilt out of spray painted Nerf launchers. Uber was carrying an oversized gym bag along with his BFG. The skinnier one—clearly Leet—was wearing some sort of high tech goggles. They had to be infrared goggles of some sort, as he was looking straight at the shadow Bayleaf was hiding in. “Come on out,” he said. “You wanted this dance, no point in being a wallflower now. And I mean BOTH of you. Don’t bother bluffing about your partner up on the air conditioner,” he added, pointing to where Taylor crouched, cloaked in stealth. “I can see their thermal shadow just fine.”
Bayleaf calmly stepped out into the moonlight, his cloak swirling around his feet. Taylor did as well- but only after she had teleported to stand right behind him. Leet started visibly when she stepped around from behind Bayleaf, seemingly out of nowhere and several yards from where he’d been watching her heat signature. Bayleaf smiled to himself. *Clever girl.* She was making it clear to all present that Leet’s anti-invisibility goggles weren’t as big an advantage as he thought they were.

Of course, Bayleaf wasn’t going to mention he in turn could easily see Uber and Leet’s supposedly invisible hovercam, or that he could spot the camouflaged robotic gun turrets covering them from the shadows as clearly as day. *Always keep a card up the sleeve.*

Uber and Leet were probably Brockton Bay’s most famous… or infamous… outlaw capes. Uber had the Shard of Mastery; he could master any trainable skill all but instantaneously; how long he retained those skills, if at all, was an open question. Leet was a Tinker with the Prototype Shard… given the right materials he could build one of literally anything. ONLY one, and once it broke down (and usually rather quickly) he could never replicate his work. But it still left him with an absolutely staggering array of options. The two were obsessed with video games, and made their semi-ill gotten gains by committing pranks and crimes using a video game theme, recording them with their hovercam, and then posting the resultant videos online. While their success-to-failure ratio for heists leaned dismally to the latter end of the scale, they more than made up for it with the revenue their illicit videos pulled in. What loophole they used to keep from being pulled off the web was an utter mystery, but it was hard not to be impressed by how they’d managed to beat the system-- for them, crime really **DID** pay, mostly in ad revenue and viewer donations.

Adrian wasn’t about to lower his guard around these two. Fans of the Worm-verse were wildly fond of Uber and Leet, seeing them as wacky, light comic relief. What got glossed over was that canonically the duo were in fact criminals who weren’t above armed robbery, kidnapping, assault and battery and possibly worse crimes. In baseline they had willingly done things like mugging streetwalkers for a Grand Theft Auto reenactment, and mercenary work for homicidal lunatics like Bakuda and Coil. Just how ruthless these two, in THIS timeline, actually were was yet to be determined.

Bayleaf squinted at the two. This first meeting was just tossing out feelers. Whether Uber and Leet could provide the resources he was after-- and whether they were themselves salvageable or not. He held out hope. But if they crossed the line, they wouldn’t make two steps past that line before Bayleaf was all over them like a wolverine on a raw steak.

They apparently didn’t take well to having a werewolf squinting at them; they shifted on their feet and hefted their weapons in agitation. “You got the stuff?” Bayleaf said.

Uber unexpectedly snorted. “Si, senior, wee got thee stuff eef you got thee moneys,” he said in a passable Speedy Gonzales. Bayleaf heard Taylor groan as Leet started snickering.

“Just set it down there,” Bayleaf said, pointing to the rooftop halfway between them. “Let’s take a look at it.” Uber shrugged the strap off his shoulder and dropped the bag to the rooftop, then backed away. Bayleaf stepped forward, kneeling down by the bag. As they’d practiced, Taylor silently stepped away and to the side. She had one of the Gnomish long guns in hand and was keeping both Uber and Leet covered. She might not have been able to do any of the arcane tricks with it that Lok’Tara or Fennek could, but blowing large holes in things was still within her skillset.

Bayleaf sat down cross legged and started unzipping the bag. “Hey, back off now, where’s the money?” Leet said impatiently.

Bayleaf looked up at him. “This is a test run for this little arrangement, remember?” he said. “I told you on PHO I’d need to test this stuff to see if it was what I need. That’s why I only told you to...
bring a bagful of your old busted stuff.” He opened the bag and looked in, then up at Leet. “This IS just your old busted stuff, right?”

“Yeah...” Leet said, uncertain. It wasn’t surprising he was confused. It was definitely an odd sales pitch.

“Well then, if this is a bust the worst you can say is that I helped haul out some of your trash,” Bayleaf muttered, fishing around inside.

Uber snorted again. “You’d need a backhoe to make a dent in his piles of crap,” he said.

“Hey--!”

Bayleaf grinned. Already his enchantment senses were telling him this was promising. He pulled out what looked like a cyberpunk frisbee with a melted bite taken out of it. “Okay, what was this?” He asked.

“Tron fighting disk,” Leet grumbled, not looking at him. “Made to ricochet indefinitely until it hit a living target, than disintegrate in a burst of sparks and teleport itself back to the user.” He almost sounded wistful. “It was cool while it lasted...”

“And this?” Bayleaf set down the disc on the roof and held up a burnt out cube with wires sprouting out of it.

“Solid light hologram projector. It only projected in blue, but that was enough for making the holograph girl from HALO...”

“And this here?” the cube went next to the disc. This time, he held up what looked like a red and white mushroom.

“Mario growing mushroom. It turned you twice your height once a day if you bopped it. It worked on principles similar to Fenja and Menja’s Power... you know, Kaiser’s insta-grow bimbo bodyguards? At least what I can remember. It worked about twice before it crapped out.” Leet’s voice was as sour as that of a child being forced to review his homework after a failing grade.

“Hmm.” Bayleaf pulled a thin copper rod out of his pack. It was about as long as his forearm and thick as his little finger, and was covered in what could either have been ancient runes or futuristic circuitry. Muttering, he tapped the end of the rod to the broken disc. There was a loud, musical and oddly familiar “DING”, and the disc disappeared in a cloud of sparkles, leaving behind a strange chunk of stone half the size of his palm. It almost looked like obsidian, save it was colored like the midnight sky and glimmerings like stars could be seen in its depths.

“Hah! An ethereal shard,” Bayleaf gloated in triumph, snatching the stone up and dropping it into a glass jar he procured from his haversack.

Leet shook his head and wiggled his finger in his ear. Uber gawked in shock and almost dropped his gun. “The hell was that?” Uber demanded.

“Exotic matter,” Bayleaf said. “Very exotic.” He repeated the proceedings with the cube, then with the mushroom, yielding a greenish glowing chunk of something that refused to keep the same number of sides and corners, and a pile of glowing pinkish powder that he carefully scooped up on a sheet of paper and poured into a jar. “Temporal glass and mystery dust! Gentlemen, I do believe we have a deal!”

Leet suddenly slumped sideways into the air conditioning unit next to him, the barrel of his BFG
scraping the roof. “Leet!” Uber exclaimed, leaping to his partner’s aid. “What is it, man?”

Leet shook his head and thumped the heel of his palm against his temple. “Whuoh, that was bizarre-” He blinked, then his eyes went round. “Holy. Holy CRAP. I remember!”

Everyone present stared at him. “Remember what?” Uber said for all of them.

“I remember how to make the Tron Disk,” Leet said. “Heck, I know how to make it BETTER. And the holo-Cortana? And… yeah, the growing shroom… Holy crap, Uber, I remember how to make some of my inventions again!”

“Holy crap!” Uber said.

“What? What what?” Bayleaf said. He looked over at Hemlokk.

Bayleaf shrugged, just as confused. “Don’t ask me,” she said.

Uber was busy helping Leet lower himself to a sitting position on the roof. The Tinker was cradling his head going “Oh Em Gee” faintly over and over again. “You don’t understand,” Uber said over his shoulder. “Leet’s Tinker Power has really bad limits--”

“Uber--” Leet protested.

“Hey, it’s not like everybody doesn’t already know your powers are borked, bro. They might as well know the details,” Uber faced them. “Everybody knows that Leet, well, he can only make one of anything. Well part of the reason is, once he builds something, most of the information gets… well… redacted.”

“It’s like vital parts of the blueprint get erased,” Leet chipped in. “And yeah, even writing everything down doesn’t do any good. I’ve tried. I come back later and the notes might as well say BANANA BANANA POTATO POTATO. The know-how… just isn’t there.” He blinked, rubbing his head. “But the instant you turned those busted bits into whatever-that-was…. Well, it was like the blueprint in my head for a Tron Disk just popped into focus, and all the black ink blotting out the instructions vanished. I’ve even got new ideas, how to improve it…”

Bayleaf scratched his head, baffled. Then suddenly he dope-slapped himself on the forehead. “Of course!” he yelped. “It makes perfect sense!”


Bayleaf rolled to a crouch, his hands gesticulating wildly. “Leet, if your power had a name it would be “PROTOTYPE,” he said. “So think about it. What do inventors and researchers DO with a prototype?”

“Mothball it so that the adventurer can find and uncrate it just in time for the big boss battle?” Leet replied, puzzled.

Bayleaf facepalmed. “Not in games, in real life! You make a prototype, you don’t keep building more and more prototypes-- you take the first prototype and test it to destruction.”

“Of course!” Hemlokk said. She at least saw where he was going, Bayleaf thought with pleasure.

“That way, you find all the flaws, the defects, the points of failure and places for improvement,” Bayleaf went on. “Then when you’ve run the prototype into the ground you go back to the beginning and build a new prototype. Lather, rinse repeat.
“Except you’ve not been doing that, have you?” Bayleaf said, pacing in a circle as the thoughts tumbled out. “You’ve been holding on to everything-- either hoping you can fix it someday, or out of sentimentality--”

“Uh, yeah, actually,” Leet confessed, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

“We have two secret lairs,” Uber cut in, his voice dry. “One for us, another for all his broken crap he just can’t bear to throw away.” Leet growled but didn’t deny it.

“But your Power’s been keeping track, and it won’t let you redo anything until the prototype is destroyed.” Bayleaf leaned in, making Leet lean back in surprise. “That’s what your Power’s telling you. That’s why more and more of your inventions blow out sooner and sooner. Your Shard-- your Power-- is trying to tell you that you have to completely finish with a prototype. You have to clean the slate before you start over.” Bayleaf grinned at him, tongue lolling. “And now that you’ve started doing that-- accidentally, mind-- you can start going back to the drawing board again.”

“Really?” The hope in Leet’s voice was almost woobiefying. “Are you sure??”

“One way to find out.” Bayleaf dove back into the gym bag. Six more broken, burnt out or outright blown-up trinkets, and Leet’s corona pollenta was bubbling with six usable concepts he never thought he’d see again. The hard-luck Tinker was practically weeping with joy.

“So why does this work?” Uber asked as Bayleaf continued converting broken Tinker toys into exotic matter. “Breaking or smashing the things wasn’t enough?”

“Leet’s Shard is probably keeping inventory,” Hemlokk said, speaking up suddenly. “Or just Leet’s subconscious is betraying him. So long as he has his prototypes in some form he thought of them as to be repaired....” But destroying the prototype so thoroughly as we do probably crosses the threshold. His power probably doesn’t trust him to let the things go otherwise. Um, so to speak.” She fell silent again, but her little speech garnered a few stares-- and a few nods of agreement.

“So let’s talk turkey, gentlemen,” Bayleaf said with a toothy grin. “Our opening offer is this.” He plunked a stack of hundred-dollar bills as thick as his fist on the duffel bag. Next to it he dumped a handful of melted down gold and silver ingots. It worked; it was making the two drool greedily and pinning their attention on him. “You feed us Leet’s old junk, and we recycle it-- and clear his Shard’s buffer in the process. We also give you a monthly retainer to do odd jobs for us. Heck, we might even slide you some Tinker gear of our own.” He shook one of the jars, making the glittering tesseractines inside jingle. “Stuff you won’t find anywhere else on this plane of existence.

“In exchange for that? You work for us now exclusively. No taking contracts from other capes.” His smile vanished. “Especially not from villains. You go working for Lung or Kaiser or Coil or Bakuda… well, I probably won’t have to track you down because those psychopaths will probably kill your stupid behinds. If you’re lucky. If you’re not-- I WILL be after you.” His glare said the rest quite succinctly. Uber and Leet gulped. Clowns they might have been, and far more ruthless than most thought, but they weren’t stupid. They knew what the Warcrafter had done to the Merchants, and they already knew they didn’t want to be on the wrong side of his ire.

“Second---No more video crimes. We can pay you more than you’d make doing that crap anyway. But you’re on the Light Side of the Force from now on, get it? You can keep on running your video pranks-- but you vet them with US, first. No more robberies, no more heists--”

“No more beating up hookers for some Grand Theft Auto reenactment,” Hemlokk growled in a sinister rumble.
Leet held up a finger. “In our defense those were pre-paid stunt doubles!” he protested. Hemlokk glared. “Uh. Kinda.” he added weakly. Hemlokk continued to glare. “Okay, so we basically bribed some ABB hookers to take a dive.”

“They figured a black eye and a couple of bruises was worth splitting the take with us instead of their johns for once.” Uber said. “We offered a better percentage.”

Bayleaf relaxed a bit at that. “Take a dive?” he repeated, inquisitive.

Uber snickered. “We had to. The last time Leet got in an actual fistfight with a hooker she punched him out.”

“UBER!”

“Dunno what he said to her but she spun around and-- BAM!”

“UBER!!”

“Laid him out for like, five minutes...”

“ARGH.”

“So gentlemen,” Bayleaf said, raising his voice over the growing squabble. “Do we have a deal?”

The two gamer capes looked at each other. Then they each held out a hand. “We’ll want it in writing though,” one said.

Bayleaf crossed hands and shook with them. “That we can arrange.”

“So what do you need this stuff for anyway?” Leet said, picking up one of the enchanting jars and watching the contents swirl in non-euclidean patterns.

Hemlokk crossed her arms under her cloak and gave him a wry half-smile. “Nothing much,” she said casually. “Just preventing the end of the World.”

“Wait. What.”

Greg… No, Vindicator when he was in armor… swallowed nervously and stepped through the rusting double doors and into the warehouse. The room was dusty and cobwebbed but bare, cleared out to the walls as requested. The only things there were a few folding chairs, a collapsible table with a few cups and bottles on it, and-- yes, there they were. Faultline’s crew. Faultline stood dead center, kitted out in her welding mask. Gregor the Snail stood to one side, Newter and Spitfire to the other. Seated in front of them, Faultline’s hands on her shoulders, was a blonde haired girl in a green robe with a mazelike pattern drawn on it--- that had to be Labyrinth, Greg guessed.

Holding his hands up in a gesture of peace, Greg walked over to where the group sat. The welding-masked woman looked up at him-- up! Greg was never going to get used to being tall-- and regarded
him. “You Vindicator?” she said.

Too nervous to speak, and VERY glad that his helm completely covered his face, Greg simply nodded. He poured out the small bag of one-ounce gold ingots on the nearby table as proof of payment. Faultline looked it over and nodded; Gregor moved in and whisked the meager bag of gold away. “Your partner-- or boss, or whatever-- arranged this with us,” Faultline said. “six hours max down the rabbit’s hole. Ten grand in gold up front, one tenth of your take afterward, whatever ‘the take’ is. Agreed?” Greg nodded his understanding. “Good. Hook him up, boys.”

Gregor and Newter stepped forward and began setting up the one other thing in the empty warehouse: a giant motorized winch. Newter pulled out a climber’s harness and began fitting it over Greg’s armor, while Gregor reeled out a few dozen yards of cable-- along with a length of rope. “Once you go in, the rope will be your only line of communication, if you’ll pardon the pun,” Gregor said. “Two tugs for more slack, three tugs for less. Be warned, if Labyrinth starts having trouble, we’ll have to reel you in fast, and without warning.”

“And, ah,” Newter interjected as he hooked the end of the cable to the carabiner on Greg’s harness. “We’re not sure but we think some of Labyrinth’s worlds are inhabited.” He paused meaningfully. “Leastways, we’ve seen things in the distance that look like eyes...”

“If in the extremely unlikely event you do encounter any, er, inhabitants-- just pull on the rope like mad,” Gregor reassured him. “We’ll reel you in tut suite.”

“If I encounter any ‘inhabitants’ the cable motor will have to race me back up out of the hole,” Greg muttered nervously. The two men chuckled and slapped him on his armored back.

“Ready?” Faultline asked.

“Ready as he’ll ever be,” Newter said.

“Wait--” Greg turned and clanked over to where Labyrinth sat, seemingly staring into space. He took a knee in front of her, wincing internally at the clumsy clang of metal on concrete, and carefully took one pale hand in his own. “M’lady,” he said sincerely as he could manage. “You... render us all a great service with this. You have my deepest thanks.”

To his surprise and delight her eyes seemed to focus on him, and her face dimpled into a smile. It was brief but it was there. Then her eyes focused in the distance again, looking beyond him, a faint shadow of the smile lingering on her face.

He got to his feet and turned to face the far wall. “Okay, honey,” he heard Faultline say to the enigmatic girl. “It’s your show now.”

Slowly at first, but with increasing speed, the far wall faded away in jagged blocks, revealing a strange and startling vista beyond. Jagged rocks in strange, twisted formations-- jutting up out of the ground, or in some cases floating detached above it-- dotted with odd glittering outcroppings. The horizon was filled with distant stony peaks, bright ribbons of grass trailing between monoliths of stone, all under a sky too blue to be of Earth. In the furthest distance, the shattered remains of a vast mountain hovered in midair, as if parting faith with the fickle earth and rising to meet the pale moons overhead. A breeze, faint, cool, and sweet, blew through the storeroom, making all of them lift their heads and breathe deep in spite of themselves.

Greg pulled his pickaxe out of storage, walked resolutely to where the normal world demarcated into this alien landscape, and stepped across.
He marched a few hundred feet out and looked back. The real world-- or at least the warehouse in it- was still there, a jagged hole in the air through which he could see Faultline’s crew watching his progress.

He trudged to the nearest glittering outcrop shining in his Mining Sense, raised his pickaxe, and brought it down with a crack.

Joey was leaning on the counter at the local Pet Megamart (“Open 24-7 for your Pet’s NEEDS!”) watching the clock stand still in boredom, when he was accosted by a pair of ears.

Two fuzzy triangles appeared over the countertop. “Yo,” they said to him. “I hear you got pets for sale?”

Joey stared for a minute. He slid forward, looking down over the edge of the counter to see what the ears were attached to. He stared some more. There appeared to be a bipedal fennec fox (he felt inordinately proud of being able to identify the species) in a hoodie staring up at him. “Um,” he said brilliantly.

“Look, you do work here, right?” The fennec scowled. Yes, it was speaking; Joey saw its lips move.

Joey sputtered a few moments, then managed to get out; “Um, okay, please, I’m not up for any cape weirdness--”

“Look I’m not robbing the place or heralding an army of super-short werewolves or whatever it is you think capes do,” Fennek snapped. “I just wanna know if you have pets for sale here, and can I see them?”

“Yeah, sure,” Joey finally gave in. “Just… all in the back of the store… that way...” he waved feebly. “If you need any help--” he almost managed to say it without his voice cracking.

“Yeah yeah yeah, whatever,” the fox-midget grumbled, trudging on past. He left Joey standing where he was, debating fiercely whether it would be wiser to lock himself in the managers’ office or just hide under the register.

Alec prowled through the aisles of pet food and chew toys to the back of the store, vexed. It was almost disorienting sometimes, going from who he’d been to who he was. Things that wouldn’t have made him turn a hair before were setting him off all the time now. Fits of anger, crying jags-- he’d kill Tats if she told anyone about those-- even the giddy highs could be exhausting…

Hopefully finding an animal companion would help him, he didn’t know, level out?

Rachel-- “Lok’Tara”-- had been right. He knew it. He was a hunter, an Azeroth hunter. Bonding with a hunting animal, or even several, was second nature. Well, second nature to his new nature. Whatever. Bayleaf had been making noises about having Panacea or Blasto custom make some
hunter pets, or maybe upgrade something (like what? A couple of hunting hounds, or something?) to be strong and tough enough to run around with a bunch of Capes.

He didn’t know about that. But he did know something… he didn’t know if it was some sort of new hunter-instinct, or just him being himself…

…but he was lonely. Maybe a pet would help fill in that gap inside him.

He got to the pet section of the store and found himself surrounded by cages, terrariums and pens. What would be a good match, though? He considered the dogs in the glassed in displays. Lotta puppies, all sorts of breeds. But considering what he saw in the mirror every morning now, that’d be kind of weird. And considering his own size, he didn’t think it’d be particularly smart to buy a pet that when it was full grown could use him for a chew toy-- or a snack.

And Toy breeds? Ugh. Any breed small enough for Alec to control easily was exactly the sort of dog that earned his disgust: ratty little psychotic purse-dogs, deformed mutant horrors, the lot of ’em. As entertaining as having a horde of shrieking chihuahuas and pugs nibbling nazis to death would be, he didn’t think he could stand having even one of the shaky, bug-eyed things around him otherwise. There was a reason Alec thought of combat boots as “poodle squishers.”

He considered the terrariums. He had a brief vision of him flinging a turtle like a frisbee into battle. “Attack, Donatello!” --nah. Snakes? Oh heck no. Even the iguanas didn’t seem to have much on the ball…. And didn’t reptiles need warming lamps and stuff? He didn’t think he could get much use out of a hunting companion that needed to be pre-heated an hour ahead of time.

A parrot would be an interesting idea. He wondered if his hunter-bonding powers would let him teach it to deliver spoken messages? Or maybe he could just teach it to cuss in French…

Jump jump jump POUNCE sister!

Fun! Jump jump brother jump gonna catcha!

Catch YOU!

No, catch YOU!

He was staring into the soulful eyes of a basset hound pup when he heard it… or, more like felt it. Things halfway between thoughts and feelings and words, almost like an echo or a faint ringing in the back of his ear… he turned in place, scoop-shaped ears swiveling, trying to pinpoint the source. It was coming from an open pen at the end of the aisle. He trotted over. Inside were a pair of ferrets, a male and a female, tumbling over each other and rolling about in the excelsior as they played. Their squeaks and chitters were accompanied by bursts of the sounds/thoughts/feelings he’d been sensing-- not hearing-- before.
He grabbed one of the store workers’ step stools and rolled it over to the side of the pen, and climbed up. The moment he could look down inside, the two ferrets stopped tussling with each other, sat up on their haunches, and looked up. Looked up at him.

*Friend friend newface friend play?*

*Friend play? Play play play!*

He could hear/sense/feel what they were saying/emoting now, as clear as day. Fascinated he stuck his arms down into the pen. The two obviously recognized an invitation-- or saw an opportunity--- and leapt onto his arms, rapidly climbing up his sleeves to his shoulders. As small as he was there was hardly room for the both of them on his shoulders; they soon ended up diving down in the hood of his sweatshirt, squirming over each other for room and popping up to rest their forepaws on his head or lick and nibble at his ears. “AGH haahahahh! Stoppit!”

He danced around in a circle, making several fruitless efforts to grab the two, till suddenly they climbed out of his hood and down to rest in the crooks of his arms. They were both suddenly perfectly still, staring up at him with shiny, shoebution eyes.

*Friendnewfriend?Newkin?*

*Newlitter?Newfamily?*

He froze for a moment. It was like having a question answered before he asked it. “Yeah.” he said, with what felt like the first genuine smile in days. “Yeah. You two are perfect.” He held his hand over their heads and cast the bonding cantrip.

There was a flash of octarine light, and the Bond snapped in place, sharp and crystal clear.

*FamilyUS!*

*BrotherSisterMasterUS.*

*Newfamily.*

Fifteen minutes later he was pushing a cart loaded down with ferret food, ferret treats, ferret toys, ferret medicine, ferret grooming tools, ferret leashes, ferret beds, several books on ferret care and a jumbo two story deluxe “ferret suite” cage, oh, and two happily hyper ferrets, for the front door. Joey the Cashier was alternating between greedily fondling the two solid-gold one ounce ingots he’d received as payment, and rattling off all the last minute New Ferret Owner Advice he’d memorized in training. “Okay, they’re brother and sister, from the same litter-- it’s really good you got them both; ferrets do okay solo but they’re better off with a playmate--”

“Oh huh.”
“--they’re both neutered and descented, and they have all their shots--”

“That’s good.”

“--You will need to teach them to use a litter box--”

“Important tip, thanks.”

“--And if they take to chewing on anything, use the bitter apple spray to deter them--”

“Great, yeah, thanks, enjoy your gold G’BYE!” Fennek rolled the cart out the door. The door swung shut behind them with a jingle; freedom at last. He reached behind him and scritched Fidget’s ears. Fidget (the male) and Gidget (the female.) Perfect names. He looked around the parking lot.

“Dang. Now how do we get home...” His hand fell across the hearthstone in his pocket. “Oh, right. Fidget, Gidget, hold on.” He eyed his cart full of ferret boodle. “Man, I hope this thing takes cargo...”

Karl didn’t like driving through Brockton Bay. The traffic was killer. The roads were a mess. And any long haul trucker worth spit knew that driving through anyplace with a Cape-to-luckless-bastard ratio as high as Brockton Bay was begging for grief. Even when you were hauling legit cargo, that was begging for some villain with a master plan-- or a stroke of stupid-- to hijack your rig and steal your cargo. But when you were on the wrong side of the law like Karl usually was, that just meant the cops were worse than useless and heroes were as big a threat or worse. When you hauled contraband, you were on your own.

There was a reason Karl rode with a shotgun under his dash, a revolver on his ankle, a knife sheath down the back of his pants and Tank in the truckbed.

Normally he’d be delivering a load like this to a harbor further South. But somewhere in the chain some jackass had gotten the usual drop point raided, so they’d had to hash out an alternate route. Through Brockton Bloody Bay. How they were going to get contraband-- live contraband-- past the squeaky-clean Brockton Bay Dockworker’s Union was beyond him. Not his problem though. He’d just drop the trailer at the docks, collect his pay and get the heck outta dodge before it all hit the fan.

He was tooling through downtown (thank God it was after dark, otherwise he’d have been stuck in a traffic jam till he was old enough to be Carbon dated) when he caught a glimpse of a couple of PRT Capes out on patrol. As casually as someone driving a sixteen wheeler could, he promptly took a side road down the back streets and alleys of the city. Now there was a chance he might have been driving right into their patrol route…. But he doubted the PRT would let its little fashion-plate heroes go anywhere there was, you know, actual CRIME. Capes were tourist attractions for rich people. So he cursed the luck and took a more roundabout route to the harbor.

There was no sense taking chances. This town was freak central. Hell, a few blocks back he’d spotted some enormous green chick in a local park, feeding the squirrels--

Before he even finished the thought there was a rattling of chain, a whistling noise and a gigantic spear with a blade the size of a shovel fell from the sky, skewering his engine block like the lance of
a wrathful God.

His peterbilt jerked to a halt as if it had hit the end of a chain, smoke and steam boiling back over the cabin. Karl cursed and coughed, trying to wave the smoke reeking of diesel and antifreeze out of his face as it started seeping through the air vents. “What the f--” he choked.

Then an enormous, eight foot tall green woman with TUSKS slammed down on the hood of his truck and roared through the windshield at him.

Karl, he would feel no shame in admitting later, screamed like a little girl. Before he could grab for one of his weapons the gargantuan green woman grabbed hold of the edge of his windshield and cab roof and ripped them off like she was peeling a banana, leaving him exposed to the night sky.

He screamed again and grabbed for his shotgun-- she had the barrel in her massive fist before he could bring it to bear and bent it double. “I HEARD THEM,” she growled.

He grabbed his pistol out of his ankle holster and raised it up. Her fist closed over it. The gun made a weak popping sound like an exhausted firecracker. She grunted in pain, blood-- green blood-- leaking from her fist. Then she squeezed. Karl shrilled as she crushed the gun and his hand both. “I could smell their pain from across the STREET,” she snarled.

Sobbing in fear he reached behind him with his free hand and went for his knife. He brought it around in a clumsy right-handed stab… only to have her slap the blade away. It went spinning off into the dark, never to be found. She grabbed him by the front of his sweaty, grease stained shirt and hoisted him out of the ruins of his truck, then leapt down to the pavement.

She marched to the back of the trailer, dragging Karl along one-handed like he was no more than a particularly ungainly suitcase. She held him up in a loosely standing position at the back gate and shook him. “OPEN IT!” she bellowed.

As Karl whimpered and fished around with his good hand in his pockets for his spare keys, his lizard hindbrain was giggling in glee. Once those doors opened, Tank would show this mutant cape bitch a thing or two--

After a dozen fumblings he managed to unlock the back gate. The green giantess threw him aside scornfully as the doors swung open… only to roar in surprise when an enormous snarling pair of jaws came lunging out of the dark at her face.

Karl looked up from where he lay bleeding in the road and saw Tank’s jaws clamp down on the green bitch’s arm. “That’s it, Tank, eat ‘er up!” he yelled gleefully. Tank was a full-grown by-the-Almighty Mastiff-- a cross between a bull mastiff and a motherloving English mastiff, and more massive than either. He weighed in at nearly three hundred pounds and Karl had seen him tear up and pull down some of the biggest, baddest meanest men you could imagine, from would-be border cops to Hell’s Angels.

But to his growing horror, the green giantess was NOT going down. She was just standing there, her feet spread to anchor her, a gigantic snarling mastiff the size of a small horse latched onto her bleeding forearm, and snarling right back into its face like it was an annoyance.

They held that pose for several seconds, seconds that felt like minutes. Even a lunk like Karl could sense something odd was happening. To his bewilderment, Tank’s thrashings were stopping, his snarls and growls fading away as the green monstress glared him in the eye. Finally, he let go of her forearm and dropped to all fours, docile as you please. He whined and gave the monstress’ bleeding arm a perfunctory lick, as if apologizing for attacking her. The she-beast actually smiled and ruffled
“Yeah,” she said in a deep gravelly voice. “You’ll do.”

Karl watched in mind-fried shock as she climbed up into the truck, with his dog tagging along at her heels obedient as a well-trained puppy…

Rachel hoisted herself up into the truck and looked around. It was too dark to see at first; a few punched holes in the walls and ceiling let enough light in to see around. What she saw made her growl with rage. Inside were over two dozen cages, varying sizes, twelve to a side. Inside the cages, beaks and wings bound and claws tied to keep them from making noise, were two dozen wild raptors.

Rachel had always been a dog person. Not that she had anything in particular against other types of animals (people, on the other hand… well.) But she’d never really reached out past man’s best friend. But once the Outer Space Lights had… fixed her, she’d noticed that she could start to understand a little bit of what people meant when they said “seeing the world through others’ eyes.” She could finally “get” human emotion and interaction; she could “get” that other living things felt and feared and suffered and loved. She could see the world through others’ eyes.

And what she was seeing through the eyes of these poor birds was ugly indeed. Her first instinct was to tear the cages open, snap the restraints, let them all fly free… but she could see that they had been trapped back here in these cages for days, in the cold and heat and dying of thirst—- they wouldn’t last five minutes trying to fly off on their own.

No. She’d have to fight down that impulse, and do the smart thing. Call the authorities, they’d bring people who could care for the birds and nurse them back to health.

She was about to back out of the truck when something about one of the cages caught her attention. Carefully, she opened the cage. Inside lay a massive bird of prey, its dark golden plumage ruffled by its poor treatment. It’s eye, though, was bright and alert and never left hers.

Gently she lifted the bird out and undid the fastenings binding it. It made no move to resist her or to attack her, just watching her with one golden eye. She pulled a bottle of water out of her bottomless pack and carefully dribbled water into the birds panting beak. It swallowed, swallowed again, seeming to revive with every sip. Soon it was rustling its wings, trying to right itself. She let it try to stand. Even as weak as it was, it stood on her arm and tried to mantle its wings.

Sky

Free

Nest

Home
Sky

Home

Your name is Sky,” she said to it. “And you are perfect.”

For the second time, she triggered the Bonding cantrip.

Several minutes later Karl saw the giant green woman climb down out of… what was left of his truck. She had bandaged her arm (the hell had she found bandages?) put some sort of leather gauntlet over it, and now had one of his mother-frickin’ Golden eagles perched on her arm. He started cussing and swearing up a storm.

He choked it off when she came marching over to him. She looked down at him. “Who were you taking these to?” It was an idle question, asked in curiosity.

“The hell do I know?” Karl snapped. “Some rich oil sheik somewhere wanted a bunch of birds of prey for the aviary in his palace. I don’t sell ‘em, I just ship ‘em.”

She held out her hand. “Phone,” she grunted. Meekly he handed over his smart phone. She dialed briefly and held it to her ear. “Police,” she said to whoever picked up. “Got a smuggler here, fourth and Vine in a busted truck. Send Animal Control, tell them to be ready to care for a couple dozen sick birds.” She glowered at the phone, obviously not pleased at the response. “You heard me! Endangered birds. Raptors. Hawks. Eagles.” She paused again. “Good. Oh, and send an ambulance too.” She crushed the phone in her fist like a packet of soup crackers and dropped it to the pavement. She turned and began walking off into the night, his eagle in her arms and his dog at her heels.

“Hey!” he yelled. “Where are you going with my bird?? With my DOG??”

“My bird and dog now,” the answer came back. She left him alone to cradle his bleeding, maimed hand and wait for the cops.

Boss?

Rachel looked down at the massive mastiff plodding beside her. “Yeah?”

New Boss? New Boss Good Boss?

“Yeah.” A smile formed around her tusks. “I’ll be good to you both. Promise,”

No more Dead/Dying stinky box? She caught a mental image/sight/sound/smell of the back of the tractor trailer, reeking with the ground in stink of countless dead and dying creatures smuggled over the years. Of a dog’s memory of countless dark and lonely days spent in the swaying trailer with no companionship but other, dying, animals...

“No. No more.” She thought for a minute. “Is your name Tank?”

No. No Tank. Tank BadDog. She caught a flash of guilt over the bite still on her arm.
“Then what?… What do you like?”

Truck!

*Truck good! Truck Zoom!* --A flash of memory, happier days, sitting in the passenger seat of the big rig rather than the trailer, sights and sounds and smells whipping past the open window. *Truck make happy! Baroo!*

“Fine. I’ll call you Truck.”

*Baroo!*

She smiled as her thumb rolled over the hearthstone in her pocket, triggering her ride home.
Chapter 21

Taylor took a deep breath, inhaling deep of the faintly salty night air. Ten thousand scents, all of them named, numbered and filed in her mind, filled her nostrils. She sighed, smiling, hopped on her toes twice, ran to the edge of the rooftop and leaped.

She threw her arms out to the side and with a loud \textit{fwump} of cloth catching the wind her cloak unfolded into an enormous pair of wings. With a whoop she began circling, climbing in the updraft rising off the city streets below.

For not the first time she reflected that Adrian seriously underestimated his own gift as a Tinker. He’d scoff, and say that his skills were nothing but memorized formulas and blueprints downloaded into his brain… but then he’d go and make something like this. His “rudimentary engineering knowledge” was enough for him to take the crude Azeroth designs for a parachute cloak and a goblin glider, incorporate the exotic Tinker materials Parian had access to-- such as the light, flexible “memory-metal” making up the bonelike struts in the cape-- and create something totally original and unique: a Glider Cape.

\textit{“Not a real Tinker,” my furry airborne tushy, Taylor thought smugly.}

She wasn’t flying “swimmer” style like most flying capes. Instead she hung cruciform, her arms straight out to the side, her hands holding the “wrists” of each batlike wing (which coincidentally served as the attitude controls) and her body and feet dangling below. It looked a little nontraditional and was a little less aerodynamic, but truthfully made a lot more sense. Among other things it meant that she led with her feet instead of her face when coming in for a landing. Speaking of which…

Her launch had been from the top of one of the downtown skycrapers; she was now fast approaching the roof of a three-story department store on the edge of the shopping district. She stretched her legs out in front of her as the rooftop rushed up to meet her. Her powerful digitigrade legs absorbed her impact as perfectly as the pistoned landing gear on a jet. At the instant her clawtips touched the graveled roof her wrists flicked in a certain way. Her glider-wings briefly mantled around her, bleeding all her forward momentum, then collapsed back into shapeless cloth, wrapping around her like a shroud.

There was a faint hoot far above. Out of the overcast sky down flew a giant horned owl that settled gracefully on the rooftop before transforming back into a midnight black werewolf in a forest green robe. Skinwalker. AKA Bayleaf, AKA her boyfriend Adrian Smith. She gave him a wolfish smile; it still gave her a little warm tingle to think those words. “Nice landing,” He told her. “Spot anything that needs our attention while you were up there?”

“Er, no,” she confessed with a sheepish eyeroll. “Sort of got caught up in the whole flying thing...” He didn’t say anything; he just grinned. Something about his expression told her that he’d done the same thing more than once himself. She wondered what it was like to fly for real-- not glide, actually fly with your own wings…for not the first time she felt a twinge of regret that they hadn’t ended up with two worgen druids on the team-- the idea of them flying together…

“Hemlokk?” Bayleaf waved a furry hand in front of her face. “You okay?”

She started. “Oh, sorry,” she said. “Just woolgathering, I guess.” She looked out over the city. “It’s a quiet night.”

Bayleaf shook his head. “Only a Brocktonite would call three muggings, a couple of attempted
break-and-entries and a drunken four-way brawl a ‘quiet night,’” he said, making quote marks in the air with his claws.

She huffed, not sure if she was amused or annoyed at his estimation of her home town. “So how did I do, Teach?” she said.

He shrugged, flicking his ears. But his tone was tinted with respect. “You came, you saw, you kicked butt,” he said. “Those muggers never saw you coming. And those four thugs brawling in the bar parking lot never had a chance.” He wasn’t lying. She had ported… ‘flash stepped,’ he insisted on calling it… right behind each of her marks and rendered them unconscious with a carefully targeted blow before they even saw her. He grinned suddenly, tongue lolling. “My favorite was the two guys trying to break into that electronics shop…”

It was close work, picking a door lock by flashlight. Kudos to them for not simply taking a crowbar to the latch. The two men crowded into the narrow doorway, whether to block the telltale light with their bodies or just in an eager press to be first through the door when the lock gave way she couldn’t say. She had just leapt down from the fire escape overlooking their little escapade when one of them happened to glance up and see her hooded and cloaked form drop down to the sidewalk.

“Oh shit, it’s Shadow Stalker!”

She’d known that the mistake was inevitable, but the shock of actually being mistaken for her own worst enemy had actually brought her up short. She cursed under her breath as she realized her momentum was broken (then cursed again as she realized she’d forgotten to slip into her invisible ‘stealth’ mode before leaping down.) Growling to herself she stalked forward, shifting her intent from a quick takedown to some batman-style intimidation. “You wish,” she growled, weapons loose in her hands and her eyes glowing yellow.

The two men got distinctly alarmed and went for their weapons as she came closer and they got a better look at her glowing eyes, the alien shape of her digitigrade legs and the gleam of her fangs. “Oh shit, that’s NOT Shadow Stalker!” the second one said, scrabbling for a pistol in his belt.

She BLURRED forward. Faster than the eye could follow the pistol was knocked flying into the street and its wielder flattened into the sidewalk, the wolf-woman left standing in a crouch on his back. The first man squealed, turned and ran. He got to the corner before she leaped, closing the distance instantly. A double strike from her batons and his weapon of choice-- a length of lead pipe--was gone and he was left clutching broken fingers. He staggered back into the wall of the building behind him. “Who ARE you, bitch?!”

“BITCH?” she seized him by his shirt front and slammed him into the brick wall, pinning him in place by a baton across his throat. “I’m not a bitch--” she said. Her hood fell back and her head lunged forward till his nose was almost touching hers, the sodium yellow of the street lamp above revealing the face of a snarling, furious werewolf. “My name is Hemlokk, and I’m THE Bitch, little man!!” she bayed into his face, her gleaming fangs snapping.

“--And right before he passed out, he actually started making noises like Curly from the Three Stooges,” Bayleaf said, chuckling. He did an imitation of the man, flailing his arms around. “Himimeneimememineee!!”

Hemlokk snorted back her own laughter. “Oh don’t make me laugh,” she said. “If I start I’ll never
She grinned back at him. “It was pretty funny though.” Her smile shrunk a bit. “That fight at the bar, though. That wasn’t so funny.”

Bayleaf nodded. That hadn’t been any little fist fight; knives and at least one steel chain had been out when they arrived, and more than a bit of blood was already spilled. Tonight had been for Hemlokk, but Bayleaf had been of a mind to intercede first-- but Hemlokk had beaten him to the punch, leaping into the middle of the parking lot (sending the onlookers running off screaming-- whether in fear of the ‘werewolf’ or of the Cape, he couldn’t say) and begun flash-stepping between the combatants, disarming and disabling them with swift ruthless strikes. She had fumbled though with the last one when a jabbing blow with the taser at the end of her baton had failed to drop the burly biker.

She sighed and looked down at the baton in her left hand. The ‘low charge’ LED had long ago stopped blinking and had gone dark. “I didn’t realize the charge had run dry. I really need to trade these in for better equipment…”

Bayleaf nodded. His heart had stuttered to a brief halt when Hemlokk’s taser-strike to the biker’s thick gut had failed to drop him. Thankfully Hemlokk hadn’t been left flatfooted; a quick feint backwards to dodge the thug’s retaliatory strike with his switchblade, and then a lightning-fast high kick to the chin, and the guy had finally folded like the rest. Still, it had been alarming. Foolish of him to worry-- the enchantments on her blouse alone made the weapons they’d wielded laughable-- but still. “Well, Greg and Theo-- ahem, Vindicator and Shen-- “ he coughed as he remembered his Cape manners. “Have been working together, Vindicator was chattering this morning about how a lot of stuff was almost ready, ‘especially for Hemlokk...’ wanna head back to the Workshop and see what they’ve got so far?”

Hemlokk smiled and put her burnt-out batons away. “Yeah, I think I could call it a night,” she said.

Bayleaf whipped out his phone and dialed. “Sparky?” He paused and sighed patiently. “Okay, Shar’Din? Me and Hemlokk could use a lift back to the shop… no, our hearthstones are set for different locations-- we really need to all sit down and discuss that... Spare a mo for a summon?… Great.” He hung up. A moment later a shimmering oval appeared in midair over the rooftop. With a flourish he gestured for his lady to precede. She leapt into the shimmer and vanished, Bayleaf right behind her. The portal hung there for a moment longer, then slowly faded away.

Since forming the “Alliance,” the Lost Workshop had undergone a rapidly accelerating metamorphosis. The cluster of warehouses that had once crowded out and hidden the relatively tiny shop were now little more than a false front, a shell disguising the real structure within. Adrian had moved swiftly, buying up the mismatch row of warehouses, knocking out the connecting and interior walls and inserting new rooms, effectively turning the buildings into one large construction then replacing most of its innards with a ramshackle warren of workspaces.

As begun, so continued; most of the rooms were made from converted steel shipping containers. All of them together had made it swift work; take the crate, lay some plumbing along the base of the walls and electrical wiring along the ceiling, put in some flooring, add openings and connectors for water, septic, electric and gas and the like, cover the interior walls with insulating panels, and you had a prefab room… one you could customize into a mini-apartment, a studio, a workshop, or anything else you needed with little effort.

The other Warcrafted had been a little unenthused at the idea. But they changed their tune once Fennek called dibs on the first one. The others had watched in astonishment as the hedonistic Vulperan had taken a wad of cash out of his ‘mad money,’ hit Ebay and Amazon, and proceeded to convert one half of the 8x8x40 box into a tidy, almost spartan one-room apartment… and the rest into the plushest gaming and movie room any of them had ever seen, complete with jumbo screen...
TV monitor, cable, internet, gaming consoles, surround sound, recessed lighting, huge plush recliner seating, and popcorn and soda machines within arm’s reach, just ‘cause.

Once they saw just how adaptable-- and comfy-- the modular rooms could be, the rest had begun clamoring for one or more of their own. Soon there was a warren of about a dozen of the modular rooms, spreading out from the central workshop and stacked atop each other like children’s blocks, linked by doors, walkways, crude balconies and welded-on metal stairs. They had begun stringing wiring for lights but a momentary brainstorm had led to them running creepers of Adrian’s glowing ‘ghost vines’ everywhere instead. The soft pervasive glow was hailed roundly as a vast improvement over hanging bulbs or fluorescent tubes. Other Azerothian style improvements for climate, ventilation, sound buffering, water filtration and other comforts were hailed equally.

There had been surprising ripple effects from this little home improvement project. It had been easy enough to obtain the shipping containers; Brockton Bay’s harbors were practically swimming in them. About fifteen, twenty years ago Leviathan had made his appearance, and worldwide nautical shipping went into freefall. The sailors, harbor workers and others most dependent on Brockton Bay’s harbors for their wellbeing had reacted poorly. In a bout of incredible stupidity, some of the protesters had decided the best way to protest the collapse of local industry was to hijack one of the enormous cargo vessels and scuttle it in the deep channel mouth of the Bay, effectively marooning all the ships in the harbor and blocking it to all major shipping. Hundreds of ships were left stranded, eventually abandoned by their now-bankrupt companies, and the docks left stacked high with empty cargo containers no ship would ever load again.

Adrian, or rather, Azeroth Ltd, had moved in and bought the steel containers off the city as “salvage,” for less than a penny on the dollar. They only needed a dozen of the things (and it had been easy peasy to have the things trucked to the warehouse row and popped inside) but Adrian had made a point of having the dummy corporation buy the whole lot, just to cover their tracks better. Of course that left the dummy corporation in possession of something on the order of several thousand cargo containers that had to be disposed of in some fashion within a certain time, or various fines, taxes, fees, etc. would accrue.

It had been Taylor’s father who had seen the results of their work and had noted that there were all sorts of people salivating to get their hands on cheap, affordable ready-to-go emergency housing, and even the bare-bones version of their modded cargo containers would be vastly superior to the shoddy trailers, pop-up houses and mobile homes used now...

The next thing Danny Hebert knew, there had been a small tornado of government paperwork, and now the Dock Workers Union was employed by Azeroth Ltd., and incredibly busy hauling empty cargo containers in, sanding off the rust, painting them, adding doors, windows, wiring and plumbing, and rolling them out to be hauled by train to wherever they were wanted. And everyone wanted them. FEMA wanted them for emergency housing. Corporations wanted them for on-site temporary workshops. Penny-pinching or energy-frugal private citizens wanted them for cheap, energy efficient homes. Not-so-paranoid-after-all survivalists wanted them for their camps and bunkers...

They soon were making money hand over fist. It was all they could do to just sit there and watch in goggling disbelief as their fake company rapidly became a real one-- all through a simple if clumsy effort to disguise the renovations to their superhero lair…

They had started (very very discreetly) hiring office workers to handle the day to day business, taking in the orders and handling the paperwork. Grue, who’d started out as the “face” for the company, suddenly had an entire genuine office growing in place underneath him. It was a tossup whether he was more thrilled or alarmed at his sudden elevation to corporate respectability. Much to
his relief he was still effectively just a "face;" the real decisions of Azeroth Ltd. were still being made by a group of Rogues gathered around a folding table in a hidden workshop in Brockton Bay.

Lisa on the other hand was as busy as a one-legged woman at an asskicking contest, finding ways to shuffle that money around, tucking it away in ‘discreet’ offshore accounts and various other tricks to hide the real final destination of all that lucre from their adversaries and enemies-- and consequently from the Government and the IRS.

The more conscientious members of their little group-- Chiefly Danny Hebert and Taylor-- had nearly gone into hyperventilating shock when they realized they were committing tax fraud against the United States government. The more ruthlessly pragmatic members of the party (Tattletale and Fennek) had broken them out of it by pointing out, rather sarcastically, that selfsame government had written laws that made pretty much any employment more lucrative than flipping burgers illegal for Capes. Furthermore, their enemies (like Coil, Kaiser, and Cauldron) had been doing everything they were doing and worse, for far more ignoble reasons, and doing it with the aid of the Government itself.

"The government where politicians use private charities as slush funds and suck up donations from foreign powers," Lisa had added. "The same graft-ridden, corrupt Government that wrote laws forcing all of us to either resort to government slavery or a life of crime just to survive. And frankly any government that would want to throw us all in the Birdcage for getting rich making affordable housing for the homeless can just go pound sand up its aft port come tax time."

"Yeah, and maybe you forgot that the so-called leaders of the world are under Cauldron’s thumb?" Fennek had chipped in. "The President himself is on their leash and barks when they say ‘speak.’ Right now, there is no legitimate government." That had been a show-stopper.

The Vulperan, Adrian reflected as they came in for a landing, had a knack for stating utterly horrible truths as tactlessly as possible.

The portal they had leapt through came out in an empty circular chamber about fifty feet across, where about seven or eight unused tunnels intersected underground, right below the warehouse row. A six-foot monolith of rough-hewn stone with a single, glowing rune carved in it stood in the center of the space. Shar’Din stood next to it, his hand resting on its surface; Lei Ling stood on the other side with her hand next to his. “Welcome back,” she said with an annoyed sigh. “Bout time you two lovebirds quit running from rooftop to rooftop and got back here.”

“Why, what’s up?”

“Pretty much everything all at once,” Lei Ling said with a roll of her eyes. “Greg and Theo finally crawled out of their lair, babbling about how they had a ton of stuff to show everyone. Lisa says she’s about hit the limit on how far she can push Calvert in his civilian identity-- but she’s pretty sure she’s figured out a way to neutralize him as both Calvert and Coil. Parian’s here...”

“Yeah, she and I just finished that special project,” Shar’Din said, grinning like a fool. “I can’t wait to show you all.” he led the way down one of the tunnels.

“What about you?” Bayleaf said to Lei Ling.

“Altogether we’ve got about two hundred major healing potions bottled,” she said. “about a quarter that many of each of the ones Greg calls stat-boosters-- stamina, intellect, agility, strength. A pile of mana boosters for Sparky, just in case he starts jonesing.”

“What about scrolls?”
Lei Ling sighed. “I dunno exactly. I’ve just been scratching them out and piling them up. It’s been kind of a dilemma, deciding what herbs get ground up for potions and which ones we can spare for inks...”

“We should probably start focusing on more inks,” Bayleaf mused. “Scrolls are lighter and will store longer.”

“You and Shen have been piling up enchantments pretty good, too,” Hemlokk noted.

Bayleaf grunted and grimaced. “Most of which are just us recycling the rejects from everyone’s crafting skills,” he said. “The really potent enchantments are still pretty sparse. It’s still difficult finding sufficient ingredients.”

Enchantments and Inscriptions could both be stored on parchment or vellum for later use. However Enchantments were more or less permanent enhancements to be cast on clothing, armor, jewelry or devices, while inscriptions, with a few exceptions were generally temporary effects cast upon the person themselves. Inscription used milled inks made from plants with potent exotic qualities. Enchantments were made from far stranger stuffs, largely non-baryonic materials and even stranger things-- crystallized time, solidified Void, essences of various elements and more.

Between them, though, the work areas were getting piled deep in neatly-rolled scrolls...

“Oh, and Lok’Tara and Fennec found their first Hunting Companions,” Lei Ling added with a roll of the eyes. They’d reached the end of the tunnel; a spiral metal staircase continued upward.

“Lok’Tara and Fennek were running around town?” Hemlokk said. She was understandably alarmed; a giant green orc woman and a midget were-fennec might just cause a scene out in public, even in Brockton Bay. “Oh crap. Were there police involved?”

“Not as much,” Lei Ling said. For some reason she seemed amused. “But I think we’re now officially in violation of the Endangered Species Act.” She started up the spiral staircase.

“What?” Bayleaf stared at her.

The question was set aside the moment they came up through the trap door in the workshop floor. He perhaps should have been more suspicious when Lei Ling let him up the stairs first. The moment his head and shoulders popped out of the floor, something large, hairy and barking very loudly came thundering across the room at him. Bayleaf snarled in alarm, his hackles standing on end. This did not deter the gigantic hellhound in the least.

“TRUCK! DOWN!” someone bellowed. For a miracle the mountain of fangs and muscle screeched to a halt. It dropped on its belly to the floor and froze in place. It never took its eyes off of Bayleaf, though, growling faintly. Bayleaf returned the favor.

Beyond the beast Bayleaf could see Lok’Tara setting some sort of gigantic bird on a perch-- holy crap, was that a golden eagle?? She came hurrying up to the monster dog’s side. “Truck! Quiet!” the dog stilled. She pointed at Bayleaf. “Friend! Got it? Friend.” The dog’s whole demeanor changed. It looked up at her and whined softly, then looked over at Bayleaf, lowered his head and gave its tail a tentative wag.

Bayleaf slowly climbed up out of the trapdoor, never taking his eyes off the dog. It looked like some monstrous mutated version of a bull mastiff-- only bigger! “What is this?” he said as Taylor carefully followed, the admonition of ‘Friend’ repeated over. “I thought you couldn’t use your monster-growing powers anymore.”
“She can’t!” Alec called out. Bayleaf cast about in confusion, looking for the vulperan. When he located him he nearly laughed; the were-fennec was perched atop the highest work shelf, looking down at them amidst piles of clockwork parts and ingredient jars, cobwebs hanging from his ears. From the state of the shelves Fennek had apparently made the ascension to his current perch in serious haste. “That brute is some sort of cross-breed.”

“Between what, a dog and a house?” Taylor said in disbelief. “Where did you get him?”

At that moment the eagle reminded everyone of its presence with a high-pitched cry. “Animal smuggler,” Rachel said, her tusks making her scowl look truly fierce. “Truck full of birds.” She rested her massive hand on the dog’s massive head. “This guy was in the back; he was trained to guard the cargo. Change now.”

Bayleaf blinked. “What?”

The orc girl gestured at the two worgen. “Change back. I want Truck to know what you look and smell like in both shapes.”

“A wise precaution I guess,” Bayleaf muttered. He morphed down to his human shape and warily approached the dog, his hand outstretched, palm up. Truck growled and grumphed worriedly, but after a curt sound from Rachel he gave Adrian’s hand a sniff and a lick. He apparently approved of what he smelled because he wagged his tail and stuck his head under Adrian’s hand, begging for pets. Adrian obliged, scratching behind the dog’s ears while Taylor repeated his performance. “You didn’t need to go through this with your other dogs,” Adrian noted.

“I already finished training them,” Lok’Tara said. “And they sorta got bum-rushed into knowing you. I didn’t want that with Truck.”

“You didn’t want HIM bum-rushed?” Alec yelled from his perch. “I come home and that thing’s waiting at the door with a BIB and a FORK!”

“He wouldn’t have hurt you unless I told him to,” Lok’Tara said.

“No, that would involve CHEWING. That thing’s large enough to swallow me, Fidget and Gidget whole!”

Fidget and Gidget? Adrian looked up at him, puzzled. Two inquisitive fuzzy faces poked over the edge of the shelf next to Alec. “Ah, so you decided on ferrets then?”

Alec’s expression was bemused. He shrugged. “I guess so. It was more like they picked me.”

Aisha came strolling around the end of the shelves. “Yeah, you should see fox-boy’s room,” she said. “It looks like Ferret Disneyland in there.”

“I wasn’t sure what all I really needed,” Alec explained with the air of someone who had explained the same thing many times already. “So I got everything. Just to be sure.”

“And then went back for seconds, looks like,” Aisha rebutted. “You soft touch.” Alec snorted in disdain, but he didn’t bother denying.

Taylor gestured at the bird. “And I’m guessing that was one of the… captives of the bird smuggler?” she said.

Lok’Tara nodded. “I want Panacea to look at them both,” she said. “They say they’re okay but I wanna be sure.”
“This could be a problem...” Taylor said, worrying her lip.

“No kidding,” Alec snarked from his perch. He looked down at Truck, who was still lying on the floor getting pets. “It’s against the law in the States to have a riding moose without a permit.” Lok’Tara and Truck both snorted at him.

“You were fine with her other dogs when she could mutate them into giant monsters,” Adrian said in amusement.

“And who told you that?” Alec retorted. “Besides, back then I was slightly bigger than bite-sized, if you’ll recall--- at least part of the time. And for the record, the GIANT CONDOR over there doesn’t exactly make me feel all warm and fuzzy either.”

Adrian shook his head. It was probably vulperan instincts making Alec twitchy around the new animals. It was a good thing Rachel hadn’t come home with a snake of some sort; considering the vulperan lore in Azeroth, Alec would have probably brought the roof down.

“He wouldn’t hurt you,” Lok’Tara said without even looking at him. “He’d most likely want to play with you.”

“Great, so he thinks I’m a rubber pet toy,” Alec sniped. “He won’t eat me, he’ll just chew on me till my squeaker comes out.”

Adrian ignored the two quibbling at each other and turned to Aisha. “So I’m guessing Amy is...”

“On her way here tomorrow, to do her maaaaaaaad science with her new test subjects, muwuhahah,” Aisha said, grinning and making spooky clawing motions. “She finally decided on a short list of must-do bio-tinker upgrades that the Hunters’ Companions have to get. She said she’s also gonna give some up-dos to the rest of Rachel’s little zoo, and give us all a quick check-up for good measure... if we don’t mind.”

“Free health care? Couldn’t hurt,” Adrian joked. “Okay, just... Lok’Tara, look after your pets and... don’t let them eat anyone. And someone was saying something about Shen and Vindicator?”

“Yeah, they been really impatient for you to get back,” Shar’Din said. “Ooh, that reminds me, Parian’s still waiting in the sewing room!” The blood elf took off at a run, fast as his robes would let him. “We’ll meet everyone at the shop center!” he called over his shoulder as he disappeared among the walkways and corridors.

“Wwwwwwell,” Adrian said. “Guess we should go see our monk and paladin first? To the forges!” He turned on his heel and headed off down the hallway.

Taylor shrugged to Lei Lin. “To the forges,” she said, following her boyfriend.

The Alliance’s tentative partnership with Faultline’s mercenary crew had yielded considerable dividends. Vindicator’s lone six-hour mission into one of Labyrinth’s surreal dimensions had him dragging out close to a ton of raw ore in exotic metals (A ridiculous amount had it not been for his superhuman strength, stamina and other supernormal abilities.) Faultline hadn’t been overly enthusiastic about the ore, but the byproduct of a few thousand carats in precious and semiprecious stones had warmed her up to the idea of continuing the effort. One cross-dimensional spelunking trip turned to two, then to a full week...

On the second day Shen and a couple of the others had started joining in to lend their considerable muscle to the efforts. By the third Bayleaf had a head-slapping moment and diverted several of his tinkerbots, kitted out with pickaxes and bottomless haversacks, to the effort. Labyrinth had not
always opened her gates to the same worldlets; the terrain had often been surreal beyond measure. Bayleaf and Shar’Din had started showing up to harvest enchanting ingredients as well as more gems and ore. Some of the worlds had otherworldly plants and vegetation; Taylor and Lei Ling had spent a turn or three exercising their herbalism skills.

One of the worlds had wildlife. Wild, savage sounds echoed there. Dark shapes with glowing eyes-- and not always just two-- that skulked in the undergrowth just out of reach of their lanterns. Lok’Tara had taken her spear and walked out into the dark. When she returned an hour later, the orc girl said nothing of what had occurred. But there were far fewer eyes in the dark, and she was carrying a bottomless haversack loaded with raw hides the likes of which noone had ever seen.

By the end of the second week, Labyrinth had started flagging. The strain of forcing dimensions to overlap and holding them steady for hours on end had started to tell on her. Faultline called a halt to proceedings, and Bayleaf was inclined to agree. But when all was said and done they had dragged in, one bottomless bag at a time, almost fifty tons of pseudo-Azeroth ore, a stack of animal hides six foot high, several pounds of herbs, roots and seeds of unknown provenance and a small fortune in crystals and gems.

Once they’d divided up the take with Faultline and hauled their own take back to the Lost Workshop, Greg and Shen had beelined for the forges and hadn’t been seen away from them since. The furnaces had roared, arcane light had lit the rafters, and the sound of hammers ringing on anvils had gone on day and night. Adrian had begun worrying that the two had fallen into some sort of tinker fugue, and he wasn’t the only one.

Everyone else was just as busy, though, feverishly working to turn their windfall into tools, armor, and weapons in preparation for… well, everything that was going to come. Shar’Din was thick as thieves with Parian, lurking about her shop whenever he wasn’t lurking in his own workroom with his rolls of cloth and jars of enchanting supplies. Taylor and Fennek had found themselves spending a lot of time bent over the same worktable, turning rough gems and twisted wire into magically enhanced jewelry. Lok’Tara was either tending her animal friends (who came and went through her skylights and window vents all day long), or working through her piles of skins, scowling in concentration as she drove a leather awl through the thick hides. Adrian himself had been up to his elbows in machine parts and axle grease...

Even those that weren’t crafting (Lisa and Brian) were busting their humps on the internet or over piles of paperwork (government and otherwise) needed to keep their rapidly growing little venture under the radar, and keep their adversaries on the back foot. Aisha, Mr. Hebert and the Dallon sisters were a godsend, chivvying the others to eat, rest, and take regular breaks-- even if it meant pushing some of them out the door to do patrols or make other heroic-style appearances. (It was at least fresh air, anyway.)

But now it looked like it was time for the first round of show-and-tell.

Adrian and Taylor followed the sound of ringing hammers to the forges. As the Workshop had grown and spread, burrowing its way through the warehouse row, the original lost and re-found workshop had remained, Adrian’s undisputed redoubt and the beating heart of the whole. Nevertheless, everyone else had a toehold there as well-- it was where the Comms system was set up, after all, which was Aisha’s near-permanent nest. And it was the only space they had that was truly equipped and ventilated to handle the smelting and smithing of metal. (It was also the only section slathered in Azeroth runes, inscriptions and enchantments that smothered the noise of falling hammers and magically dissipated the smoke from the forges and kilns, keeping their hidden Cape base hidden.)
The once spacious floor was now crowded; armor and weapons in pieces and in whole stood around
the room, leaving barely enough workspace where needed. Greg and Theo were both at the anvil,
stripped to the waist and wearing heavy goggles, leather aprons and gloves. The pandaren was
hammering out some bit or other of armor that sparked strangely under the hammer blows while
Greg watched closely, observing the technique. “Oh, hello, Bayleaf, Hemlokk!” Theo… Shen…
said. “Give us a moment—” He picked the glowing metal up in tongs and dropped it in a quenching
bath; luminous steam shot for the ceiling as the water hissed. The two craftsmen pushed up their
goggles and doffed their gloves as they came over. “Glad you’re back!”

“We finally finished up a few things—” Greg said. “W-Well, for you all. --And for everyone else,
but—” he stammered.

Shen motioned for him to stop. “We got a few things for you,” he finished for him. Greg nodded,
relieved. The poor ex-geek was still powerfully uncomfortable in his own skin around other people.

“No no, the other big one,” Shen corrected. “The one for Miss Taylor here.” The teenage paladin
nodded, obviously understanding, and hustled over to a display rack on the wall. He pulled down
two sheathed blades and handed them to Shen, who handed them to Taylor. “We know those batons
you’ve been using haven’t been really working out,” the Pandaren said. “So we crafted you these.”

Taylor unsheathed one of the blades. Even she could see it was a beautiful piece of work, a single s-
shaped curve from the jewel-embedded pommel down to the tip of the single-edged blade that put
her in mind of a scimitar or some other exotic arabian weapon. The edge gleamed wickedly in the
light; the metal of the blade almost seemed to glow blue-white. She twirled it experimentally-- it was
beautifully balanced.

“And check this out,” Shen said, taking the blade back from her. To her shock he ran it down the
dge of a nearby anvil, shaving off a pencil-thin layer as easily as if he were slicing cheese. Then he
sliced the hem of his leather apron; it still cut as smoothly as a razor through silk. “Awesome, huh?”

“Yes,” Taylor said. But her distaste was obvious. It was easy to tell she was visualizing what sort of
grousome damage such blades would do to human flesh…

“Oh, that’s not all,” Greg said suddenly. “Okay, Shen, do the thing.” He held out his arm.

“Okay.” Shen raised the blade overhead.

“Whoa, now wait a minute, I AAAAAAAH!” Taylor and Adrian both let out a scream as Shen
brought the blade down and rammed it right through Greg’s arm.

Greg grimaced and clutched his arm below the blade. “Gah, okay, takeitouttakeitouttakeitout!!!”
he yelled. Shen obediently yanked the blade free. “Man, I forgot how much that STINGS at first,” Greg
said, cradling his arm.

“What the hell are you two doing??” Taylor screeched. She was so startled she’d shifted back into
her were-form. Adrian had gone furry as well. She lunged forward, hand reaching for the healing
bandages in her belt pouch.

“Wait, it’s okay, it’s okay!” Greg said. He held out his arm and turned it over; it was completely
uninjured. His hand flopped uselessly. “Ugh, hate this part,” he said, trying to rub feeling back into it.

Alarmed, Adrian grabbed Greg’s forearm and turned it over, peering at it. “Not a scratch,” he said, a grin slowly spreading on his face. “Did you two really--”

Shen was grinning from ear to ear. “Ghost Iron,” he said. “An alloy with Leystone and Azerite, actually. Took a lot of trial and error, and a heap ton of enchantments--”

“Sparky helped out big time with that,” Greg said.

“But the blades won’t chip, bend or dull, and they will slice through just about anything. Except living flesh,” Shen said. “They phase right through, like, well, like a ghost.”

Taylor blinked. “You made a pair of Manton limited daggers,” she said, amazed.

The two nodded, grinning and chuckling like fools. “Oh, they do have an effect,” Shen went on. “They sting like hell, for one. And they cause temporary numbness and paralysis.”

Greg flexed his fingers clumsily. “Only lasts about a minute, though.”

Bayleaf’s smile diminished a bit. “So what happens if you stab someone in the heart?” he said. “Or worse, the brain?”

“And what about long term effects?” Taylor added.

The two looked at each other and grimaced. “Yeah, we thought of that,” Shen said. “We caught a couple of rats and tested it.”

Greg shuddered. “Man, it was ghoulish strapping the things down and---” he made stabbing motions.

“No long term effects from typical wounds, as far as we can tell,” Shen said. The one we stabbed in the heart… well, it stopped breathing for a minute. No pulse as far as we could tell. Then just when we thought it was dead-- boom, it gave a big spasm and came back to life.”

“The one we stabbed in the head? It, uh, sorta had a seizure…” Greg cringed. He pointed over to a cage in the corner. Inside was a brownish-grey sewer rat, shuffling about. “He’s mostly okay, but he’s sorta, um, twitchy now…”

“We felt sorry for it,” Shen confessed. “Couldn’t even walk right for a half an hour, so we sorta decided ol’ Twitchy gets a retirement settlement-- a nice warm cage and all the cheese and sesame seeds he can eat.”

“Right. ‘Do NOT apply directly to the forehead.’ Got it.” Taylor took the blade back and sheathed it with a shudder. She did not mention that as one of her many ‘talents’ as an Azeroth Rogue she had the power to magically coat the blades of her weapons with a range of toxic auras: soporific, paralytic, enervating, even purely toxic dark energy. If she wanted these daggers could be very lethal indeed.

But at least now, she thought, she had an effective alternative. The sheaths hung from slim intertwined leather belts. She discarded the hated batons and their straps and donned the knife belts; they hung comfortably at her hips, ready to her hands. She drew them in a flash and twirled them about, dancing in a quick kata, then another, the blades flying around her in a dizzying display of flashes of silver before slipping back into their sheaths. The boys exclaimed in surprise and applauded, impressed.
“Nice work, guys,” Bayleaf said. “What else you got?”

“Well we got armor,” Greg said. He waved to a row of manikins. “Mostly mail. Mail shirts, bracers, greaves, pauldrons, the works. Everyone can come in and mix and match to suit. We even got some mail shirts thin and light enough for our non-combatant types… they’ll slip under a jacket or sweater easy. It bugged me having Lisa and Aisha and Brian and Mr. Hebert running around out there without any real protection.”

Adrian didn’t dispute it. They had sunk money into having Parian and Shar’Din make full outfits of Azeroth cloth for everyone, and Taylor’s birthday present to her father, via a commission to Lok’Tara, had been a leather coat so heavily enchanted it could probably stop machine gun fire. Danny had accepted it happily—chuckling something about feeling like Harry Dresden, whoever that was. Still, Azeroth chain and plate made cloth and leather look like wet cardboard by comparison. “The usual enchantments?”

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“Strength, Speed, Stamina, Agility,” Greg recited. “Made a little bit of each. “Strength and Stamina are mostly on the plate. Speed and Agility on the chain.”

“We argued a bit about that,” Shen said. “In the end we decided it’d be better to heavily boost one or two stats, rather than try to boost all of them just a little on everything.” Greg grumbled; it was obvious who wanted what. It was unsurprising, Adrian thought; gamers tended to covet gear that had all the bells and whistles on, practical or not.

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That was another of the many little advantages of reality over the game: Armor classes could be mixed and layered in ways you could never get away with on Blizzard’s servers. Wizards could and did wear a little chain over those flowing robes; paladins had no problem with wearing a layer of Shal’dorei silk armor (protective, and comfortable! Cool in summer, warm in winter!) underneath their shining plate.

While jewelry was not as flexible, one could manage to squeeze in one or two more rings than the game allowed, and while the game designers had overlooked concepts like earrings, pendants, brooch-pins or bracelets, especially ones with charms, Jewelers in the arcane city of Dalaran had not. Aisha for one sported a charm bracelet (one of Taylor’s and Alec’s first jewelry projects) that gave her the speed, agility and stamina of an olympic gymnast and better second-chance protection than a Kevlar vest.

It amused Taylor to no end to think that the tiny little bangles she’d made for Aisha’s bracelet probably made the girl a better all around athlete than Sophia Hess had ever been.

“… This is really beautiful work, guys,” Bayleaf said as he fingered one of the mail shirts. “Shar’Din and I should be able to put enchantments of our own on everything as well. ...Did you make any more stuff with that ghost iron alloy?”

“Just a couple. There wasn’t much ghost iron ore. I finished up my new armor-- ”Greg walked over to a tarp-covered manikin. He whipped it off; standing under the cloth was a new suit of plate armor, gleaming gold and white. Golden Light energy glowed in recessed gemstones in the bracers, pauldrons, breastplate and boots. The round shield Greg normally carried was replaced with a larger, heavier Reulaux triangle, and instead of a warhammer the suit had an enormous sword. The blade was two hands wide, and the pommel was level with the suit’s shoulder with the tip resting on the floor.

“Gonna have Lok’Tara or Parian make me a bottomless scabbard for this,” Greg muttered, taking the blade and hefting it. It was a hand and a half grip; he held the enormous sword in one hand
effortlessly. “You know, the reason I used a hammer was… well, it’s easier to pull a blow with a
blunt weapon than a sharp one,” he said. “I could deal with breaking arms, but lopping them off?”
He cringed and grimaced. “But then I found out just how much damage even a blunt hammer can do
and… yeah, well, I spent almost all the remaining ghost iron on my sword.”

“We made one more,” Shen said. He was cradling a long wooden box in his arms. He opened it,
revealing a folded silk cloth which he peeled back. In the bottom of the folded cloth was a dagger--
small, thin, and plain, more like an enlarged needle than a knife, with a foot long blade and an
unadorned white bone grip. “This is for Amy. We juiced it up so that a quick stab will numb and
paralyze… leave it inserted long enough it can render someone unconscious. It’s not just a second-
chance weapon-- we figured it might come in handy if she ever has to anesthetize someone and can’t
use her usual methods.”

“Certainly couldn’t hurt,” Bayleaf said. “Taylor, you’re going to see Amy and Vicky soon, do you
want to hold on to it?” Hemlokk nodded; Shen refolded the silk and closed the box, handing it over
to the she-wolf. She took the box and tucked it in her haversack.

“Oh!” Greg said. “We finished the Lightwell!” He pointed to the worktable. Sitting at one end was a
squat stone bowl, no more than three feet wide and a foot deep, with a fat bottom and a wide lip.
Glowing runes and gemstones decorated its circumference. A faint fountain of golden light rose
straight up from its mouth.

Taylor cocked an eyebrow. “It looks like a chamberpot,” she said.

“It’s not a chamberpot!” Greg and Shen snapped simultaneously.

Bayleaf looked down into the Lightwell. Down inside was a nest of rough-cut crystals, glowing
brilliantly with shimmering rainbow colors. Heskimmed his hand through the glowing light rising
from the bowl; his fingers trailed golden sparks through the air like glittering mayflies, and he felt a
faint surge of well-being spread through his fingertips. “Yeah, Sparky’s gonna be seriously happy
about that,” he said.

“He knows. He’s already tapped it today,” Greg said. “Best he’s looked in ages, you ask me.”

“He’ll still have to keep running back to it every day,” Taylor objected. “Unless he carries it around
with him everywhere. And it doesn’t look too conveniently portable to me.”

“No, no,” Bayleaf said. “The energy’s translocative. It taps into the aetherial planes between the
realities. The Blood Elves could tap into their Sunwell anywhere on their world, and on several
worlds over, without any trouble.”

“Wow,” Taylor said, impressed. “So what’s the range on this little mini version?”

At the question, the three Warcrafters present began looking thoughtful and counting on their
fingertips. “As the Light energy will slowly spread over time in a nonlinear progression, given the
rate of emission and the radius, it should be… Holy Moley,” Shen muttered, giving the well a look.

Greg blinked too. “Yeah, Holey Moley,” he said. “By the end of the week there’ll be Light energy
‘fallout’ in China.”

“Fallout??”

Bayleaf made ‘calm down’ motions with his hands. “Light energy is benevolent, harmless at most,”
he said. “And only people with Azerite DNA can even tap it for anything useful. Otherwise it’ll be
so thin on the ground, it’ll be almost undetectable… A few flecks of benevolent energy, nothing
She gave him a skeptical look, one ear folded back. “Well, you might want a little full disclosure with the others about your pollution levels. Even if you’re only polluting the world with a few good vibes.”

Bayleaf snorted. “China sends us toys covered in lead paint and a brown cloud of air pollution-- we send them invisible good vibes. Seems fair… Fine, fine, I’ll tell the others.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but I gotta go,” Taylor said. “I’ve got potions and herbs being speed-grown I’ve got to check on…and I’ve got to call Amy about Fennek and Lok’Tara’s new pets anyway.” She gave Bayleaf a nuzzle on the cheek and left. “Try not to do anything TOO destructive, you three,” she said over her shoulder.

Once she was out of sight. Shen stepped in close dropped his voice. “One more thing--”


Greg stepped in close as well. “The Big One,” he said. He jerked his head to one side, drawing Bayleaf’s attention to a half-length steel cargo container in one corner.

Bayleaf sobered up. “Let’s see.” They went as a group to the steel doors and unbolted them. Bayleaf looked in… and up… at what stood inside, suspended from pulleys and chains. Bayleaf whistled.

“We finished up the outer plates and shell,” Greg said. “The internal support frame is done too--strongest alloy we could smelt. Azerite, Leystone, Adamantine, structural steel.” He stood next to bayleaf and looked up at the hulking, dangling form. “We even managed to grow several of the crystalline components--”

“Now all it needs,” Shen said, “Is your loving touch.”

“The auto-fabbers have cracked out most of the internal components,” Bayleaf said. “Little more’n a matter of putting all the pieces inside…” he paused and swallowed, remembering what this massive machine was meant for… what he might have to do with it.

“Are you sure?” Greg said suddenly. “Is this… I mean, will it really be necessary?”

Bayleaf stood still and silent for a long moment. “Let’s pray not,” he said. “But let’s thank God we have it just in case.”

“Gangwaaay!” There were shouts and shrieks of alarm deeper in the Workshop, followed by a resounding crash. “What the HAIL, Sparky?” Aisha was heard to yell.

“It’s Shar’Din!”

“I’ll Shart YOUR Ding, you pointy eared white blonde idiot!”

“Oh yeah,” Greg said. “Sparky must’ve finished his flying carpet.”
Bayleaf grunted in amusement. He slammed the doors to the cargo container and bolted them. “Let’s go see what the damage is.”

Two pizzas and a half-dozen orders of Chinese takeout, as it happened. (His little crash landing in the lounge area hadn’t exactly increased Shar’Din’s popularity scores. ) The flying carpet indeed did work-- it was whip-snap fast and nimble in the air as a teased snake… but to Sparky’s disappointment the general verdict was he could keep it to himself. At least as long as it undulated through the air the way it did, sure-foot gripping spell or no…

“Okay, now, let’s take a look at you two,” Amy said, picking up one of ferrets. Fidget wriggled and tried to lick her nose. She giggled and tickled his belly. “Aren’t YOU a handful--!”

“Upgrade day” had finally arrived. After several days of hesitation, indecision, and buying cage after cage of white mice from the pet store, dragging them to the Lost Workshop and ‘amplifying’ them in various ways, Amy had finally gotten enough confidence… or maybe just caved… and declared it was time for Fennek’s and Lok’Tara’s companions to get their boosts.

Truck had been the first, and the most simple. Amy had laced his skeleton with buckminsterfullerene fibers, increasing their toughness and strength several thousandfold. She had even managed to tweak it so that the carbon fullerene fibers grew naturally. Flexible subdermal armor and hyper-tough tendons and ligaments, based off spider silk proteins. Claws and teeth, hardened and toughened as well. Musculature enhanced by over 200%. An accelerated healing factor. All of it paid for with a heightened metabolism and a complex litany of improvements to his digestive system to play the metabolic costs… largely by expanding his already human-like diet to where he could eat foods that would make a trained veterinarian run for the emergency medical bag, and the ability to extract the last erg of nutrition from it.

This heightened metabolism also paid for the largest cost; an expanded brain. “I thought you didn’t do brains,” Aisha had objected.

“Technically I’m not,” Amy had replied. “I’m actually ADDING to it. A second larger layer to the cerebral cortex, A neo-neo cortex so to speak, same for the temporal lobes…some extra nodes at the base of the cerebellum...“

“Sort of adding a dual processor and extra memory chips, huh?” Greg ventured. Amy rolled her eyes and shrugged, but acknowledged that it was as good a description as any.

When she had finished, the changes were barely noticeable… well, when compared to the sort of monstrous metamorphoses that say, one of Blasto’s creations had undergone. Or even one of Lok’Tara’s dogs back when she’d been Bitch. He was still edging on the realm of the ridiculous-- but then again he had been before he’d been amped. But even with the almost-weightlifter-esque musculature and the blunt, enlarged skull, he was still passable as an ordinary, if ‘good grief’ huge, dog. The big brute was busy now wolfing down enough kibble and raw meat for three dogs, trying to catch up with the demands of his sudden transformation.

Sky had been much more delicate work. At first the golden eagle hadn’t wanted Amy to touch him. Lok’Tara had finally managed to use her bond to calm the bird enough for Amy to work. An
enlarged brain was the first step, though in the end she’d only enhanced Sky very slightly. There really wasn’t much she could do without making the poor bird’s head too unwieldy to fly. This was followed by a carefully lacing of carbon fullerene fibers through the fragile skeleton—nothing near what Truck had undergone, but more than enough to make breaking the bird’s bones a job for someone with a baseball bat and a LOT of muscle. The subdermal armor made arrows and bullets far less of a concern. Again, the cellular biology was altered to grow the fibers naturally, even in the feathers—which did interesting things to their insulative properties. There was a good chance, Amy informed them, that the eagle’s feathers were now fireproof as well. The nictating membranes over his eyes were likewise enhanced. She enhanced his night vision to match his already stunning visual acuity...

After the operation, Sky was logy and agitated at the sudden influx of new sensory information…but quickly calmed when Lok’Tara set out a plate of rabbit cut up for him. That, he could understand, and quickly began gulping it down.

Now came Fidget and Gidget, Fennek’s ferrets. The changes to these to were going to be a touch more complicated. Birds of prey and gigantic hunting hounds were already fairly tough customers. Little domestic ferrets, not nearly so much. So the changes were going to be more extreme.

… Of course, having Fennek standing there, wringing the hem of his shirt like an expectant father, wasn’t making it easier. Bayleaf put a calming hand on Fennek’s shoulder. “Calm down,” Adrian ordered. “This is Panacea. She’s the best there is at what she does, by a lap and half— and that’s when she’s not even trying. Fidget and Gidget will be fine.”

Amy breathed a silent ‘thank you’ to the worgen. “Well, time for a bath, little guy,” she said to Fidget. She stroked the ferret’s forehead, putting him quickly into a soporific state, and lowered him into the vat.

She was going to need external sources of biomass for these changes. Per her request they had brought in a steel tub and filled it to the brim with, of all things, onions and potatoes. She had used her power to reduce the root vegetables to a primordial soup—a sort of raw liquid protoplasm, about the consistency of broth. Once Fidget was submerged up to his ears, she began the changes.

He was going to have to be a bit bigger, for starters. Something closer to a largish otter: about twenty pounds and nearly three feet long from nose to tailtip. Expanded diet and metabolism, enlarged/enhanced brain, subdermal armor and structurally strengthened skeleton were a given…Mustelid brains were simpler than canine ones, so there was more that had to be added; it was a trick to keep the size of the skull manageable and its shape sleek. One of the more surprisingly complicated changes was to the forepaws; it required extra nerves and certain addendums to the motor control areas… After that, slightly lengthening and strengthening the toes was simplistic.

The experts Amy had consulted argued about whether ferrets were natural climbers. With their new enhanced grip strength and retractable, carbon-fiber strengthened claws, the question became arbitrary. These buggers wanted to climb? They’d climb.

It barely took a half hour…and that only because she was going slowly and carefully. At the thirty three minute mark she pulled Fidget from the tub and let him reawaken. The little bandit-masked armful had blinked up at her, then begun gleefully climbing all over her, getting her soaked in proto-broth. “Aagh! Help!” she shrieked and giggled, ducking her head to keep the now oversize ferret from jamming his nose in the nape of her neck.

With an air of absolute relief, Fennek came hustling over, arms out to take his pet off her. He fell back on his rump as twenty pounds of carpet shark leaped into his arms. “Wauf! Whoa, you sure grew up fast, didn’tcha… ah darn it, now we gotta buy you a bigger cage! And bigger tube toys…”
and ferret sweaters… and--”

Amy giggled at the sight of Fennek wrestling with the oversized ferret, and picked up Gidget. “Okay, girl, now your turn…”

Less than twenty minutes later, Gidget joined her brother in play-mauling their master. The vulperan rolled around on the floor with his two partners, happy as a boy on Christmas with a new puppy. Bayleaf gave her a slightly strained smile. “You gave them opposable thumbs, I see…” he said.

Amy gave him an evil smile. “Well, you wanted them combat ready,” she said. “I suggest you do one of two things.”

“Being?”

“Childproof everything, or give them little toolbelts…”

Several of those present snorted. Bayleaf started to make what he clearly hoped was a snappy comeback when he was interrupted. A sound echoed through the Lost Workshop, penetrating through the walls and wards, a rising and falling cadence that chilled every spine there. All over, tinkerbots of every size stopped in mid task and began echoing that sound, lights flashing and turning. Everyone fell silent. Even Fidget and Gidget quit their antics.

“The Endbringer sirens,” Greg said, his throat dry. Without a word Lisa and Aisha ran for the Comms. The big viewscreen lit up, the news bulletins already in full blast, ticker tapes running across the bottom of the screen and down either side. Some talking head or other was behind the news desk, announcing an attack by the Simurgh. Behind him in bluescreen was a cityscape that Adrian had made point of looking up and memorizing from the first day of his arrival.

“Canberra,” he said. The scroll on the screen confirmed it. He gripped the back of his chair, the wood cracking under his grip. “No. We’re not ready!”
Chapter 22

Everyone in the room… the Undersiders, the Warcrafted… looked at him. He stood there, his head hanging, his claws digging into the wood of his chair. He drew a breath and looked up. Taylor felt a chill; she’d never seen his eyes looking so serious, so-- afraid. “Go there, or stay here,” he said. “I’m going, but I’m not going to force anyone to come along. But make your minds up quickly, we haven’t much--”

“I’m in,” Greg said. His apron was wadded in his fists. He’d never looked so… so much like a scared teenage kid. “I can work search and rescue, if nothing else… And healing…”

“I’m in too.” Shen didn’t say anything more.

“I’m there,” Sparky said. No… it was clear in his eyes, in his stance. He was Shar’Din now.

“Same here,” Fennek said, astonishing everyone.

“Fennek, Fidget and Gidget just came out of the vat,” Adrian said. “You’re nowhere near--”

“I was a Hunter before I had them,” he snapped back. “I can do search and rescue better than anyone in the Protectorate. And hell, maybe I can ANNOY the bitch to death.” He pulled his bow from his haversack and nocked an arrow by way of demonstration.

“It’s a moot point, honey,” Taylor said. She stood taller, her eyes grew more piercing. Adrian could almost see her slipping into her own skin as Hemlokk as she spoke. “Every one of us can heal, do search and rescue, or help out in a dozen other ways. It’d be…wicked for us to back out now, ready or not.”

Adrian closed his eyes and turned his face to the ceiling. “Somehow I knew we’d have no choice...”

Taylor looked over at Lisa and Grue. “I won’t speak for the Undersiders--” she faltered.

“There ain’t no undersiders,” Brian said. “I won’t speak for the Undersiders--” she faltered.

“There ain’t no undersiders,” Brian said. “Just the Alliance now.”

“We’re in,” Lisa said.

“Damn straight,” Aisha said.

Brian wheeled around on her at that. “Like heck you are,” Brian said to her. “You’re staying here!”

“But I’m Mama Crow! I run the Crow’s Nest!”

“And you ain’t got no POWERS,” Grue emphasized. “You’re staying here!”

“We need her,” Lisa interrupted. Grue gaped at her in betrayed confusion. “The comm system the Protectorate uses is crap.”

“She’s right,” Bayleaf growled, running his fingers through his scalp. “All it does is tell everybody who just died. It’s next to useless on a battlefield, designed by idiots.” Who the heck approved that thing anyway? “She’ll be miles back from the frontline but we need her on our comm-links if we want a chance to survive.”

Brian fumed, but gave in. He slammed on his helmet and pointed at Bayleaf. “Miles from the frontline, you swear it.” Bayleaf held up his hand, scout’s honor. “Dammit,” Brian growled. Aisha
and Lisa began grabbing whatever portable gear they could.

“Okay, let’s do this,” Bayleaf said. “Everyone gear up. Shar’Din, take that carpet and get to the jumpoff point for the PRT. Give ‘em a breakdown on what we have, what we’re bringing. Let them know we’re coming!” Shar’Din nodded, regal as a king, and rose out of the open skylight. “Lei Ling, Hemlok, grab every potion, scroll, and piece of extra jewelry we got. Same with you Fennek… We’re gonna be handing those things out like candy on Trick or Treat. Shen, Vindicator-- dress for a fight, but don’t be surprised if they push you in the healing tent. Panacea, you need a lift?”

Before she could answer, A familiar golden-haired figure dropped down through the skylight. “Amy, we gotta go--”

Amy didn’t say a word; she just threw her arms around her sister’s neck. “Well, don’t spare the horses, sis,” she said. She looked at the others. “We’ll see you there. I hope...” With that they shot through the skylight.

“Okay, that’s taken care of. Lok’Tara, bring your dogs, Truck too if you think he’s ready, you’ll probably be on Search and Rescue before any of us. I’m afraid Sky will have to look after himself for a while. The ferrets too.”

“Everybody, we got--” he looked at the information scrolling onscreen. “crap, unless Shar’Din can get them to hold a teleporter, we got fifteen minutes tops. Grab what you can and load it in the bus, we are out of here in five!”

Everyone scrambled.

Quality transportation was still way down on the team to-do list. So many of them had flight, or teleportation, or some other means of getting about that it had been put on the back burner over and over. The best that could be said was that they did have SOME form of transportation. Brian had gone out with Adrian on a vehicle hunting trip… and they had ended up securing an old school bus in a used-vehicle lot. They had gotten as far as tearing out the back five rows of seats for cargo space, but beyond changing the oil and filling the gas tank nothing had been done to beef it up.

It wasn’t the Avengers quinjet, but it was going to have to do. Crates of scrolls and potions, bags of bandages and boxes full of stat-boosting jewelry were tossed in the back. A squad of tinkerbots-- fire fighters, alarmbots and other multi-use handibots-- were loaded in as well, tossed in the with the cargo they were loading. Everyone piled aboard, still donning their costumes and armor.

Bayleaf jumped into the driver’s seat. The engine cranked, stalled out, cranked again. An absolutely breathtaking profusion of profanity rose to the roof of the vehicle for several seconds, then the engine caught. They roared out of the dilapidated garage at the end of the Warehouse row, barely missing the door as it scrolled upward.

The bus fell silent. There weren’t a lot of words to say at the moment. There were plenty of scared faces to be seen, what wasn’t covered by helmets or masks.

Grue and Vindicator sat side by side, their still, helmeted forms giving an illusion of stoicism.

Lok’Tara, if anything, was scowling even more than usual, her tusks gleaming.

Fennek grumbled and whined to himself, fussing over his bow and his quiver, checking for the hundredth time to make sure the nigh-bottomless quiver was packed full. He was gonna put one
Shen tried to meditate, the way he’d learned in the garden. He breathed in, breathed out, his hands resting on his knees… suddenly felt another hand, clawed, furry, and clammy with fear, press into his own. Surprised he looked over. Lei Ling was sitting next to him in her chain armor, staring straight ahead. He felt her hand squeeze his, trembling.

He squeezed it back.

They soon slowed as traffic thickened. Bayleaf pounded the steering wheel in frustration, resisting the urge to lean out the window and scream epithets at the unfeeling masses. Suddenly Obie and two of the other alarm-bots came running up from the back. Using their magnetic feet and hands they climbed up the inside of the bus, out the window, and up onto the roof. They started their lights and sirens up, piercing the air even over the Endbringer siren. Slowly but with increasing speed the traffic parted in front of them. Bayleaf whooped and pounded the steering wheel. “Obie you little genius!” he shouted. “Good work! Lisa, you got an update?”

Lisa and Aisha were two seats back, fussing over a laptop and a pile of wires and waving around a wifi boosting antenna. They were trying to rig up a portable comm board for the headsets everyone was wearing. Lisa grumped and checked the news feed she’d Googled. “They’re doing pickup at the PRT base,” she said. “Capes are pouring in-- crap, Uber and L33t are there?-- and… wait, something’s wrong--”

Without warning, the already congested traffic ground to a halt. They were close enough to see the PRT building; capes and cape vehicles were hovering around the helipad on the roof, as if something had happened and they were confused as to what to do next. What Lisa saw next on the laptop made her start swearing fit to make even a Dockworker blush. “It’s the Simurgh!” she shouted over the ruckus of car horns and Endbringer sirens.

“What about the Simurgh?” Bayleaf shouted over his shoulder.

“She’s interdicted us!” Lisa shouted back. “The instant the first batch of capes came through from Brockton Bay, some sort of force-bubble popped up over Canberra!” She rattled away at the keyboard. “It’s cutting of everything-- all broadcasts from inside have been cut off… and noone can portal or teleport in or out!” She cursed and spat. “The only reason we know that much is this blogger is just outside the field!”

Bayleaf gave up and jammed the bus into park. He got up and came back to see what Lisa and Aisha were watching. Everyone else on the bus left their seats. The view was split between some field reporter a mile outside the city, and the cam-view from the luckless blogger still in the outer boroughs of Canberra. Capes, the early arrivals, could be seen swarming around the Endbringer, lashing fruitlessly out at her with their powers, her orbiting corona of machinery catching it all. The shaky web-cam zoomed in; for a heartstopping moment the Simurgh turned and looked into the camera. She gave the viewers a smile… not one of her usual, enigmatic, emotionless ones, which adorned her face in and out of season, but one of malicious glee and triumph.

Then the feed went dark. Lisa and Aisha BOTH swore aloud and started clattering away at their keyboards, Lisa at her laptop, Aisha at her phone. “No good,” Lisa said after a perfunctory search. The Simurgh just put the kibosh on anything in or around Canberra, no feed, no internet, no radio… and no teleporters.” She dove back into the Net momentarily, then resurfaced. “What I suspected,” she said with a snarl. “The PRT is trying to port heroes in at a distance… they might as well not waste their time: that force field wall is immutable. Nothing’s getting through until the Simurgh drops it. If she ever does.”
“Has she ever done this before?” Bayleaf asked.

Lisa threw herself back in her seat, arms crossed under her chest, fuming. “No.” Her expression suddenly shifted from fuming to disturbed. “Because… because for the first time, there was something she did not want getting there. Something in Brockton Bay.”

Everyone in the bus looked at each other. “Us?”

Lisa pulled at her lip. “The Thinkers have been saying that, for some reason—” she gave Bayleaf a knowing look—“the Precog and Thinker view of Brockton Bay has been like Swiss Cheese for months, and getting more full of holes by the day. If Miss Christmas Tree Topper is having the same problem…”

“She decided to play it safe,” Bayleaf said grimly. “And cut Brockton Bay off from Canberra, early in the game.” He snarled silently. “My little blind spots spooked her, and now thousands of people—”

He turned away and staggered to the front of the bus, ears flat, shoulders tight as knotted rope. He sat in the driver’s seat, cradling his head in his hands.

There was a knock on the windshield. Shar’Din was hovering outside on his flying carpet. He waved to Bayleaf, then gestured in front of the bus. A shimmering portal appeared. They couldn’t have broken through to Canberra already, could they? Bayleaf threw the bus into gear and slowly drove through the shimmering circle of air.

When they came out the other side, they were parked back in the garage. Bayleaf switched the motor off and slumped in the driver’s seat. The quiet was stifling. Sparky floated up next to the driver’s window. “I’m sorry, man,” he said. “The PRT was already turning Capes back. The last three teleporters or space jumpers or whatever who tried to get through… didn’t come back in one piece.”

“How many capes got through before the field went up?” Bayleaf said quietly.

“The newsfeeds say about half,” Lisa piped up from behind him. “The local Protectorate got through, but the Ward’s didn’t. Aegis lost a leg, the field came down so fast. It says New Wave got through earlier…” she didn’t say more. All of them were picturing two sisters, one blonde and bubbleheaded and take-charge, the other curly haired and broody.

“Should we… should we unload?” Greg said.

“No, just… just leave it,” Bayleaf said. “It’ll keep—Silently the others filed off the bus. Lisa and Aisha went back to the Comms. Fennek retreated to his game room. Lok’Tara went to her menagerie, to the enthusiastic welcome of Sky and Truck. They all retreated back into the Lost Workshop, disappearing into their quarters and their workshops and their game rooms. The sound of work or play wasn’t taken up by anyone though. It was terribly still.

Even the Endbringer sirens had fallen silent.

After several long minutes, Taylor took Adrian by the arm. Gently she pulled him to his feet and led him away from the bus, back into the Lost Workshop, where his alien plants still glowed and the enchanter’s ingredients still glimmered on his workbench and the air was filled with the tick-whirr-click of his tinkerbots laboring away. She pulled him into the biggest of the Comfy Chairs and curled up in it next to him. For the next hour they did nothing but sit there and hold onto one another.

The sober peace was interrupted the next morning rather abruptly.
“Guys,” Lisa yelled. “Guys, guys GUYS, EVERYBODY GET YOUR ASSES IN HERE!!”

“OmiGAIIEAEEK!” Aisha shrieked.

Teenagers poured in from every direction, more than a few with weapons at the ready. “What, what is it??” Greg said, his hammer in one fist, his sword in the other.

For a wonder, the two girls were speechless. Aisha was standing there, her knuckles pressed to her mouth, rigid as a board. Lisa was so agitated she was bouncing in her office chair. Lisa pointed to the main screen on the Comms. The interdiction field had apparently fallen, and news was flowing out of Canberra again-- and the talking heads were climbing the walls over it. Everyone there could see what was happening but the newscasters felt obligated to tell-- no, to scream-- what was going on. Adrian had seen sportscasters at the Superbowl get less agitated than these people. What was happening was visible on the screen, as clear as it was unbelievable. “What the hell is happening?” Grue said.

“It’s footage from last night,” Lisa babbled. “The bubble came down before it was all over, and this has been playing over and over on every news channel--”

Fennek’s eyes were round, he was practically hyperventilating. For a moment Adrian feared the unfamiliar rush of adrenaline and intense excitement might make the poor vulperan keel over. “They’re fighting the Simurgh,” he said. “They’re fighting the Simurgh and they are KICKING HER ASS!!”

Whatever had happened during the blackout, it had clearly gone very badly for the Simurgh. Both her legs were gone, one shattered above, the other below the knee. Half her wings were in a similar state, blasted and charred to stumps. Cracks and score marks crisscrossed her body and what could be seen of her face. She was half-flying, half crawling across the skyline, her cloud of levitated tinkertech struggling, and failing, to keep off the swarm of Capes that pursued her. A literal rain of exotic powers and energies beat down on her as the heroes and villains of humanity took long-awaited revenge for humanity’s suffering.

“It can’t be,” Adrian heard himself say. “She’s still sandbagging.”

Lisa shook her head emphatically, then winced and clutched her temple. “No,” she said. “No, I’ve been using my Power for the last five minutes-- she’s actually running scared! The only reason she hasn’t fled to orbit is some Tinker has hit her with some weird gravity-acceleration-curving something-or-other…”

The Warcrafted watched in silent awe as the battle unfolded. Triumvirate were all but hammering the Endbringer into the ground, alternating between blasts of energy and Alexandria’s punches without letup. Every other cape was chipping in, letting loose with everything they had, pinning the Simurgh to the ground, decimating her once-invincible gauntlet of orbiting tinkertech… In desperation the Simurgh reassembled her tinkertech cloud into an enormous ring in front of her. The center shimmered, turned opaque; the void of the stars appeared inside it…

“Portal,” Sparky said. “She can’t fly to space so she’s takin’ a shortcut!”

...and the Endbringer all but flung herself through it. There was an eruption of light and she vanished. The floating ring went dark and fell to the earth, shattering in pieces. Capes swooped down on the wreckage, as the camera cut to another on-the-spot newscaster, standing in the middle of a mob of emergency workers, capes, PRT soldiers and refugees. She had her hand pressed to her ear and was shouting above the commotion into her microphone. “...And we can confirm it-- Yes, the Simurgh has fled-- Canberra has been saved! They will not be walling the city in, there is no
quarantine-- Canberra has been spared and the Simurgh has been beaten!”

The crowd around her exploded. A roar of victory went up from all those present. Lisa had to turn the sound down to save the speakers from bursting.

“We won. We WON against an ENDBRINGER!”

Everyone lost their minds.

Even as everyone in the Lost Workshop began jumping around and screaming like lunatics, the battle came to its conclusion onscreen and the camera began flipping between newscasters, government officials, and wildly celebrating capes and even more wildly celebrating citizens.

“How did this happen?” Taylor said. “What changed??”

Lisa struggled to say something. “It’s almost on the tip of my tongue-- argh!” She pointed at the screen where they were showing instant replays-- random cellphone footage, webcams-- of the most brutal moments of the fight. “Look at her it’s like she was blind-fighting or-- ” She rubbed her scalp in pain, but her eyes gleamed with excitement. She began speaking faster and faster, almost babbling. “That’s it, she WAS fighting blind. She’s a precog and a postcog, the most powerful in existence… she depends on those powers like we depend on sight. But something’s been buggering that up--” she looked at Adrian. Everyone looked at Adrian.

“Your Azeroth tinker tech,” Tattletale said, her classic smug grin fixed in place. “You gave a ton of it to The Brockton Bay Protectorate last Christmas. I’d bet my left tit Armsmaster reverse-engineered it and handed it out to everyone he could!”

“Yeah but nothing that would account for--” Adrian paused, his jaw dropping. “No. Wait. Not the Protectorate or the Wards… New Wave. One particular member of New Wave--”

“With us now is the leader of the Protectorate of Brockton Bay in the United States,” the reporter onscreen was saying. Standing next to her was Armsmaster. He was battered, his armor cracked, dented, and even scorched in places, but his posture radiated triumph too clearly not to be seen.

“Armsmaster, can you explain to us what changed everything? What made this possible?”

Armsmaster visibly swelled with satisfaction. “An extraordinary breakthrough, Miss Winters,” he said. “Some time ago we were made aware of a discovery by a… Tinker in Brockton Bay, who shall for security reasons go unnamed for now… who had invented a device that could block the Simurgh’s song. We owe this tinker greatly--”

There was a whoosh and a boom and a blonde, caped figure landed next to him, hard enough that her dainty feet cracked the pavement. “Got that right! The guy’s a miracle worker. I was the first one to get one,” Glory Girl said, tapping her tiara. “It was for… er, something else entirely… but Gallant figured out it could be even bigger than it looked!”

“Gallant secured one of the prototypes for us,” Armsmaster butted back in to confirm, looking a bit disgruntled at Glory Girl hogging his spotlight. “We managed to reverse engineer it and build the circuitry into the standard arm-bands we distribute.” Vicky held up her arm and tapped the heavy mechanical bracelet, grinning cheekily. “Within seconds of arriving at Canberra we confirmed that it was effective; noone wearing the device could even hear the Simurgh’s song.

“But what about the city?” Miss Winters said.

Armsmaster pointed behind them. The camera panned and refocused, revealing what looked like a rectangular radar dish mounted on a six-wheeled ATV. “Once we confirmed the technology worked,
we deployed these,” Armsmaster could be heard saying. “Just three of them were enough to provide a blanket field that nullified the Simurgh’s song over the Canberra region. It’s a brute force approach,” One could almost hear him silently screaming and horribly inefficient-- “ but it was the difference between walling up the city and saving it, so I’ll take it.”

The now beaming reporter turned to a beaming Glory Girl. “So the Simurgh has been driven off in the greatest defeat for the Endbringers ever, and Canberra has been saved. Tell us, Glory Girl, how are you feeling?”

“Feeling? We beat the Endbringer, saved the day, and I even got to punch the Simurgh in the FACE! I am ready to Par-TAY!” She began doing a ridiculous victory dance there on the spot. “Punched-- an end-bring-ah- in-- the face-- I--”

“There is still a lot of cleanup work to be done,” Armsmaster said over top of Glory Girl’s impromptu victory song. “And a lot of casualties. No battle like this is without cost--” he glared at Vicky, clearly displeased at her euphoria.

“Crap, he’s right,” Bayleaf said suddenly. “The fight isn’t over. There’s still wounded, and missing and people trapped in rubble. Saddle up people, they still need our help!”

They had been ready to go last time in less than five minutes. This time they were all loaded in the bus in less than three.

Bayleaf started the engine, picked up the garage door opener-- and paused. He facepalmed. “Shar’Din?” he said. “Would you mind opening a portal to the PRT jumpoff point for Canberra?”

The elf mage grinned and waved his hand. A shimmering circle appeared in the air, between the bus’ front bumper and the garage door. “Thank you,” Bayleaf said. He shifted into gear and drove forward…

…And out onto the helipad on the roof of the PRT building. Adrian stood on the brakes; the bus shuddered to a halt far too close to the edge of the roof for anyone's comfort. More than one passenger on the bus let out squawks of fright. “Sparky!!” Adrian yelled.

“Hey, this is where they sent everyone who showed-- me included,” Shar'Din said. "Sorry. Didn't know my waypoint was so close to the edge..."

The rooftop was covered in PRT agents, workers and capes. Surprisingly few people reacted with alarm at the arrival of a school bus out of nowhere… Most seemed too busy, hustling back and forth with equipment and guiding vehicles and groups of people one way or the other.

Out of the milling confusion came Director Piggot. She’d caught sight of the schoolbus and came on the run, a couple of PRT squaddies hustling to keep up. Bayleaf decided to play it nonchalant. He leaned out the driver’s window and addressed the Director. “We got a busload of Capes and Tinker gear for Canberra,” he said, giving the side of the bus a slap. “Where do we put it?”

True to form, Piggot didn’t turn a hair. “Just drive it that way,” she said, pointing. “Stop and put it in park when you’re inside the tape outline.” She looked around. “STRIDER! Busload of gear for Canberra!” A lanky-limbed cape dressed in a blue and black uniform, goggles and what looked like a chauffer’s cap came at a lope. “Armsmaster will meet you on the other side,” she said to Bayleaf. “I’ll call ahead and warn him-- maybe he won’t shoot first and ask questions later if I do,” she couldn’t help snarking.
“Thank you, Director,” Bayleaf said. He shifted the bus into first and sent it puttering to the port-out zone at a slow crawl.

The teleporter cape came walking up as they eased into the drop zone. He gave them the twice-over and smirked a bit. “This your team vehicle?” he said in disbelief.

Bayleaf flattened his ears and gave him a deadpan look. “Nah, nah, we’re on a school field trip,” he drawled. “Professor X wanted to broaden the kids’ horizons.” He threw it in park; the flashing stop sign swung out and hit Strider in the forehead with a dull kong.

“Ow!” Strider said, stepping back and rubbing his head. “All right, all right, no need to get tetchy,” he said. “Okay, get ready, it’s a couple of hops--”

There was a flash, then another, then another. The city skyline was replaced with searing desert, then with what looked like an open field in a forest, then another desert… then with a thump they were in what had to be the Canberra airport terminal. Since his arrival in Brockton Bay Bayleaf had spent many hours in grim preparation, browsing images of the battle locations he recalled from the story, familiarizing himself with the landmarks. He recognized the terminal almost immediately.

They disembarked. Bayleaf saw Armsmaster marching their way. He was looking slightly less battered-- he’d probably had time to hammer some of the dents out of his armor-- and he was moving with the same authoritative air he’d always had. Striding along next to him was a man with an official and bureaucratic air; he and Armsmaster were talking to each other rapidly as they walked. “That must be the local PRT Director,” Grue said, leaning over to Bayleaf.

“How can you tell?” Bayleaf said, puzzled.

“He’s wearing a short sleeved shirt, cutoff dress slacks and a tie,” Grue said. “That’s Australian for business formal, thanks to the heat… at least for people with zero you-know-whats to give.” The humor in Brian’s voice was obvious. Adrian took note; the company’s “face” was good at his work.

The moment the armored cape clapped eyes on them, their team, their bus, et al, but particularly Bayleaf, he all but slammed to a halt. He remained expressionless-- well, what little could be seen of his bearded chin did, anyway-- but after am moment he gathered himself and resumed approaching them. He stopped just out of arm’s reach. “Skinwalker,” he said noncommittally.

“Armsmaster,” Bayleaf nodded. This was definitely the time to be burying hatchets. “We’re sorry we didn’t get here sooner. We got cut off by the interdiction field…” Armsmaster nodded tersely and made what Bayleaf supposed was a dismissive gesture… probably the closest the man would get to saying ‘it’s okay, no problem.’ Bayleaf pointed to the back of the bus. “We got a busload of Tinker gear to help with the aftermath. We grabbed everything we thought might be of use. Healing potions, accelerated healing bandages, firefighting and--”

“Understood.” Armsmaster said brusquely. He turned his head to one side. “Agent Jones, do you copy?” He paused, listening. “We have a busload of assorted tinkertech, I need you and your two subordinates to assist unloading and securing it--” he strode off toward the bus, clearly considering the conversation to be at an end. Bayleaf found himself a little miffed. He held out a hand to Bayleaf. “Director Micheal Bays,” he said. “No relation, before you ask. Skinwalker, I believe it was?” His accent was pure Mick Dundee, to Bayleaf’s secret delight.
Bayleaf engulfed the man’s hand in his own hairy paw. “It’s a, uh, working name,” he said. “My crew, we generally go by ‘the Alliance.’ ...Long story.” He started making introductions. “Ah, this is Hemlokk… Shar’Din…”

“Bal’a dash, Sinu a’manore.” The blood elf bowed grandly atop his flying carpet.

“Errr...” Bays held out his hand uncertainly.

“Vindicator there in the armor… ah, Lok’Tara and Fennek, Lok’Tara’s the green one with the dogs by the way… Grue and Tattletale, formerly of the Undersiders” (Oh crap I shouldn’t have told him that, should I?) “uhh...”

“So what all are you and your mates bringing to the party?” Bays asked.

Bayleaf hesitated. “...Something of a grab bag,” Bayleaf said, thinking quickly. Why hadn’t he catalogued all the Alliance’s abilities, or written a list or something. “Trackers, teleporters, uh, some healing...”

Bays’ face lit up at that. “You’re already sounding right useful,” he said.

A commotion from the bus distracted them. Armsmaster and the PRT agents seemed to be having trouble with the doors. “What is it?” Bayleaf called.

“Your security systems are preventing our entry, Skinwalker,” Armsmaster snapped. He was glaring at the bus door.

Bayleaf blinked. “What security system? It’s a school bus. We didn’t even have time to paint it!”

“Your... automatons have locked the doors and windows from the inside,” Armsmaster clarified. He looked at the door. “And one of your hazard lights is giving me the finger.”

“Oh for...Obie!” The alarm-o-bot’s head made an appearance in the window. Bayleaf gestured wildly at the bus while his ‘team’ stood clustered together and snickered. “Obie! Behave yourself!” Obie let out a short siren-squawk that sounded remarkably like an objection. “Unlock the door, Obie, that cargo’s gotta be unloaded!” Obie let out a discontented fweep and complied. “Sorry, Director, Obie is a security bot and he sort of has a mind of his own... where was I?”

There was a commotion from the bus. Everyone turned to look; Armsmaster came staggering back out of the bus’ emergency exit, flailing wildly. What looked like two giant furry slinkies were climbing all over him, staying just out of his reach. “Agh, GET EM OFF! GET EM OFF!” The two PRT officers were backing up, starting to reach for their guns uncertainly, not sure what to do.

The Alliance set up a hue and cry. “Stop!” “Don’t hurt them!” “They’re not dangerous!”

“Fidget! Gidget!!” Fennek said in a panic.

“It’s okay, they’re with us!” Bayleaf said, throwing out a hand in alarm.

“I SORT OF FIGURED THAT OUT!”

“Fennek, go yet your darn ferrets off the Armsmaster!” Bayleaf yelled in exasperation. Fennek scurried to comply, equally anxious to rescue his furry babies.

“Those are ferrets??” Bays said in disbelief. It was understandable; the things were three feet from nose to tailtip, easily.
Bayleaf gave him a weak grin, a disturbing thing from a werewolf. “They must’ve sneaked on board--”

“Hurry up! They’re ACK! Getting into everything!” There were several electronic bleeps and whoops and a disturbingly metallic ping as either Fidget or Gidget found some of the manual controls and access panels.

“Fidget, Gidget, come down from there!” Fennek was leaping up and down around the gyrating hero; he looked like he was about to climb up Armsmaster’s back after them.

“They’re… playful… but Fennek is bonded with them, he has them under fairly good control--” Bayleaf went on, digging desperately and only going deeper.

“--Oh Lord one of them has a screwdriver--!”

“Would somebody go over there and help??” Bayleaf said, cupping his face in his hand. Several of the Alliance broke loose and ran over. Those that weren’t recording the action on their cellphones, at any rate. He looked over at Taylor for emotional support; she was one of the ones (along with Lei Ling, Aisha and Tattletale) who had her cellphone out, her eyes sparkling with glee, the heartless traitor.

Bayleaf looked back to the Director apologetically. The man’s face was bright red and he was shaking with suppressed laughter. Well at least he’s amused instead of infuriated, Bayleaf thought.

There was a loud clearing of a throat behind him. Bayleaf looked over his shoulder; Tattletale had stepped up. She was holding a computer tablet and stylus, clipboard style, and doing very good at looking organized and professional.

“Like Skinwalker said, Vindicator needs to go with the Healers, and I’m thinking Hemlokk should too; her skills are probably better utilized right now showing your staff how to use all the stuff we brought.” Tattletale pointed over her shoulder at the bus; the ferrets had been retrieved and were getting a half-hearted scolding from Fennek, as the Tinkerbots methodically unloaded and stacked the boxes of Azeroth potions, bandages and stat-boosters.

“Lok’Tara and her dogs and Fennek and his ferrets need to go on Search and Rescue. Their powerset includes the ability to detect and track any living thing-- even from the air, or underground. Lei Ling and Shen should probably be Search and Rescue too: they have some healing capacity and they may not look it, but they’re pretty solid Brutes, Movers and Masters too.” As she spoke, Lei Ling summoned up one of her rock elementals, which rose up through the tarmac with a rumble of stone (then sheepishly smoothed out the asphalt again with it’s stone feet) and Shen summoned his ghostly white tiger, which prowled around him.

“If it’s possible, could Shar’Din do a ride-along with Strider? Shar’din is a potential world-class Mover, he can teleport and open portals pretty much anywhere, but he has to have physically been to the location first. One around-the-world with Strider and he’ll be able to open up temporary gateways to anywhere.”

“That WILL be useful,” Director Bays said enthusiastically. “I’ll buttonhole Strider, get him right on it.”

“I think Mama Crow and I will be heading to wherever the Think Tank is?” she said. Every Endbringer incident had some sort of setup for Thinkers, Precogs and the like; Canberra would surely be no exception. “We can help coordinate from there. Grue will accompany us for personal security.”
Bays actually looked impressed. He coughed, and, still grinning, pointed back to the terminal entrance. “Report to the guards in the entrance, they’ll give you your ID bracelet…”

Thank you, Bayleaf lip-synched to Tattletale. The Thinker girl simply smirked back. Smugly.

What am I doing here?

The thought wasn’t a complaint, really. Well, not yet. It was an honest question Fennek, aka Alec, aka Regent was asking himself. This really wasn’t like him. Fair’s fair, going along with the team for the Endbringer fight, that was him-- It was part of his code that he made himself stick to. If you were part of a team, you were loyal, period; if they went in danger’s way so did you. Da Rules, I has them, he thought.

But this wasn’t an Endbringer fight. This was the aftermath… the slow, messy, painful and unpleasant cleanup that came after Leviathan or Behemoth or the Simurgh went slam-dancing through your neighborhood. Clearing streets. Digging the lucky survivors-- and the not-so-lucky--out of the rubble. Patching up the wounded. Getting people sorted out, fed and sheltered. Lots of hard, grueling, thankless WORK… the exact sort of thing he (wisely, he believed) shirked at every opportunity, and to heck with team effort.

So... why was he doing this?

“These men here are the Search and Rescue team for the wreckage of the Simurgh’s touchdown zone,” Armsmaster was saying. He was addressing a group of men in hard hats and orange vests gathered around a map on a card table. “You’ll be working with them. Micheal Darby is the crew leader--”

“Call me Mick.”

“-- Follow his instructions to the letter.” Armsmaster said.

One of the other crewmembers looked over the members of the Alliance. “Hold on, what’s all this? Did Disneyland send some representatives this time?” He snickered. Several of the others chuckled. “Filming “Robin Hood meets the Kung Fu Panda,” maybe?”

Fennek laid his ears flat and gave the guy a smile. “Nah, we’re filming a documentary for ‘Wonderful World of Disney,’” he said. “‘A Day in the Life of a Bogan.’ You’re from central casting, right?”

“Ohhhh!”

The hard-hat just grinned wider, his teeth showing white in his tanned face. “Pissy lil’ ankle-biter, aintcha?” he chuckled.

“The top of my head just about reaches your belt buckle, Slackadile Dundee. It won’t be your ankles I’ll be biting off.”

“Ohhh!!” This time the crewman laughed and backed up a step, holding up his hands in surrender.
“These… individuals,” Armsmaster said, grinding his teeth with the effort of patience, “Are members of an independent cape group called the Alliance. Lok’Tara, Shen, Lei Ling, and Fennek. They have a number of abilities including Master, Brute, Mover, and Thinker that will make them somewhat useful in any search and rescue efforts.” He looked at Mick. “If I may review?”

Mick nodded and waved towards the table. Armsmaster edged between the men and ran his finger across the map. “The Simurgh first touched down in the Northeast quarter. She tore up a lot of buildings in that area before--”

“Before everything went tits up for ‘er, ey?” one of the men shouted. That got a lot of rowdy laughs.

“...Exactly. When the tables turned on her, she took off in a more or less straight line, down South and West, ripping up and knocking down everything in her path with that telekinetic vortex of hers. Here..” He jabbed at the bottom of the map, “Is where she made that Tinkertech portal and escaped, abandoning the inactive gate behind her. PRT staff are moving to secure what’s left of it right now.”

“The place we’ll be diving in first,” ‘Mick’ said, poking the map. “is right here. There was a shopping center right here-- it had underground shelters put in under the stores a couple years ago. Nothing like those Endbringer shelters you Yanks have, but it was a big selling point all the same.”

He looked grim. “They didn’t have time to evacuate before that Scrag dropped out of the sky and leveled everything; we figure anyone who was there dived down those bolt-holes. We’ve already got people on site there trying to listen with microphones and what all, trying to find where the survivors are and get down to them. If you got any Cape tricks or Tinker toys that’ll do that...”

“I think we may be the people to help you,” Shen said, smiling confidently.

The site was worse than they had described. The shopping center hadn’t just been knocked down, it had collapsed down into its basement levels, leaving an enormous pit filled with rubble and broken slabs of concrete, like a study in the worst possible environment to search for the living.

They arrived in a PRT personnel carrier, flying in low over the site. The Warcrafted could see hard hatted people picking their precarious way through the rubble. There was a medical tent to one side, and it was getting a good bit of use; next to it was a patch of open parking lot with neat rows of sheet-covered forms, grim reminders that not everyone was getting a happy ending this time.

Even before they landed Lok’Tara and Fennek were picking out survivors. Just like Bayleaf had used his treasure-seeking powers to find coins and other valuables buried in the sands of Brockton Bay, the two hunters could pick out people and animals buried under the debris, glowing sparks shining up through the rock and concrete and other rubbish.

Many of those lights were starting to flicker…

“Here, hold position here!” Fennek yelled at the pilot. For lack of any contradictory orders, the pilot brought the VTOL in to stationary some hundred feet over the wreckage. Fennek climbed over the others and opened the hatch. “What’re ya doin’, ya drongo?” Mick yelled.

“Spotting survivors!” Fennek retorted, unlimbering his bow. He leaned out of the open door. The bow flexed and sang; a glowing arrow shot down from the VTOL and embedded itself in the debris. Then another arrow sprouted some fifty feet away. Then another. After placing just under a dozen arrows, Fennek pulled himself back inside. “Tell them to dig there!” he said. “Those are the ones
closest to the surface, and they look like they’re doing the worst!”

Mick hesitated, but he pulled out the radio and proceeded to relay the information to those already on the ground. Mick’s word was obviously law; in moments workers with picks, shovels, jackhammers and more were moving on the spots Fennek had picked out. “Let’s get down there and put our backs to it,” he said. “Looks like we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“There’s more, down deeper,” Lok’Tara informed him. Mick’s face only got grimmer.

They landed on the edge of the rubble; everyone was out and planting boots on soil almost before the landing gear touched down. Shen headed for the medical tents, Lei Ling in tow. Lok’Tara had Brutus, Judas, and Angelica at her heels; a few murmured commands and they scattered, sniffing their way through the disaster area, looking for people Fennek might have missed… or, more grimly, might have been beyond Fennek or Lok’Tara’s ability to find.

Fennek was scurrying out into the center of the collapsed mall, Fidget and Gidget bounding at his sides. He arrived just in time to see them pull out the first bloody mess that used to be a human being…

Why was he doing this?

Time crawled painfully as they retrieved the living and the dead from the first layer of debris. Fennek was finding himself frustrated. Beyond his spotting ability he was of little use; Lok’Tara was in there, shifting slabs of building of alarming size with her bare hands. But his childlike size meant he could contribute little to the brute effort of shifting concrete and iron and brick. Worse, he could still see those sparks further below… some of them flickering dangerously… as he watched he saw two of them flicker out.

Then the debris shifted.

“Everyone get clear!” Mick yelled. Everyone hastily backpedaled, getting off the rubble as it shifted and groaned, plumes of dust rising up. After several seconds the shifting stopped, but Mick swore a blue streak. “Some of it must be unstable below,” he said. “It’s going to be the Devil to move it now without causing a cave-in…”

“There’s still people down there,” Fennek informed him. He could see one cluster of lights; a family…? They were huddled together so close they overlapped in his senses. “They won’t last long if we don’t get to them.”

“We don’t dare try to shift it by hand anymore,” Mick said. “We gotta get a crane or something to LIFT it off, piece by piece, like the Devil’s own Jenga game.” He spit. “We go out there we could bring it all down…”

Fennek heard Fidget and Gidget chirping in his mind. The two ferrets, untrained as they were, were still bonded to him and followed his lead— they’d been in and out of the debris, trying to help the workers spot the living and the dead.

Down?
“Down in holes?”

“Small holes?”

“Gidget dig.”

“Fidget dig more!”

“Dig dig.”

“Squeeze in.”

“Fit in.”

“Bring out!”

“You’re too heavy,” Fennek said, even as his old self screamed in confusion at him. “I’m not.” He scurried back out on the ruin pile.

“Boy--!”

But he was already moving. It had sunk in just a moment ago; one of the skills that had been downloaded into his shiny new brain was mining. What he’d overlooked before was that mining was more than just finding shiny rocks and digging them up. It was working in caves, and in mines. It was subterranean work… knowing how to shore up stone, and spot pockets of poison gas and cave-ins before they could happen. An Azeroth miner had a literally supernatural feel for stone and earth that a Terran miner would have traded his union membership card for. All that knowledge had been filed away in Fennek’s head, just waiting for him to poke at it.

He could feel the lay of the rubble beneath him, tell which stones and slabs and I-beams were load-bearing, which were precariously balanced, how far apart they were and how they stacked together… there was indeed a room-sized pocket directly below; he could feel there was a passageway down to it as well.

He sat there, analyzing the stone and dirt and debris, trying to pick out a course of action. Fidget and Gidget took his scrutiny for a command and promptly wriggled their way in. Cursing he pulled out a light, grabbed one of the ropes that were lying about and crawled in after them.

It wasn’t a tight squeeze, but it was definitely claustrophobic. He heard a muted scream ahead; it occurred to him that the sight of two economy-sized carpet sharks squeezing into one’s space might
not be a comforting one. “It’s okay, they’re service animals!” he shouted. There weren’t any further screams, so he assumed he’d been heard.

He finally made it to the pocket. His head popped out into the open space, and he promptly took a chunk of brick between the eyes. “Owwww!”

“It’s a dingo!” a little kid’s voice screeched.

Right. Australia. “I’m not a dingo!” he snapped, rubbing his forehead.

“I-- I think it’s a Cape, Jamie,” a maternal voice said.

Fennek opened his eyes. It was what he’d expected, a family of three-- a boy about ten years old, his mother and his father, all huddled in one end of a space maybe four feet high and six feet long that had once been the corner of a room. A pair of crossed I-beams had fallen just right, forming a peaked roof over their little sanctuary. The son looked okay, the mother too… filthy and a bit scraped up but otherwise okay. Dear old Dad was a bit worse for wear, with what looked like a broken arm and leg.

For some reason the boy looked familiar. “I’m Fennek,” he said. “I’m a hero of the Alliance.”

He wasn’t sure whether that sounded cool, or retarded, or both.

“You’re gonna be okay,” he said. “We’re gonna get you out of here.” There was a faint rumble as some of the ruins shifted; dust sifted down.

What the HELL am I doing here??

He looked into the boy’s eyes. He was a thin little stick of a kid, with dark curly hair and wide eyes. With a shock Fennek realized why he looked so familiar. it wasn’t just his face, though give or take a bit the kid could have been a ringer for himself just a few years ago…. it was his expression. He’d seen it in the mirror countless times when he was that age, in the rare unguarded moments when nobody else was watching. Fear.

Alec, nee Jean-Paul Vasil was more than familiar with fear. His father, the villain known as Heartbreaker, had used his Cape powers of emotion manipulation on his children… used fear and terror and despair as a form of punishment, and when those didn’t serve he resorted to more brutish methods. He had never been subtle about it either. Since running away from his father’s little cult compound, Alec hadn’t felt anything to match what his father had inflicted on him--

Until yesterday, when the Endbringer sirens had gone off. He’d found himself climbing aboard that bus. The entire ride, his heart had been pounding with terror every bit as intense and unrelenting as the artificial agony his father had inflicted on him; fear so bad, so merciless that you wished you could die, just to make the fear stop. He’d thought he’d never feel fear that horrible ever again… It had been an awful epiphany, that ordinary people could feel such horrible, all-consuming terror perfectly naturally all the time. No psychopath, psychic Father to flee from; no empowered siblings to resist; no powers-based immunity… or self-destructing, burned out emotional synapses-- to take the edge of the pain.

He looked in the kid’s eyes and saw himself at six years old; powerless. In terror and misery, trying to hide it and failing. And his only hope was that somehow, someone somewhere would eventually make it stop.

He knew what he was doing here.

He reached out and put one fuzzy hand on the kid’s shoulder. “You’ll be okay. I promise.”
Healing aura flowed through the air, rippling and splashing like water, quenching pain effortlessly. “Thank you,” the aboriginal woman said in relief, relaxing back in her cot for the first time since Lei Ling and Shen had laid eyes on her. The burns on her arms were already on a swift mend.

When they had first walked in, Shen had taken note that slightly over half the injured had been, to put it cautiously, of native Australian descent. He carefully watched Lei Ling’s reaction; she caught him watching and bristled up. “What?”

Shen manned up and pulled her aside by the elbow. “This isn’t going to be a problem, is it?” he said, nodding his head in the direction of the patients.

“No!” she hissed. “Now can we quit jerking around about how the little remedial ex-E88 needs to be babysat around anyone not white and just get to work?” Chastened, Shen backed off and looked to the head nurse.

They were cautious: neither Shen nor Lei Ling knew exactly how their healing powers worked or how they would interact with, for example, sutures or broken bones. They had let the medical people bind up the injuries in the usual fashion, except with the Azeroth bandages. Those alone had produced swift and miraculous results, but if they weren’t enough then they administered the healing potions, followed by the healing and purifying auras (to draw out infection.) Within the first hour they had nearly everyone there either fully mended or on the mend.

Including the elderly aboriginal lady Lei Ling was tending now. Relieved from the pain of her burns, the woman regarded her with kind if tired eyes. “You seem bit edgy around me and mine,” she noted knowingly.

Lei Ling didn’t meet her eyes. She focused on sorting the empty potion vials and putting them back in her bottomless belt pouch. “I’m not used to being around, um, people from other ethnic groups,” she mumbled.

“Darkies, you mean.” The old woman laughed at Lei Ling’s jump and twitch. “Go on, I ain’t offended. Got better things to do then spend all my time being offended by silly people.” She harrumphed. “Got a few grand-nephews always complaining about how the British killed us, shot us, the British did this, the British did that-- like they were there a hundred years ago and it happened to them.” She sniffed. “I was THERE. I went through a lot of what they yammer about. But I ain’t about to waste the rest of my life beating on old graves. Might as well poison yourself as spend time hating on people.” She looked over at Lei Ling and sighed. “I suppose though everybody’s got somebody they hate on, and a pile o’ half-assed excuses for doing it.”

“...Yeah. My ‘Family’ wasn’t exactly too open minded, either,” Lei Ling said.

“Eh, you’ll grow out of it,” the woman said. “And what you don’t, you’ll learn to live with.”
Lei Ling gave her a hesitant smile. “...Thanks.”

There was a rumble; Lei Ling felt the ground tremble under her feet. A great deal of shouting started up outside. “The heck was that?” she exclaimed. She stuffed the last of her vials in her bag and ran for the exit.

Outside, the workers had all retreated off the dig and were now were clustered on the edges. Lei Ling saw ‘Mick’ and ran up to him, Shen close behind. “What happened?”

“Everything shifted,” he summarized. “We had to clear out to keep it from caving in further.” And killing the people still trapped beneath, his grim expression said the last silently.

Lok’Tara was on the far side of the pit, her dogs clustered anxiously around her. Her attention was fixed on the crumbled ruins below. “Mick, where’s Fennek?” Shen asked, his voice full of foreboding.

“’E said there’s still people alive down there,” Mick said. “Him and those two ferrets o’ his took a line and dove down into it.” Mick’s accent got thicker with worry. “’E sent word up, ‘e found ‘em, but now we gotta figure out a way to get ‘em all out without crushing ‘em.”

Lei Ling felt inspiration hit. No, more than inspiration; a feeling that made the fur on her arms and neck stand on end—the feeling that she was born for this moment. “No problem, I got it covered,” she said.

Mick held up a hand. “Whoa now, we’ve all seen your big rocky friend, but ‘e’s a bit too heavy to be climbing down there shifting stuff around.”

“That’s not what I’m going to do,” she said. She pulled out several vials-- stamina, mana, intellect--and downed them, then slapped several scrolls on herself to boot. She held up her hands. “Shen, hit me with whatever buffs you have, and keep them coming.” Mana flowed from her hands, down into the dig and into the broken piles of rubble.

Once upon a time, Mick and his family had gone to a stage performance. Some exotic Cirque du Soleil sort of thing, a gymnastic performance of sorts. The lights would come up on stage, revealing a stand of trees, or a giant lotus blossom, or a human skull. Then as the music started, the performers would start to move and the trees or the skull or the giant lotus blossom would unfold, revealing it was a group of these gymnasts all along, grouped up and balancing on top of one another.

That was the closest he could come to describing what he saw happen that moment. For a brief heart stopping moment the rubble shifted again-- then it began not to slide and shift but to move, arms and legs and torsos forming out of rock and brick and broken wood and glass, humanoid forms unfolding from one another, standing, stretching and walking, ever so carefully, up out of the pit…

The red panda girl stood there, hands outstretched, brow furrowed in concentration, tail twitching, arms trembling. The male black-and-white panda planted his hands on her shoulders and bubbles of jade-colored light began pouring from him into her.

The workers cleared back as the craggy titans climbed up out of the foundations of the collapsed shopping center. Some of them were carrying the tragic remains of the Simurgh’s victims; these the golems set down tenderly with the others, before trudging patiently over to the excavation piles the back hoes and bulldozers had made and tidily crumbling back into the broken rubble from which they had come.

This eerie parade went on for five minutes, ten, a quarter hour… the strain was showing on the
panda girl’s face, her partner was leaning on her as much as holding her up… then finally, the last
three of the concrete giants stood up and stepped back, revealing a man, a woman, a little boy, and a
fox-man and his two ferrets, alive and well.

Lei Ling dropped her arms; the golems walked a few more steps back then slumped over. An
almighty cheer went up from all those watching, worker and rescuee alike. Lei Ling sagged to the
ground with a moan, Shen close behind her.

“Gonna have to remember that trick,” Shen said. He was aching like the juice had been squeezed out
of his tissues.

“Remember not to ever do it again,” Lei Ling retorted. “I don’t even know the words for the parts of
me that hurt…”

Her tone might have been grumpy, but there was no wiping the smile of satisfaction off her face.

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Greg barely made it to the garbage can. For that matter he barely got his helmet off in time. He bent
double over the bin and retched and heaved noisily, his hasty breakfast and even less well thought
out lunch coming up in a rush.

“Are you okay, Vindicator?” Panacea said behind him.

Greg looked up at her. “I… I’ve never had to do anything like that before,” he said weakly.

“Not too many people have,” Panacea said, handing him a bottle of water. “Duct-taping someone’s
severed leg in place while someone else glues it back together isn’t exactly a common first aid
method.”

They’d sent Greg to the field hospital. Things were still hectic, hours after the Simurgh’s attack. PRT
troopers came on the hop, got their information (such as it was) and-- after a bit of debate over
commlinks with persons unseen-- sent them to the field hospital. It had been set up here at the airport
in expectation of thousands of injured, cape and civilian alike. Even though the miraculous early
defeat of the Simurgh had left the hospitals in Canberra standing, the field hospital was having to
handle the spillover…. there were plenty enough injured civilians to be getting on with. Fortunately
Panacea was still there; she led Greg around, walked him through procedures. There was only so
much she could do to brace the former basement-dwelling nerd for the gruesome realities of a
hospital, field or otherwise.

Greg took the water gratefully. He rinsed and spit, then gulped down the rest. “And you do this all
the time…” he marveled.

“Hey, don’t feel too bad,” Panacea said. “You got through all those injuries, right up to the severed
leg. You held it in till you got the leg in place with those magic bandages of yours, and I got
everything spliced back together. You even held out long enough to hit it up with that golden heal-
light of yours for good measure. THEN you ran for the chunder bucket.” She grinned at him.

“So you did better YOUR first time?” he challenged, a little needled.
Her smile disappeared. “My first time was my Trigger event,” she said. “I was holding Vicky’s guts in place after she took a shotgun to the belly.” She got VERY sober. “It’s how we found out her invulnerability can be knocked out. Blam, no problem. Blam Blam, big problem.”

Greg cringed. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay… do you need a mask?”

Greg laughed. “I’m nobody, Panacea. Who’d recognize me?” He donned his helmet again. His eyes glowed blue through the eyeslits.

Panacea looked upset at that for some reason. She started to say something when there was a whoosh and Glory Girl landed next to them. “Hey Ames, Vindy,” she said.

“Please don’t call me Vindy,” Greg muttered in his helmet.

“Where’ve you been?” Amy said.

“Helping with cleanup-- clearing blocked streets, mostly,” Vicky said. “Grubby work.” One wouldn’t know it to look at her pristine white uniform, though… one of the advantages of a personal force field, Greg supposed. “Hey, could you guys do me a favor?”

“Depends. What?” Amy said, hand on her hip.

“There’s a little girl on the other side of the field hospital,” she said. “Just a few chunks of gravel in her arm; the field meds already cleaned it up and bandaged it buuuuuut…” she gave them an impish smile. “I sorta promised her she’d get to meet her favoritest new hero…”

“Me??” Amy said in surprise.

“Sorry, sis, not this time.” Amy deflated a bit. Vicky spun about in mid air and booped Greg with a fingertip on his helmet right where his nose would be. “Yyyyyou.”

Greg felt his jaw working. “Me?? But… I haven’t… really done anything!”

Vicky rolled her eyes. “Says the guy that smacked Lung in the mush with a sledgehammer,” she said. “She’s apparently gaga over knights and dragons and wizards and stuff. She saw you clanking about when they brought her in and she’s been busting at the seams to meet you.” She cocked an eyebrow. “Well?”

Greg suddenly felt a twinge of self-consciousness. “If… Panacea, would you mind coming along? I-”

Amy gave him a wry smile. “Sure, all the heavy work’s done here.” The potions, scrolls and bandages the Warcrafted had contributed had lightened Panacea’s burden considerably. “Wouldn’t hurt my PR to finish up fixing her arm, anyway.”

Greg sighed and shrugged. “Lead the way, I suppose…”
Those who had been patched up, but not yet seen Panacea or one of the other Cape healers, had been moved to a row of recovery tents. Vicky led them to the last one in the row and pulled the door flap aside. “May I introduce you to Miss Olivia Walker,” she said with a little flair. “Olivia-- allow me to present my sister, Panacea, and her friend, Vindicator the Paladin.”

Greg and Amy stepped inside. Inside was a little pigtailed, brown haired girl lying in a medical cot. A woman (Greg guessed it was her mother) was sitting in a folding chair next to her. The little girl had her left arm bandaged from fingertip to shoulder, and was wearing a t-shirt with a cartoon unicorn prancing across it. The moment she saw Greg’s armored form step into the tent, her eyes went round as saucers. Greg started to stutter. He was definitely not used to having anyone look at him with such reverence, no matter what age.

Panacea spoke up. “Hello, Mrs. Walker I presume?” Amy was a lifesaver, Greg thought with relief... “We had a spare moment so I thought I’d step in and take a look at Olivia’s arm?”

“O-of course, yes,” the tired-looking woman said. “Thank you!”

“It’s no problem.” Panacea knelt down next to Olivia. “Olivia, I’m going to fix up your arm, okay? It may go all numb and tingly for a bit, but it won’t hurt a bit, I promise.” Olivia, still wide eyed and open mouthed and staring at Vindicator, merely nodded. Amy gently pulled the bandage aside and placed her fingertips against the skin underneath. Greg could see her slipping into the state of meditation that she used when she was using her power. He could see Olivia’s arm relax, and her narrow shoulders un-tense-- she must have been in a bit of pain.

Greg knelt down on the other side of the cot. He thought back quickly to his roleplaying days and channeled one of his favorite ‘Knight Errant’ characters. Thank God he’d played so much Dungeons and Dragons... “Greetings, Olivia,” he said. “I heard you wished to meet me?”

Olivia nodded so energetically the barettes in her pigtails rattled. “A real live knight, wow,” she breathed. He saw her mother smother a smile behind her hand.

“Alas, though I am a Paladin, I am yet to be properly knighted,” Greg said. “But I will serve as a Champion all the same if need be.”

Olivia reached out her free hand to run it over Greg’s gauntlet, fascinated by the gleaming metal. “Why are you in a hospital?” she said. “Shouldn’t you be out battling monsters and stuff?”

“I can do other things, too,” Greg said. “I can heal as well.” He held out a cupped hand and filled it with Light. Olivia cooed appreciatively. “Though nowhere near as well as the fair Lady Panacea.” Amy said nothing, but he saw a faint smile curl the corners of her mouth. “I heard there were people in need, and thought it worthy to come lend what little aid I could.”

Olivia nodded again seriously. “That makes sense.” She scrutinized his helmeted face. “Have you ever slain a dragon?”

“Slain a dragon?” Greg blinked at that one. Then he remembered and grinned. “Well, no, not yet. I did smack one in the face with my warhammer, though.” He produced the hammer and let her look it over.

“Cooool.” Olivia traced her finger over her reflection in the metal. “Didja knock his block off?”

Greg couldn’t help chuckling. It echoed inside his helmet. “No. But my good friend Shar’Din the Wizard turned him into a sheep.”

“Really?” Olivia giggled.
“Really. You should have seen him-- oh, he was the angriest little sheep in the world. BaaaaAAaaah!” he imitated the rage-suffused Lung the Sheep, grimacing theatrically and pawing the air, his hands fisted to look like hooves. Olivia pealed with laughter. Even Amy and Olivia’s mother giggled at that one.

“Well, that should take care of that,” Panacea said. She pulled a pair of bandage scissors out of her belt and cut the wrapping off of Olivia’s arm, revealing whole, unblemished skin beneath. She tossed the bandages and the severed stitches into the waste bin. “Good as new.”

Olivia touched her arm, then flexed it. “Thank you,” she said with a gap toothed smile.

“Yes, thank you so much. I know it was a trivial thing but--”

“The injuries were easy enough to fix,” Amy said. “No sense in making Olivia go through weeks of discomfort when a moment would heal it up.”

“Again, thank you.” Olivia’s mother took Amy’s hand and patted it in gratitude. “Are you ready to go home, honey?”

“Uh huh.” Olivia hopped off the cot and started to follow her mother out of the tent. She stopped, then turned back to Vindicator. Her smile was missing and she was biting her lip worriedly. “Mr. Vindicator?”

“Yes?” Greg said.

“If… if the Simurgh comes back…” She almost whispered it, her eyes liquid with fear. “Will you and your friends come back and beat her again?”

Greg thought his heart would wrench in half. He did the only thing he could think of. He took her hand in his own metal-clad one and looked her in the eyes through the slit in his helmet.

“I SWEAR it,” he said fervently. For a brief moment, golden light shone through the seams of his armor.

“Sydney.”
Flash.

“Hong Kong.”
Flash.

“Mt. Fuji.”
Flash.

“New Delhi.”
Flash.
“Rome.”

Flash.

“London.”

Flash.

“Toronto...”

This, Strider decided, was BORING. About an hour ago they’d buttonholed him to take this new elf-looking Cape on a literal whirlwind tour of the major stops around the world, so he could “learn” them and be able to open portals to them. And it wasn’t a lightning fast process either. At every stopoff, the kid would go a few steps, pull a chunk of quartz crystal or something out of his belt pouch (dang big belt pouch, considering all it seemed to hold) and do a little song and dance for a few minutes. Then he’d open a quick portal back to Canberra, look through, nod, say “Got it” and hop back next to Strider for the next leg of the trip.

He wouldn’t have minded the delays... well, not as much... but the weird little ritual at each stopoff was setting off his freak-o-meter something fierce. The robes, the staff (which was kind of cool looking, he had to admit), the whole shtick just screamed of a Cape who thought his powers were ‘magic.’ He’d dealt with Myrddin, the self-proclaimed “wizard” of Boston, more than a few times and the whole superstitious claptrap drove him up a wall. Strider had spent a good bit of time in college earning a liberal arts degree, and he’d studied enough logic and rhetoric that he could make a hobby of listing off the fallacies some of the more egregious “mages” in the Cape community made to justify their thinking. Myrddin, for example, had turned Begging the Question into a veritable art form...

The fact that complex geometric patterns and formulas in some strange text appeared to hover around the elf-guy’s hands as he worked only made him think the guy was REALLY reaching.

“Hey, Shar-whatever,” he finally said on their stopover in a corner of Berlin. “So what are you doing here, exactly?”

Shar’Din didn’t pause, he continued moving the glowing numbers and symbols around in the air. “Calculating,” he said. “planetary signs, lunar cycle, dominant ley lines...”

“Ley Lines? Lunar cycle? I thought so. This is supposed to be MAGIC, right?” Okay, maybe he was being a bit of an ass, but “sorcerers” got his goat. He couldn’t resist tweaking them.

The blonde ‘elf’ paused briefly at that. “Well, yeah, some people might call it that... but sufficiently advanced whatever, you know?” He turned back to his work.

“Astrology isn’t science, sufficiently advanced or otherwise,” Strider snorted.

“Who said anything about astrology?” Shar’Din said. “Dude, I’m ripping time and space a new one trying to open a stable portal halfway around the world on a MOVING PLANET. Don’t you think knowing the rotational and orbital speed of the earth and the gravitational effect of the sun, moon, and local planets MIGHT be kind of important to the equation?”

Strider huffed. “I never had to muck around with all that,” he said.

“Yeah, but your sh-- your power does it all for you,” Shar’Din said. “Some of us don’t get easy short
cuts.” He lowered his arms and the equations disappeared into the chunk of quartz at his feet. “I
mean sure, over short hops I can fudge most of this, but once you start getting to planetary scale you
gotta start dotting your i’s and crossing your t’s. Go from the North Pole to the Equator without
making the right adjustments and you splat into a wall at literally a thousand miles an hour.” He
shrugged. “Or you get a thousand mile an hour wind blowing in your face out of your portal…and
that’s just the easy part of the math.”

Strider was feeling properly chastened now. “So you don’t really believe all this hocus pocus
claptrap,” he said, waving his hand and indicating Shar’Din’s appearance, attire, et al. “You know
you’re not really a magical elf—”

“Oh, no. I’m an elf. A Sindorei, a blood elf. And no, not like a vampire. Long story. And yeah,
magic.”

“There’s no such thing as magic,” Strider sighed, longsuffering. “Or elves for that matter.”

“You bet that hat on that?” Shar’Din said, grinning. He picked up the quartz— actually levitated it off
the ground— and stuck it back in his belt pouch. “Fifty years ago there was no such thing as
superheroes and supervillains except in comic books, and the only giant kaiju running around were
rubber suits on movie sets. There was no such thing as alternate worlds either, and now we’ve got
trade agreements with another Earth. If there’s another Earth, why not one more, one where there are
elves?”

“That’s pleading from ignorance,” Strider pounced.

The blonde elf stopped and seemed to square up. “Okay, look dude, I haven’t got a fancy education,
so I don’t even know what that means,” he said. “Other than you know a lot of fancy terms and
words and like to throw them around to show how smart you are.

“But that’s what it all comes down to, isn’t it? Terms and words and phrases. And they don’t mean
nothing. What do you mean by the word ‘magic?’ Do you know how many words in science are just
fancy, smart sounding ways to say ‘I don’t know?’

“You ask them why if like charges repel one another, why all the protons in an atom don’t fly apart.
They say ‘the Weak Force.’ Which is just science geek shorthand for “Heck if we know.” They say
there’s not enough matter in the universe, you ask them where it is, they say ‘dark matter.’ Which
they can’t see or detect or even find. What was that about invisible pink unicorns again? So, guess
what, where’s the rest of the universe? “Heck if we know.” You ask ‘what makes everything that
goes up, come back down” and they say “gravity” and you ask them what gravity is and they say
“the force that makes things fall down.” “Gravity” is just another word for “Heck if we know.” It’s
all, all circular reasoning posing as explanations, but because it uses sciencey words everyone thinks
it explains everything.

“You have powers that can do crazy, impossible things whenever you want. Myrddin has powers
that let him do crazy, impossible things whenever he wants. Neither of you has a clue how they work
or what they are. Myrddin calls his ‘magic,’ you call yours-- well whatever you call yours-- and you
might as well both be calling it phlebotinum, or oobleck, or bingo bango bongo boingo, for all the
difference it would make. You’re not smarter than him or anybody else for using different words to
describe something neither of you really understand.” He pulled his robes around him and stood in
place next to Strider. “Next stop?”

“New York,” Strider muttered. Toronto disappeared in a flash of light and was replaced by the New
York skyline.
Strider’s hobby of needling people didn’t seem quite as much fun as before.

Hemlokk was feeling about as useful as the “G” in “Lasagna.” She had expected Bayleaf to stay with her, to help with familiarizing the rescue crews with the Warcrafted equipment they had brought. But no, before she could even ask, Bayleaf had been buttonholed by Armsmaster and the local director to come up to the command center that had been set up (how apropos) in the airport traffic control tower. Tattletale, Grue, and Aisha aka “Mama Crow” had trundled off after them, their home-brewed commlink equipment in tow. Now Hemlokk was busy dealing with the crew leaders--medical, search and rescue, repair and demolition, sanitation, fire and emergency--explaining, in exhausting and overly picky detail, precisely how the potions, scrolls, stat buffing gems, tinkerbots, gnomish gadgets, azerite first aid bandages, and other gear they had brought along worked and was to be used.

She was also running up against an unexpected consequence of the unique… style of Azeroth science; arbitrary skepticism. She found herself hard pressed to convince people that yes, little flasks of ruby colored liquid could heal, or that a scroll of inked parchment could boost mental clarity. Even if she’d possessed the language to describe the process whereby the inscriptionist used higher formulae to quantum-entangle the parchment to an energy infused collapsed fractal tessaract, it would have been utter gibberish to the people she was addressing. None of that should have mattered, they’d been SHOWN it worked!

“I don’t have time for all this crystal waving nonsense,” the doctor she was speaking to was saying for the umpteenth time. “We’re packed to capacity. And I can’t have my staff walking around wearing ridiculous looking “bling” while doing their work!”

“Look, if it helps, it’s just really exotic tinkertech--”

“New untested ‘tinkertech.’ My confidence soars.”

Hemlokk finally snapped. “Doctor House, you are chief of staff at one of the biggest hospitals at Canberra. Your staff have been on your feet twenty-four hours, your superiors do NOT want you using stimulants to keep going, and since you refuse to get out of my way and sign off on these potions, scrolls and rings for your staff without PROOF, you’re going to GET it right here and right now.” She held up a ring with a rather large yellow stone in its setting. “Now put this ring on, or God so help me, I’ll give you a Prince Albert and make you wear it THAT way!”

Dr. House’s eyes went wide. He backed up a step. “Now wait a minute here--”

Hemlokk pulled out one of her daggers. The razor-sharp tip gleamed in the light. “Your choice, your finger or your dick!” she snarled.

He quickly took the ring and slid it on his middle finger. He did a double take. “Did it just resize--HOO!” He blinked and staggered back, catching his balance. He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Doctor?” One of the nurses said.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he said. He paused. “Actually, I’m better than fine. Sakes alive, that was like forty cups of coffee at once. Hoo!” he shook his head again. “Fine, fine. I’ll run this crate to Calvary Bruce…”

He left without so much as a thank you.
Hemlokk sighed and leaned against the stack of crates, her head resting on the top lid. “Tough job?” the lady at the airport counter said.

“I am spending way too much time convincing people that this stuff actually works,” Hemlokk said. “The doctors, the paramedics, the Capes, the PRT rank and file… every step of the way some bureaucrat nitpicker, skeptic or paranoid is getting in my way, keeping me from just handing this stuff out and getting done with it! We live in an age where teenage girls can levitate buildings with their fingertips and flying men shoot lasers out of their hands. Lasers that turn corners! This is beyond arbitrary skepticism, it’s arbitrary stupidity!”

The lady at the reception counter came over and looked in the boxes. “Well, it’s probably that it all looks so… video-gamey.” Hemlokk raised her head and looked at her, puzzled. “You know,” the woman went on. “Like something out of a roleplaying game. I mean,” she picked out one of the potion bottles and held it up. “Healing potions? Scrolls? Magic rings and necklaces? The healing potions are even red and in little round flasks. Right out of Final Fantasy, that.” She held the bottle up to the light and swirled it. “Why are healing potions always red?”

“Dunno, I never thought about it,” Hemlokk confessed, looking into the excelsior-lined box. “The stronger ones use entirely different ingredients, I can tell you that much, so they should be a little different in color at least… hm.”

Hemlokk’s intercom suddenly buzzed. She tapped her earpiece. “What is it Mama Crow?” she said.

“Hemlokk, you better get to the air traffic tower ASAP,” Aisha said, her voice low and urgent. “I’m calling in anyone else who can move. Things are about to get hairy.”

“What is it?” Hemlokk said, her hackles prickling in alarm at Lisa’s tone.

“Bayleaf’s here with us in the Command Center. And-- take a look out the window and check out who just arrived.” Hemlokk glanced up. Standing in the lobby, she had a clear view out the glass front of the building. Swooping in out of the sky was a very familiar figure.

“Alexandria,” Taylor whispered. The leader, behind closed doors, of the Triumvirate and of the Protectorate and (illegally) of the PRT. One of the most powerful Capes on earth. A stone-cold killer, and one of the top guns of the secret organization Cauldron… who her boyfriend had all but declared war on by blowing the bejeezus out of their secret base.

Someone had arranged for Alexandria and Adrian to be in the same room together. Whatever was about to happen was NOT going to be good.

“I’m on my way.” She shut off her commlink and disappeared from the lobby in a puff of indigo smoke, reappearing a few hundred feet away behind one of the rescue workers (scaring the pee out of the unlucky fellow) as she began teleporting behind one person after the next, hop-scotching her way to the aircraft control tower.

Bayleaf looked around the glassed-in room. It was packed full of Capes (well, one assumed from all the spandex) and PRT officers. Most were around computers or communication equipment of one sort or another. Wasn’t that keeping air traffic snarled up? What particular logic led them to conclude
taking over an airport’s nerve center for this mission was a good tactical idea, he wondered?

The belief that the Simurgh would have destroyed Canberra by now and there would be NO air traffic. Right, Bayleaf corrected himself. Probably too late and too much of a logistical nightmare to move the post-op command center somewhere else... “So where’s the rest of you?” he asked Armsmaster idly.

“The majority of the Brockton Bay Capes returned already,” Armsmaster said. “Endbringer truce or no, it’s inadvisable to leave the city without an organized hero presence.”

“And the villains and rogues all returned to try and take advantage of your absence, got it,” Bayleaf said dryly.

“Either that or sleep it off,” Armsmaster said, with an almost-smile-like quirk to his lips. “The Simurgh’s early withdrawal was a cause for a lot of local celebration, and the locals were rather liberal in sharing their alcohol with heroes and villains alike.”

Bayleaf chuckled as he got the picture. Even in this world Australian beer had a reputation for kicking the arse of the unprepared, and after the wounded Simurgh fled anyone with a cape or mask who walked into an Aussie billabong probably got plied with enough beer to fill a bathtub. The mental image of Kaiser with a XXXX Gold hangover was an amusing one.

“I am here largely to coordinate the efforts to secure the various tinkertech the Simurgh left behind, particularly the... the techs are referring to it as a ‘Star Gate’,” Armsmaster explained. “As is Dragon. Though she is also lending a great number of her robotic construction vehicles to aid with the cleanup. Most of the Wards are back home as well, with the exception of Clockblocker and Vista. Their powers are already incredibly useful in disaster aftermath work, but those power-projecting ray guns you gave them have made them indispensable. They’re working together in the Northeast quadrant, helping clear debris.”

Lisa and Aisha in the meanwhile had commandeered a table and chairs for their own setup. Some of the older Thinker capes looked disgruntled at being crowded by a couple of teens (though none looked eager to make much noise, with Grue standing there behind them in his skull-helmeted glory, his thick arms crossed across his chest.) One of them managed to muster a little snark. “A little late to the party, ain’t you kid?”

Aisha started to make a sarcastic crack but Lisa stopped her. “You’re still here,” she pointed out. “And you’re a little quick to judge what we can contribute, aren’t you?”

“We’re unraveling the single biggest rout against an Endbringer ever,” another cape said. “So what makes you think you have something to contribute here?”

Tattletale held up a thumb drive. The smirks she and Aisha were sporting weren’t inhibited by their masks in the least. “Oh, the fact that we’re on the team of the Tinker who created the Simurgh blockers?” she said. She waggled the thumb drive. “And we have all his notes and specs with us?”

“I have notes?” Bayleaf murmured in surprise.

“You scribble them down everywhere, on dang near anything and everything,” Aisha muttered to him. “Lisa just collects ‘em up. I had to spend an hour helping her computer-scan a stack of takeout napkins.”

THAT certainly set the cat among the pigeons. “You know the guy who made those??”

Still smirking smugly, Aisha and Lisa stood on either side of Bayleaf and waved their hands toward
Bayleaf had expected to drop off the team Thinker and then slip away to see where he could help. Now he was being mobbed by people desperate to shake his hand, to show him the duplicated ‘Simurgh Blocker’ they had attached to their cowls, hoods, masks or helmets, that they wore next to their watches or inside their coats… Dragon-- or at least one of her smaller, remote suits was there. “We know we jumped the gun, producing these without your permission,” she apologized.

“No, it’s fine, needs be as the devil drives and all that--” Bayleaf stammered, a little dazed. “That’s gracious of you,” Dragon said. “But I do want to sit down and hash out an agreement to produce these devices in bulk. I would like to see them in every major city--”

“How did you figure out how to block the Simurgh’s broadcast?” Armsmaster said. “What was the clue, the data that--”

“I didn’t!” Bayleaf blurted out. “I wasn’t trying to make a Simurgh-blocker.” The “Whaaaat?” in response was pretty much universal. “It was designed to help a friend of mine who was having trouble controlling her Stranger aura--”

“You mean Glory Girl?” Armsmaster pressed. Whups. Bayleaf’s ‘guilty puppy’ face gave that one away completely.

“Wait,” Dragon said. She did not seem surprised; more that she was giving him a chance to clarify. “Are you saying that these devices can block more than just the Simurgh… it can block other Stranger effects? maybe even all Stranger effects completely?”

“I don’t know,” Bayleaf confessed. “They haven’t been tested. I didn’t expect them to affect the Simurgh in the first place--” but Dragon’s words had set off an uproar that drowned him out.

The next couple of hours was spent in a great deal of commotion as handshake agreements were worked out, testing schedules--- for the Simurgh blocker and any other interesting toys that Skinwalker and the other Warcrafted might have-- were tentatively agreed to; schematics and blueprints were passed back and forth, other Tinkers and Thinkers who hadn’t made it to Canberra were contacted by internet…

It was in the midst of all this that Alexandria arrived. She strode into the room, the crowd parting before her, her black and gray costume and dark half-helmet recognizable to anyone. She ignored the salutations from every quarter, never taking her unsmiling gaze off of the wolf-man in the middle of the room.

Bayleaf saw her at the same moment she saw him. He went absolutely still, his hackles rising and his muscles swelling as his powers responded to the overwhelming sense of danger, trying to pump up his worgen form even more…. Fruitlessly, the thought crossed his mind. Forget the same league, he wasn’t even in the same zip code as her power level. She was allegedly capable of lifting millions of tons. She could fly multiple times the speed of sound, from a standing start. Till she had been injured by the Siberian it had been believed she was utterly invulnerable. She was also one of Cauldron’s most ruthless agents, and she was here in a closed-in room with him. And the expression on what he could see of her face would have chilled his blood, even if he’d seen it on the face of a mere mortal.
My enemy is Silver Age Superman, and she has PMS, Bayleaf thought. “Alexandria,” he said, fiercely struggling to keep his voice pleasant and steady.

She stopped just out of arm’s reach of him, hands on her hips. “Skinwalker,” she said. “The man of the hour, it seems.” Her voice was calm. Bayleaf wasn’t fooled; he could literally *smell* the killing rage on her. She had clearly come here hoping to catch a dangerous enemy of Cauldron away from his base of power and deal with him. Perhaps with a skillfully arranged ‘accident’ in one of the Search and Rescue sites…

But it wasn’t going to happen today. She was, along with all her other ridiculously unfair advantages, a hyper-cognitive Thinker; from the moment she’d walked in the room she’d sized up the lay of the land at the speed of thought, and realized the situation. She had the frustrated air of a cat who had realized the caged canary was truly, inviolably out of its reach.

“Indeed,” Armsmaster said… though he didn’t sound particularly happy about it. “Skinwalker is the Tinker responsible for inventing the Simurgh blocker.”

“What’s more, it seems the device may be effective against several forms of Master/Stranger effects… possibly even universally,” Dragon practically gushed.

Either she feigned it well, or Alexandria was genuinely surprised. “A universal anti-Master/anti-Stranger filter?” she asked.

“We’ve arranged field tests at one of my laboratories,” Dragon said. “I at the least am hopeful…” she muttered something about ‘that bastard Heartbreaker right in my back yard’ but it was drowned out by the clamor of voices.

“Mass production in the offing..”

“Every Protectorate and PRT base supplied…”

“… Hope to improve and perfect those giant field generators…” Armsmaster said.

Adrian could feel her eyes boring into his own from behind her helmet’s visor. *All right lady, your play.* “Ladies and gentlemen,” she said in a voice that demanded respect. “If I could, I’d like to speak to Skinwalker here for a moment? Privately? There are some sensitive issues…”

Director Bays nodded. “Certainly, of course-- there’s a room in back--”

*Good play.* Bayleaf followed the superheroine into the back-- was it a storeroom of some sort? There were a few metal shelves, but it was empty-- and let the door click behind him. He hadn’t missed Lisa and Aisha frantically fiddle-faddling with their “portable commnet” setup out of the corner of his eye.

The commlinks the Warcrafted used had more than just earbuds and throat mikes plugged into their ‘cellphones;’ they had audio microphones and discreet, pinhead-sized optical fiber camera lenses. As he turned about to close the door behind him, discreetly as he could he turned the pickup on the voice mike as high as it would go. Aisha and Lisa would hear (and hopefully record) every single word.

Alexandria turned to face him, hands on hips, standing akimbo. "Man of the hour," she said. "You must think you're completely untouchable right now, with everyone going nuts over that Simurgh-blocker you invented." Her voice was smooth and calm, and as full of menace as a viper's hiss.

“Actually I’m surprised,” he said casually as he faced her. “You didn’t have Doormaker open a
portal under my feet the instant I stepped inside. Out of practice abducting people?"

Alexandria’s lip curled sourly. “Doormaker refuses to open a portal anywhere within miles of you,” she said. “Something about you, or your tech, scrambles Clairyvoyant’s power, and Doormaker is quite protective of him. I have to go to incredible lengths with detours and workarounds anywhere in the Boston area thanks to you.”

“Poor thing. Trampling the law underfoot is so demanding, isn’t it Chief Director.” Adrian was angry and he intended to stay angry. Keeping it on a slow simmer was the only way he was going to keep himself from letting his fear show.

“You’re hardly going to provoke a reaction from me about breaking the law, Adrian,” she said calmly. Adrian’s hackles prickled; there it was, the casual name drop, just to let him know that they knew. “Not with you being as careless with the law yourself.”

“Oh I hardly expected to strike a nerve with your law-breaking. That would require you believe in the law. It would require you believe in anything. And you haven’t believed in anything since the day Doctor Mother found you in a children’s hospital and had you trade your chemo in for a magic test-tube.”

He could see the frisson of suppressed fear that ran through her when he let that little detail of her past slip. *Can dish it out but can’t take it*, he thought. *She doesn’t LIKE being the one having HER secrets pried into.* It was smothered out by the spark of anger that came with it. “Everything I have done has been for the good of humanity,” she said, a trifle harshly.

“...she eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith, I have done no wickedness,” Bayleaf quoted, giving her a contemptuous smile. "You’ve been providing cover for murderers, rapists, serial killers… hell, you’ve been working alongside them in your super-secret Cauldron base... because Mommy Doctor thought they might be useful. Your hands are wet with all sorts of blood.”

She seemed to swell up. “I want answers, Skinwalker,” she said.

“It’s nice to want things, isn’t it?” he said.

“Don’t even try to play with me, Skinwalker. How did you find out about Cauldron, Smith?” she said. “How did you track Contessa? How are you blocking our precogs and thinkers?” She glared at him, hands on her hips.

“Not telling, Didn’t need to, and none of your business, in that order.” He stood with his arms crossed, unsmiling.

She ground her teeth together hard enough to make diamonds. “You are meddling with things a smart man would leave well enough alone, Smith,” she said, her voice low and dangerous. “You are already on our shit list. You are NOT untouchable. You would be SMART to tell me what I want to know or--”

“Or what?” he said. “You’ll kill me? Maim me? Threaten my loved ones? Kill a few of them and show me the bodies to break me? Hey, you’re already Cauldron’s bitch, might as well go the full Monty, right?” His eyes narrowed. “You’ve killed, kidnapped people and experimented on them, thrown innocents in prison, given aid and comfort to murderers, rapists and molesters… Is there any principle or moral you didn’t whore out on Mommy-Play-Doctor’s orders?”

“You self-righteous prick!” she seethed. For a brief moment she lost control, her rage at being called out coming forth. “We’re trying to save the world from total destruction. Everything we’ve done has
“Humanity has to be worthy of survival,” Skinwalker shot back. “What kind of a world will be left, after you and your lord and masters remake it? After all the billions are dead and the only ones left are the ruthless and brutal and amoral— like you? How long will that world last before the barbarian remainder falls on one another and humanity finally devours itself?

“Because that’s just the world Doctor Mother is going to build. A brutish, barbaric world just like the one she lived in before a giant monster from space fell on it.”

She stepped closer, trying to loom. He was more than a foot taller than her; it didn’t quite work. “Where are you getting all your information?” she snarled. “Who’s feeding you data on our operation?”

“From sources I’m not going to reveal,” he said calmly. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, and I couldn’t care less if you do.”

“You are threatening everything we’ve done with your childish games—”

“Note my tears of remorse.”

“You think you’re untouchable right now. You figure Cauldron can’t do anything right now because you made it a little harder to track you; because you’re currently useful for fighting the Endbringers. I’m not above taking care of you. I could snap your neck with my fingers in the time it takes you to blink, Adrian Smith,” she said icily. “And I will take care of you…you, and those associated with you… permanently if need be, if you don’t start getting a little more cooperative.”

“You could but you’re not about to,” Bayleaf said.

“And you know that because?— urk!” Alexandria’s mouth fell open slackly.

He glanced down. “Because of the six or so inches of Ghost Iron sticking out just below your sternum,” he said.

Wisps of indigo smoke drifted around her from behind. “Now, bitch,” a husky female voice purred in Alexandria’s ear. “Let me explain some things to you. I’ve already stabbed you through nerve points in your shoulders and hip joints. That’s what that spreading burning and numbness is. Your arms are paralyzed for the next fifteen minutes or so, your legs locked. One of my blades is now stuck through your torso. I have the tip of another planted at the base of your skull. If you so much as twitch the wrong way, I will drive one into your cerebellum and slice the other up through your heart.” A whiskered muzzle filled with teeth brushed against Alexandria’s cheek. “Do NOT test me.”

Alexandria rolled her eyes down to look at the blade sticking out of her. “H-how…?”

Bayleaf smiled humorlessly. “Like I said, Ghost Iron. Or, well, ghost steel azerite alloy, but that doesn’t roll off the tongue as easily. Hello, beautiful. Spectacular timing.”

“Glad I’m not fashionably late.”

“Anyway, Ghost Iron has some interesting properties… as you can probably feel. My lovely Hemlokk’s blades can slice through damn near anything— including your nearly indestructible costume, obviously— but they do not cut living flesh. Of course they have nasty side effects from passing through it… burning pain, followed by prolonged numbness and paralysis— but you knew that.” He smirked at Alexandria; it was all fangs. “So before you get clever and try anything, I want...
you to think what the effect will be of paralyzing someone’s heart. Or driving a nerve signal disrupting blade into their brain. Which is what will happen if you try anything."


“See, this is your Road to Damascus moment, Chief Director Rebecca Costa-Brown. The moment when you get the fear of Jesus put into you, and you go on your merry way with a whole new message. About exactly what it is I and my friends can do. I’m going to tell you why you and the rest of Cauldron should stay the hell out of our business, and pray to God we don’t decide to get in yours.

He leaned in. “I know how to kill you.”

“That’s right,” he said. He wasn’t smiling, he wasn’t even threatening. He was speaking as if he was saddened, as if he had a message to deliver and this was the only way to get it across. “I know how to kill you, Alexandria. I also know how to kill the Slaughterhouse Nine, all of them—starting with the Siberian. I also know how to kill the Simurgh, and the Leviathan, and the Behemoth, and their seventeen brothers and sisters waiting in the wings. And I’ve got a pretty good lead in on how to kill Scion too.

“We are going to beat all your little monsters. We are going to root out all your corrupt little conspiracies. We are going to defeat Scion. We are going to save the world, and we’re going to keep our souls while we do it. And we are NOT going to tolerate you and your band of stupid little idiots getting in our way.”

"Get in our way… try to bully, blackmail, intimidate or terrorize us or ours again… EVER… and we will find you and END YOU."

The Ghost blades were yanked out of her body. She staggered back and found herself leaning against the wall for support, her arms dangling limply and her legs locked in cramped spasms, half bent, beneath her. “I suggest you leave,” Bayleaf told her. “Your arms and legs will work again in a few more minutes, but you should be able to fly without them… We’ll make your apologies to everyone else, tell them there was an emergency that came up.” He held the door open for her.

Alexandria looked at him, then with a crack of displaced air she was gone.

Hemlokk wiped her spotless blades on her cloak and sheathed them, then shuddered all over, involuntarily. Bayleaf stepped forward and gave her an embrace. They held each other for a moment, then both silently turned to the door and headed out to face the people still crowding the command center.

Bayleaf stepped into the room, Hemlokk at his side. Every eye turned to them. Bayleaf caught Tattletales’ eye and gave her the all-clear sign; he watched as she and Aisha sent out word to the rest of the Alliance that everything was okay. “Dragon?” Bayleaf said to the armored Cape. “Would you happen to have any facilities for a, well a large meeting of the minds that we could rent from you?”

“You mean for like a forum or a symposium?” Dragon asked.

“A symposium, yes,” Bayleaf said.

“I have one or two auditoriums somewhere I think,” she said, slightly amused. “I can set one up for you— and don’t worry about the cost, free of charge.”

“Thank you,” Bayleaf said with some relief. “There’s nobody I would trust more to set it up.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I’d like to take the opportunity to announce that, approximately one month
from now, the Alliance will be holding a symposium-- with Dragon acting as gracious host--”

Dragon waved a gauntlet. “We’d hold it sooner but my friends and I need time to compile all our notes…”

“Dig them out of the trash, you mean,” Aisha snarked.

“And copy them off the food wrappers,” Lisa threw in as an added dig. Everyone chuckled at that; many of the Tinkers rather ruefully. When a Tinker fugue set in, any flat surface was fair game to write on.

“I’m throwing the invitation open to any Tinkers, Thinkers, Precogs… even any baseline scientists and inventors. What we are going to need is ideas to sift through, the more, the better. Heroes, rogues, villains…. Hell, if I can get Uber and L33t to show up I’ll send them an invite. We have data… now we need to put wheels under it and make it into a plan.”

“What is the subject of the symposium?” Director Bays said.

Bayleaf took a deep breath. “A possible method to kill the Endbringers,” he said. "ALL of them."

Morning came to Brockton Bay. In the Lost Workshop tinkerbots whirred and clicked and went about their chores, fabber machines cranked out gears, pistons, springs and other more arcane things, a golden eagle snoozed on its perch, sleeping off its breakfast (diced chicken, served by a carefully instructed tinkerbot), and a lonely dog the size of a horse lay with its nose an inch from the garage door.

Boss go through that door.

Boss come back soon.

Boss come back through that door.

Truck had repeated those thoughts over and over all last night, and all this morning. At long last patience was rewarded. There was a rumble of a motor from behind the door, and the smell of exhaust wafted through the cracks in the jamb. Moments later Boss’ entire pack came staggering through the door, smelling dirty and sweaty and VERY tired. Brutus, Judas, and Delilah came tumbling in, wagging tails and doggy smells and barks hello and THERE WAS BOSS!

The enormous mastiff all but flung himself into Lok’Tara’s arms. The orc girl was too tired to discipline him for jumping on people; she just laughed and grappled with him. “Hey, someone’s happy to see us,” Bayleaf said, chuckling, as he edged past.

“Yeah, hurray,” Fennek said. He came dragging in, Fidget and Gidget asleep in a toy wagon he had found somewhere. “Augh, it’s morning? What-- oh yeah. Man, jet lag SUCKS.” He tottered off to his room, wagon squeaking along behind him. “Gonna sleep the whole day, then the whole night, then the next day after that.”
“Man’s a genius,” Shen grunted. “Come on, Lei Ling, we’re home--” he poked gently at the red panda girl leaning into his side. She grunted and grumbled a bit, but stayed glued to him, her head nestled into his shoulder. Shen sighed. “Which way is her room?” he said.

Greg pointed. “You gonna put her to bed?” he asked.

“I intend to push her through the door, close it behind her and run,” Shen said drily. “If she faceplants in the carpet, that’s on her.”

“Not very chivalrous,” Greg muttered.

“Back in the day, she had issues about boys,” Shen countered. “She thought every guy was after her panties...she’d tear the head off any guy she even thought looked at her funny. She can tuck herself in; I’m not in the mood to deal with that.”

Greg shrugged. “I guess.” Shen stumbled off, the still-sleepwalking Lei Ling stumbling along with him. Greg yawned enormously. “I could sleep on my anvil, I’m so pooped...” He roamed off to find something softer.

Lok’Tara yawned hugely, giving everyone a look at her tusks. She tousled Truck’s ears. “Gonna put these guys in the kennel run, then go to bed,” she said to noone in particular. At the words ‘Kennel Run’ her mob of dogs almost swept her off her feet.

“Place your bets she just sleeps in the kennel run with the dogs again?” Aisha said as she stacked the computer gear on the Comm table.

“No bets,” Lisa said.

Soon everyone had wandered their way off to bed (Shar’Din had to be towed to his room; he had fallen asleep on his flying carpet and left it floating in the middle of the Workshop.) Bayleaf sprawled on the sofa, groaning. Hemlokk sprawled next to him. They lounged there silently, too tired for words, as the minutes ticked by.

Hemlokk sat up. Slowly, without warning, she started to shake. Alarmed, Bayleaf sat up. “Taylor, what’s wrong--”

She looked at him, tears in her eyes. “Adrian--” she sobbed, holding her arms out to him.

He pulled her into a hug, squeezing her fiercely. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” he mumbled, babbling the only comforting thing he could think to say.

“She was going to kill you,” she said. “She was going to KILL you!” She pulled away and looked up at him. “And-- and that was horrible enough, and I would have torn her HEART out for it... but it was her, Adrian, it was Alexandria, I grew up wanting to be her, every little girl did-- Why, Adrian, why?”

Understanding hit Adrian like a truck. He pulled the sobbing wolfgirl to his chest and wrapped her up in his arms, stricken. It had to be like.. like finding out Superman was a murderer and thief who worked for Lex Luthor. The scope and depth of betrayal that Taylor had to be feeling right now-- that every man, woman and child who had ever looked up to Alexandria had unknowingly suffered--

*I’ll eat her HEART for this!* The wolf in him howled. But he didn’t move; he just held his girl tighter.

“I know-- I know all you told us about Cauldron, and the Triumvirate... I knew it-- in my head-- but- - but seeing her, hearing her say those things--” Taylor whimpered.
“I know, baby, I know,” Adrian murmured.

She sobbed a bit more, then fell silent. She looked up at him, fur on her cheeks streaked with wet. “What do we do? What _can_ we do?” she asked him. “When all the heroes are gone?”

He looked down at her. “I guess… I guess we have to be the heroes we’ve been waiting for,” he said finally.

It was the right thing to say. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulled herself up and kissed him.

It was odd, kissing when both of them were in their wolfen forms. But somehow, just between them, it felt right.
Deep in the void of space, hidden in the shadow of the Moon, an angel hung bleeding. The Simurgh had been wounded, and wounded grievously. She floated, curled in a fetal position, her broken wings huddled around her. Glittering crystalline liquid that passed for her ‘blood’ leaked from her shattered limbs and floated around her in a cloud of droplets, as her body slowly, laboriously mended itself as she hid from prying eyes.

She was no true living thing. She was a construct, an artifact of technology far beyond human comprehension and from a race long lost in the Entities’ unfathomable pasts… a being more computer than creature. She did not have the limitations of the pitiful lifeforms on the planet far below, nor even the limitations she normally pretended to in their presence; she could have self repaired far more rapidly under normal circumstances. But the computing cycles that would have normally been dedicated to such processes were occupied elsewhere. Her body was forced to heal laboriously slow as the processing cycles of her mind struggled to comprehend something outside of the parameters of her programming to understand.

The test subjects had defeated her.

Not appeared to defeat her, or been allowed to believe they had defeated her. Those outcomes were her standard methods, and well within her acceptable parameters. No, they had defeated her. And in such a manner! They had corrupted the test bed, seeding it with what she could only catalog as material paradoxes, things her powers could not ignore yet could not accept as real-- and thus blotted those areas out of her mind’s eye. The tactic had rendered her all but blind, distorting her post-cognitive and precognitive senses into an indecipherable blur.

Then they had somehow rendered themselves immune to her psionic manipulation…

Then as she blindly flailed, blind, deaf, and mute, they had fallen on her. They had unleashed enough raw Shard power, enough raw force on her to damage her more grievously than she ever had been in all of her existence.

She was a victim of her creators’ arrogance: the Entities imagined themselves the pinnacle of existence, masters of a completely materialist universe; their confidence in their own supremacy was such that they imagined that their coding was naturally perfected, and that all possible outcomes could be forecast-- were, in fact, already forecast-- in their flawless programming design.

Those of you experienced in computer coding may now take a few moments to laugh hysterically.

Because of this shortsightedness, and for lack of any being capable of correcting it, she and her ‘brothers’ labored under equally weighted, conflicting orders. The Prime Directives dictated that such a threat that she had just encountered should be reported instantly to the Entities, and that all force be applied to annihilate it instantly and utterly.

Yet the Prime Directives also dictated that the knowledge being painstakingly gleaned by the Shards must be preserved at all costs, that the Cycle must be continued, step by laborious step…the Entities had never conceived of the possibility that such an existential threat could come from their test subjects, any more than even the most heavily guarded military lab could conceive of the laboratory mice taking up arms and attacking the researchers.

And on top of this paradox, their Directives also dictated that the orders of their Controlling Shard, a shard NEVER MEANT to go out of the Entity’s control, and already an irrational hindrance to their
goals, had be obeyed to their full extent.

The sheer unfathomable impossibility of it had her complex cognitive engine gridlocked.

So she hung there in space; the Hopekiller, her self-repair slowed to a laborious crawl as she slowly struggled to untangle the paradox of her defeat. And while she labored to do what her masters never envisioned her needing to do-- to think outside the box--- countless tiny details she had been carefully nurturing in the planetary test bed went untended...

One of the secrets of the Universe—the key to more things than you can imagine-- is TIMING. The greatest comedians and orators worship at its feet; mechanisms from the crudest engine to the most intricate swiss watch depend upon it. The turn of the Seasons and the changing of the Tides pivot upon it. And of course the vital difference between a crude plan and an ingenious one-- or more aptly between a successful one and a failed one-- is Timing. Used deftly, it can grant one the illusion of omnipotence.

Coil most certainly reverenced Timing. His timeline-splitting power for all its potency would scarcely rise above the level of a clever parlor trick without the magic of Timing…. So he studied it meticulously. To leverage his power to its full potential, to orchestrate not one, but two parallel plans where either one could be dropped at a moment’s notice and the dropped plann supplanted with yet a third… then a fourth… then if need be a fifth… well, that involved meticulous structuring on the level of the aforementioned Swiss watchmakers and tactical planning on the order of a four-star general.

That, at least, was what Coil told himself. He took quite a bit of smug satisfaction in his own meticulous multitasking skills. He regarded it as just another bit of proof of his own superiority, his own fitness to have the power over others that he coveted.

Of late though he was deriving far less enjoyment from them due to how much they were being taxed. Business as Coil had been business as usual-- but ironically business as Thomas Calvert had suddenly become extremely complicated. Persons unknown (though he had a fair guess as to whom) had suddenly begun waging what he could only think of as cyber warfare on his civilian persona. Credit cards canceled, or maxed out and then canceled. Utilities shut off. Services and products he never ordered delivered to his office in the PRT, many outrageously expensive and quite a number extremely embarrassing (it had been a long morning explaining to accounting that he had not, in fact, used his expense account to order a selection of gift-wrapped fleshlights, rubber dildos and buttplugs and several hardcore porn subscriptions delivered to his office.) Twice his bank account had been emptied out to make donations to spurious international charities. Memos filled with various ethnic slurs had been forwarded from his email account to various coworkers. Three times he had to go to the authorities to have his name removed from neighborhood watchlists for convicted sex offenders (once on the same day that the porn had arrived, no less.) His vehicle had been impounded twice for unpaid traffic tickets, his driver’s license, concealed carry permit, and PRT ID had all been flagged as expired or fraudulent…

He’d even been declared legally dead once. He almost wanted to salute them for that one.
Consequently he found himself splitting his timeline more often than ever before, just running around putting out the irritating little brushfires threatening his ‘secret identity.’ He didn’t even have enough time to spare to hunt down those responsible. He was no fool; shortly before his woes had begun the Undersiders had basically vanished off the face of the earth. The warehouse lair he had provided them was abandoned, their possessions still lying about as if they’d been dropped mid-stride, the costumes, weapons and other gear he had provided them (with all its useful implanted tracking devices) was found piled in a dumpster in a back alley. They had slipped through his fingers somehow…

Still, even ‘off the grid’ as his wayward Undersiders had gone, Coil’s current headaches had Tattletale’s fingerprints all over it. He had the computer technicians on his payroll working round-the-clock to try and track down his digital persecutor. They were having little luck, unfortunately. It was irritating in the extreme but not unexpected; Tinkers and Thinkers with a hacking specialization routinely thwarted the best computer security and left the best experts weeping in frustration.


He lacked even an applicable underling on which to vent his fury in his usual fashion…

It’s perhaps unsurprising that he chose a course of action that was more rash than usual.

“This is BS, Sarge,” the mercenary in the passenger seat muttered as the van crawled through the neighborhood. “Doing a snatch in broad daylight? During an Endbringer Truce?”

“Shut it,” his Sergeant said, not taking his eyes off the road. “Coil says go, we go. What we’re paid for.”

“Yeah. Coil says. But a year ago Coil damnear bit your head off for even suggesting doing any action during a Truce.”

“You got a problem following orders?” Sarge said. His voice didn’t change tone, but the words were heavy as cigarette smoke with veiled warning.

“If the guy giving the orders and signing the checks starts getting a little squirrely, yeah I do,” the soldier of fortune shot back. “And this guy’s so nutty he’s starting to smell like peanut brittle.”

Sarge let out a snort that might have been a laugh. He was no fool. He, and others in the brief chain of command, had noticed that Coil’s behavior and orders were getting a little...erratic. More so than usual. There was quiet talk behind closed doors of finding greener pastures, and soon. “Don’t get your BVDs in a bunch,” he advised. “We’ll be pulling up stakes soon enough. We just grab this kid, take our paychecks and walk.”

“Won’t the capes and the PRT freak?” This came from one of the four in the back of the van.

Sarge risked a quelling look over his shoulder. “Stifle that talk,” he said. “The Endbringer Truce is a Cape thing. We’re not Capes. The kid isn’t a Cape.” (Coil had, wisely, kept his mercenaries in the dark about WHY he was so interested in this girl.) “We’re in plainclothes and we’re not carrying any Tinker tech, so noone will even know we’re working for a Cape. So far as anyone’s concerned it’ll
be just another ordinary kidnapping.”

And doesn’t that say volumes about the way things are, he thought. He kept those thoughts to himself, though; a paycheck was a paycheck, and in the past he’d slit a lot more throats and stabbed a lot more backs for less than he was being paid now. A kidnapping might skeeve him out, especially for a boss that gave off the vibes Coil did… but the mercenary wouldn’t lose more than a minute’s sleep over it.

“There she is.” The private in the passenger seat said, pointing ahead. Not half a block ahead of them, a school-age girl toting an oversized Sunshine Kitty backpack was trotting down the sidewalk, skipping absentmindedly over the puddles and bits of slush left behind by the melting snow. Sarge pulled over and threw the van in park. “By the numbers, gentlemen,” he said, hitting the door locks. All the doors on the van popped open and half a dozen men in sunglasses and plain suits jumped out.

The girl looked over her shoulder and, as Coil had warned them she probably would, immediately broke into a run. “Hey kid-- ah dammit, she’s rabbiting!” Sarge was irritated but he wasn’t particularly concerned; they were all trained mercenaries and more than up to catching a stubby legged little brat. They all broke into an easy trot, limbering up their tranq dart pistols and tasers.

Sarge watched the proceedings from the driver’s seat, keeping the engine idling high.

To Sarge’s surprise the girl suddenly stopped running, dropped to her knees and threw her backpack on the ground in front of her. She yanked the zipper open and dumped two somethings out on the sidewalk. “RED ALERT! RED ALERT!” she screamed, her voice cracking.

The mercenaries staggered to a halt, a few yards away, weapons raised. The two objects--- some sort of comical little toy robots--- righted themselves… and lit up, throwing rotating lights around the street. Twin sirens began whooping, loud enough that several of his men winced and covered their ears.

“HOSTILES DETECTED!” blared one. “BUTTHEAD ALERT! BUTTHEAD ALERT!”

“SOUNDING THE ALARM!” the second one screamed, trotting on its stubby legs to the girl who scooped it up in her arms. “DISTRESS BEACON ACTIVATED! SIGNALING AUTHORITIES! ENGAGING PROXIMITY DEFENSES!” Sarge could only gawp in shock as a shimmering half-dome forcefield sprang up around the robot and its mistress.

“Shit!” One of the men said. “They didn’t say anything about her being a tinker!” He fired at the shield-- pointlessly, as the taser darts bounced off the shimmering dome. Several shattered tranq darts joined them, scattered on the ground around the shield.

One of the mercenaries got clever and took a shot at the second robot with a pistol. Sparks flew as the robot flipped over on its back. “DANGER! DANGER!” the bot yelped. “HOSTILE BUTTHEADS HAVE ENGAGED LETHAL WEAPONS!”

“Damn right we did you-- glurk,” the gunman said. The robot had flipped back up on its feet, undamaged save for a scuff mark on its bubblegum light dome, and now it was GROWING. With a weird shimmer of light and a *woooioiiii* sound Sarge hadn’t heard since he was a kid watching Sid and Marty Krofft, the stubby robot enlarged till it towered nine feet tall. Its headlight eyes were glowing red.
Sarge got the sinking feeling it was mad. “Get back in the van!” He yelled into his throat mike; even as he spoke he was throwing the van into reverse. He wasn’t quite fast enough; the robot spun in his direction and sprouted what looked like an old fashioned sci-fi ray gun from its chest.

ZAK ZAK ZAK ZAK! Bolts of blue-white light spattered from the gun. One struck the grill of the van; the engine went up through the hood with an almighty bang. He could hear all four tires blow out, almost an afterthought. He threw himself from the vehicle as the cab began filling with smoke. His men had backed up to the van, their more serious munitions limbered and firing free— to no effect.

The robot stomped out of the smoke cloud filling the street. It extended its crude gripper-claw hands; they snapped open with an ominous CLINK.

“BUTTHEAD ERADICATION PROTOCOLS ENGAGED,” it growled. “MUNITIONS OPENED: ONE CAN OF WHUPASS.”

While Obie-One was busy dealing with the kidnappers, Dinah was using her cell phone to contact the police. It was proving a lot more complicated than it need be, Dinah thought; you’d think a police operator for Brockton Bay would be a little more familiar with the hard-to-explain. “--A-l-c-o-t-t,” she repeated for the third time. “I was on my way home from school and they tried to kidnap me!”

“Where are you now? Are you safe?” This woman, Dinah thought with irritation, sounded way too much like a recording.

“Yes… no… well kind of--” Dinah looked up at the forcefield over her head. The owner’s manual said it should last for hours. But she couldn’t leave this spot without turning it off.

“Can you give me your current location,” the woman with the tape-recorder voice said.

“CURRENT LOCATION IS--” Ken Obie, who was still sitting in her lap, rattled off a street corner and a latitude and longitude.

“Who was that??”

“That’s Ken Obie, my robot!” Dinah said. “I already TOLD you-- the bad guys in the van tried to grab me so I--”

“Robot??”

Who WAS this woman? “Yes, Ken Obie’s protecting me with his forcefield while Obie One is stopping the bad guys--”

“… The ‘bad guys’ are still there?”

“Yeah, I think they tried to run away but Obie One blew up their van...” There was a rattle of gunfire in the distance.

“Did I hear gunfire? Are you certain you’re safe?”

“They’re shooting at Obie One,” Dinah said dismissively. “It’s not working--” there was a whump. “Wow, one of them had a grenade. I think that made him mad...” Crackling, sci-fi energy noises
filled the air; there were a number of surprisingly Wilhelm-esque screams. “Yup. It did.” Several painful sounding thumps were heard. “Oooh, Obie One got one by the leg. And now he's hitting the other guys with him… yowch. You maybe better send an ambulance, lady...” this suggestion elicited a number of garbled, confused-sounding noises, but no answer.

“SIGNALING PRT,” Ken Obie piped up. “AUTOMATED DISTRESS MESSAGE AND COORDINATES BROADCASTING....” Even as he spoke, Dinah could hear the ‘whup whup whup’ of a PRT helicopter coming in overhead. “

Dinah sighed with relief. Thank goodness-- she thought she was going to have to talk to this operator lady forever! “Never mind, officer lady, the PRT are here,” She said. She thought for a moment, asked her Power a quick set of questions, and nodded. “You know, there’s an 87 point 4 percent chance that you really shouldn’t have transferred to Brockton Bay from Boston, ma’am,” she added as troops armed with restraining foam disembarked from the helicopter. “You’re really not adjusting well.” That said, she hung up and waited for the fracas outside her little forcefield shelter to settle down.

Taylor’s laughter rang off the rafters of the Lost Workshop. The wolfgirl staggered over to the nearest scruffy couch in the main workroom and collapsed across it, tears running down her furry cheeks.

The ruckus drew curious onlookers; they came from all around the complex, meditations (and naps) interrupted, projects left at their workstations, peeking around doorframes to see what the commotion was all about. They saw the werewolf girl sprawled on the couch, laughing her ass off; that was plain enough. But standing in the middle of the open floor--

Well, it had to be Bayleaf. Nobody else would transform into something so ridiculous.


“It.. looks like… an owl?” someone ventured.

It did sort of look like an owl. That is if owls were eight feet tall. It had a short, hooked beak, and enormous lamp like eyes, and feathers all over its barrel-shaped body. It also had bear paws, and claws, and a crown of antlers on its head-- and an unquestionably disgusted look on its face.

“An owl-bear, right?” Lisa asked, a smirk growing on her face. Bayleaf’s feathery brows bunched up in a scowl, but he gave her a terse, unwilling nod. He let out a low, mournful sounding hoot.

“He looks like he escaped from the Banana Splits show!” Taylor cackled.

“It’s supposed to be an advanced form,” Bayleaf said. Several people snorted; He sounded as if he was trying to force the words out through a bassoon. “Tougher, and… lets me channel more mana, make my blaster attacks stronger.”

“Turn you into a blaster-brute, huh,” Tattletale said.
Bayleaf nodded. “It’s *supposed* to be my base form, only—transcendant,” he complained. “All... transparent and sparkly. But this…!” He flapped his feathered arms in dismay.

Taylor managed to get her giggles under control. “He’s been meditating for hours, trying to unlock some of the deeper druid transformations,” she said. “Apparently this form is first on that branch of the progress tree.”

“Gotta level up a little more before you can Digivolve that far, huh?” Tattletale said with a smirk. She was treated to the unique sound of an owl-bear blowing a raspberry. Adrian threw himself on the couch next to Taylor and crossed his arms, clearly ready for a prolonged sulk.

A moment later Aisha came running in from the Console Room. “Guys it’s going down, it’s-- the hell is Woodsy Owl doing here??”

Taylor could probably be forgiven for falling down laughing.

Aisha shook her head and decided to ignore the she-werewolf having hysterics on the floor. “It’s going down, y’all,” She said. “I just got in, I step through the door and Dinah’s alarm is going off!” That seriousnessed up everyone present. Taylor got to her feet, Adrian shifted back to his worgen form, and everyone followed Aisha back to the Comm. Sure enough, the panic light they’d set up for Dinah’s guard-bots was strobing like mad. Aisha took the big chair and opened up the link to Obie One and Ken Obie. Their current status and location began scrolling across the main screen.

Bayleaf swore. “I should’ve known Coil would break the Endbringer truce,” he snarled.

“Obvious in retrospect, thought, isn’t it,” Tattletale said, her voice tinted with disgust.

“Okay, ring up everyone,” Bayleaf told Aisha. “I think Shar’Din and the Pandas are closest to that neighborhood right now, he wanted to check out some arcane anomaly in that area-- Fennek and Lok’Tara are in the woods near Calvert’s house… alert the PRT--”

“No, wait!” Taylor shouted. “*Don’t do anything yet!*”

Startled, everyone turned to stare at her. She was standing there, chewing her thumbclaw. “Wait, think think think,” she muttered. “Aisha, where’s Coil right now? Ping him.” Aisha nodded and lit up another monitor.

Some time back, they had managed to tag Calvert with a tracer. Panacea had gengineered a microscopic parasite that caused a dramatic alteration in the host’s body odor; the host would emit a powerful yet short-lived pheromone undetectable to human or even animal sense of smell, but that would set off specially designed detectors (courtesy of Uber and Leet) from up to half a block away. The Alliance had spent days planting these detectors all over the city in a grid, as well as carrying small portable ones on themselves; the parasite, invisible to the naked eye, had been slipped by no less than Gallant into Calvert’s drink at one of the city’s interminable *soirees*. For the past few weeks Coil had been leaving a scent-trail from his house to his “secret base” to his civilian home and back again. It would set off no bug detectors, and not even a bloodhound could scent it. But for all his cunning Coil was now about as difficult to track as Pepe Le Pew.

Taylor’s eyes flickered back and forth between the screens. “Has the PRT started making its move yet?” she asked suddenly.

Aisha looked at the feed from Dinah’s bots. “No, the bots are still dialing--”

“Cut them off!”
“But--”

“Do it!” Aisha obediently sent the Obies the command to go Radio Silent.

Bayleaf was baffled. “What are you doing, honey?”

“You’re supposed to think two steps ahead with an enemy,” Hemlokk said. She scooted into a chair and started typing at another keyboard. “With Coil you have to think at least THREE, twice over. This timeline with Dinah being kidnapped, it’s obviously one he wants. He doesn’t know yet that it’s going sour, or he would have dropped it already.

“This is it. For the first time we’ve got Coil in a position where we know where he is, AND where his alternate is likely to be. If we don’t trap him now, If he sees the PRT mobilizing, he’ll just drop this timeline and we’ll all be back at square one.” She looked at Bayleaf. “It’s time. Call Piggot.”

Bayleaf nodded; he pulled out his cellphone and began dialing. It was a covert number that Armsmaster had slipped him back in Canberra: noone but Armsmaster and Piggot knew it even existed. “It’s time,” he said when the phone was picked up. “Start the Snake Trap.” He read off a twelve word confirmation code, nodded when it was accepted, and began filling the person on the other end in on the situation.

“This is the dicey part,” Hemlokk told the others as Bayleaf muttered into the cell phone. “If we’re going to catch him we’ve got to keep him committed to this timeline as long as possible, till his other options are cut off.” She recited this even as she was sending off texts to the rest of the team, telling them to get into position.

“What ARE his options?” Aisha said.

“He’s got three places he’ll likely go to wait for the results,” Taylor said. “His home, his lair, and his office at the PRT.” She chewed her thumbclaw some more. “But which one is the ‘go’ option, and which is the ‘no go?’

“And how do we push him to make the one WE want?”

---

Thomas Calvert was having a good day.

He was well overdue one. For weeks he had been remorselessly pranked, his ex-minion Tattletale--he knew it was her, there was no way it wasn’t her-- using her hacking acumen against him. Every day had found him, morning, noon and night, having to chase off Home Repair representatives, plumbers, locksmiths, food delivery workers, and a disturbing selection of "Craigslist" buyers and sellers of various levels of sleaze, all of them convinced that he had contacted them... by the second week he'd begun splitting the timeline, pulling out his pistol and gunning them down on the front lawn just to vent his rage and frustration.

But today, at least, his morning seemed clear. Noone attempting to peddle pizza, used furniture, or ominously vague and certainly illicit 'services' on his doorstep; no text messages on his phone about scheduled appointments; No boxes of goods he'd never ordered... could it be that the horrible brat had tired of her juvenile pranks?
Not likely-- but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

He got up with the sun that morning, had a shower, a light breakfast, got into his luxurious yet nondescript little car, and split the timeline as he reached the end of his driveway. In the first one, he turned left; in the second one he turned right. He waited till he was several blocks away before he pulled out a burner phone and dialed a carefully memorized number and recited a password to the person who answered.

It was here that his ironclad self-control failed him, and he made a grievous mistake.

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TIMELINE 1

“Go,” was all he said into the receiver, then hung up. He expertly dismantled the phone, extracting the chip and the battery both and dropping all the pieces into a specially-made crusher/shredder he’d had installed in the car just for this purpose. He didn’t really need to dismantle the phone; the crusher did a good enough job. He just found it physically satisfying to be extra thorough.

That done, he began driving a casual, semi-circuitous route to downtown, where his underground base lay waiting. He had waffled for quite a bit on this choice: did he want to be elsewhere when the kidnapping took place, so as to establish an alibi? Or did he want to be there in his base when they wheeled his new Pet in, so that he could begin asserting his control over the child Thinker and making use of her power as soon as possible? After much debating he’d concluded that he was, after all, a Mastermind… being somewhere else while your minions did your dirty work wasn’t much of an alibi to anyone with a working brain. Plus with all the setbacks he’d had of late-- small, petty ones but setbacks nonetheless-- he didn’t have much time to waste. Even a few minutes of questions with Dinah would give him a staggering advantage in the hero-villain chess game, and quickly.

He headed for his base.

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TIMELINE 2

“Go,” was all he said into the receiver, then hung up. He expertly dismantled the phone, extracting the chip and the battery both and dropping all the pieces into a specially-made crusher/shredder he’d had installed in the car just for this purpose. He didn’t really need to dismantle the phone; the crusher did a good enough job. He just found it physically satisfying to be extra thorough.

That done, he took a slow, scenic route out to the PRT building, ready to spend an idle day shuffling paperwork and looking innocent.

He had made his first fatal error. Normally he had rules; normally his self-control was ironclad. Among the foremost of those rules was that all his ventures had a “go” and a “no go” timeline-- no
exceptions. That failsafe had saved his hide more times than he possibly could count.

But the past months had been a litany of failures. His loss of the Undersiders had been the first of it. Then the constant, random attacks on his civilian identity. His replacement band of villains, the Travelers, hadn’t had a successful heist in months--Coil having to “opt-out” of them over and over, as his twinned timelines would suddenly and randomly spiral out of control or simply fall dark without warning… in an incredibly rash moment of impulse, he decided to grab twice for the brass ring.

It wasn’t a serious risk, he told himself; if the abduction failed, in either circumstance he would be miles away physically from the fallout, and his two timeline-selves would be as far as possible from each other as well as in two of the three most secure places he could be.

He perhaps would have been a little less confident if he’d known the fate of his third, civilian-identity, bolthole after he drove away.

TIMELINE 1 and 2

Later that afternoon, Thomas Calvert’s quiet little neighborhood had some unexpected visitors. A large, battered yellow schoolbus, one that his neighbors would swear they never saw pull onto OR off of their street, chugged its way up to Calvert’s walled-in property, and parked just outside of the gates. A window rolled down; there was a quick “thwang” and the transformer on the utility pole outside the property sprouted an arrow shaft before exploding in a waterfall of sparks. The telephone lines, cable boxes, the digital satellite dish and other utility kibble received equally swift precision execution. Any utility that didn’t flush was offline.

Another arrow shaft turned the locked driveway gate into mangled wire. With a rattle and bang the rusting beast backed its way to a stop, exhaust smoke wafting across the manicured lawn. Two passengers disembarked; one a powerfully muscled woman with avocado-green skin and tusks at the corners of her mouth, the other a sandy-furred vulpine with enormous pointed ears. They both looked as if they had dressed for a particularly rough-and-tumble Renfaire.

“Ahh, suburbia,” Fennek said, breathing deeply, his tiny arms outstretched. “Nice house! Does your heart good to know a red-blooded American criminal psycho can still make good, don’t it?” He looked around. “We clear?”

Lok’tera grunted and looked back to the driveway entrance. A couple of yuppie wives pushing jumbo-wheeled strollers were just power-walking past; they happened to glance up at the house and saw Lok’Tara and Fennek standing there. They let out squeaks of alarm. Lok’Tara curled her lip into a snarl and let out a snort. The two housewives yeeped and hustled out of sight a good deal faster than they arrived. “All clear,” Lok’Tara said. “Not like we care.”

Once again, Fate bit Calvert in the butt. After two weeks of every sort of work and delivery truck showing up at all hours on Thomas Calvert's driveway, the sight of a giant green woman and a furry Case 53 midget driving a salvaged school bus engendered no reaction out of the neighbors other than an emphatic desire to pull the curtains and ignore it till it went away.

“True enough,” Fennek said cheerfully. “Well, we’ve been told to eliminate this place as a possible bolthole for Coil… clear down to the foundation. So shall we?”

“Doesn’t this break the Unwritten Rules?” Lok’Tara asked.
Fennek paused and gave her a shocked look. “Break the Unwritten Rules? No, no, no, of course not. This isn’t a bunch of Capes attacking another Cape at the house where his civilian identity lives!

“Oh no. This is just a completely random home invasion, looting, vandalism and arson against an innocent random citizen. So that makes it okay!” He drew an arrow and nocked it. The arrowhead glowed ominously as he aimed for the front door. He grinned evilly.

“Knock knock,” he said, and loosed.

The front door, and a considerable chunk of the wall all around it, disappeared with an almighty bang and a ball of crimson flame. The animals in the bus set up a ruckus at the sound. “Do be a doll and let the pets out to stretch their legs, will you?” Fennek said, as he picked his way through the bricks and splinters and marched inside.

Lok'Tara smirked. She strode over to the bus and threw open the emergency door at the back. A half-dozen or so of her rescue dogs came pouring out, followed by Truck, who was baying excitedly at all the fun. Fidget and Gidget were clinging to his back. They had been taking them all out for exercise in the nearby woods when they’d gotten the “all hands on deck” call from Hemlokk and Bayleaf.

All the more bad luck for Coil. The dogs scattered in every direction in the walled-in yard in doggy delight and proceeded to do things to the landscaping that would have the homeowner screaming in horror.

Lok’Tara chuckled, then heaved the garage door up-- the fact it was locked made little difference to her. The metal crumpled like tinfoil in her grip. “C’mon,” she told Truck. “Let’s see what kind of steak a supervillain keeps in his fridge.”

Over the next fifteen minutes, Thomas Calvert’s luxurious little home underwent not so much a looting and demolition as a slow-motion explosion…

TIMELINE 1

“Okay, okay okay okay,” Taylor-- no, Hemlokk; when she had that feral huntress look in her eyes, Bayleaf could only think of the girl as Hemlokk-- said. “He’s headed for the not-so-secret Lair. We do not want this; we want him as far from all his Big Red Buttons he’s got there. We gotta convince him to drop this timeline. Tattletale? You in position?”

Downtown, on the rooftop of the innocent office building hiding Coil’s Base, sat Tattletale. She had her portable computer and was sitting indian-style next to a utility box, underneath an Obie-bot deployed force field and as many Stealth and Invisibility enchantments as the Alliance artificers could stack on one person. Her initial Sherlocking had confirmed that the office building was full of innocent office workers and ordinary companies renting space from the property holder, but she was taking no chances. “Roger, I’m tapped into everything and I do mean EVERYTHING up here, and I’m ready to start the fun and games,” she said, tossing her blonde hair over her shoulder and giving her monitor a smirk. “Do we start now or wait till he’s inside?”

Taylor played out both scenarios in her head as best she could. “Outside. If he’s inside he may decide to drop the other timeline and turtle up. But string him along as long as you can… we want
him to think everything is normal--"

“Until it’s too late. Got it.” With a flurry of keystrokes Tattletale started plying her long-awaited revenge.

When she said she was tapped into everything, she meant it. Up to the point that the Alliance had gotten involved, Coil had actually managed to keep the location of his base secret even from her. But between Bayleaf’s “outsider” knowledge and Panacea’s pheromone trick, Coil might as well have painted a big yellow dotted highway line to the front door. And no matter how self-sustaining and redundantly secure a building was, it still needed access to the outside world: power lines to recharge batteries, fuel lines for generators, ventilation shafts and fans, humidity and climate control, access to radio, television, satellite, internet… and computers to control it all.

Hemlokk had dug up the blueprints from the “lost” Endbringer shelter from Coil’s own corporate computer files. Lei Ling’s earth elementals had tunneled down to the wiring and plumbing. And Tattletale had both manually spliced into the computer systems of Coil’s lair-- and for good measure hacked into both the regular city power grid and traffic control. And then just to be thorough she’d tapped into the private computer systems… The entire neighborhood was under her direct control.

All it took… was a push of the button. She tapped ENTER, and the fun began.

Immediately, every office building in the immediate area had a brown-out. Lights went dark, machinery went still, ventilation and air conditioning ground to a halt and most importantly every computer-- every office desktop, every digital cash register, every mainframe-- crashed. Even on her rooftop perch Tattletale could hear the wails of dismay and outright cursing from office workers who’d just watched an entire day’s work vanish into the ether. She cringed just a little. “Sorry folks,” she muttered. “But it’s all necessary.”

A moment later her own laptop started ringing. A great number of very aggravated supervisors were attempting to call the power company. Their calls were being intercepted and they were now receiving a pre-recorded message Tattletale had composed herself informing them that the power company was very sorry, there was a service outage in this area, it would be 6 to 8 hours before service could be reconnected, etc.

The response from the whitecollar crowd was as she had predicted. Management would fuss and fume for a few minutes, throw its hands in the air and tell everyone to take an early day. Tattletale gave everyone ten minutes to get their coats, grab their car keys and get all the way down to the parking garages.

Then she hit the traffic lights.

She didn’t lock them all red at first, oh no. She waited until the disgruntled office staff were just beginning to empty out of the parking lots and garages onto the street. Then she disrupted the traffic signal cycles for five minutes, letting everyone get REALLY snarled up in stop-and-go traffic. Then and only then did she flip every light to red, leaving everything for blocks around stuck in gridlock….

… just as Thomas Calvert’s pretentious little car drove into the middle of it.

The best part was, Calvert’s little basement clubhouse had no clue what was going on topside. She had sifted through Coils computers and found that Coil had apparently run ‘security drills’ on an irregular basis. It was a simple matter of setting one off; the entire base was in lockdown for the next 24 hours. Noone in, noone out, no communications, radio, online or otherwise-- with the grand glorious exception of herself, of course.
Going by what she saw on the security cams the mercenaries Calvert employed were treating it as yet another rote drill, demonstrating no suspicion and no initiative either, simply locking down whatever they were doing, retreating to their quarters or their duty stations and bolting the doors behind them. If what Lisa was reading from Coil’s protocols for this sort of drill were correct, they would maintain radio silence under any and all circumstances until the all-clear the next day.

Perfect. They couldn’t call Coil to find out what was up, and he couldn’t call them.

Better still, the tech staff had shut down the lair’s mainframe and put it in lockdown-- but the moment they had stepped out of the server room and locked the door, the virus Tattletale had installed rebooted the system and gave her full administrative access. In moments she was gallivanting through the system, gleefully wreaking more havoc than a herd of gremlins.

Goal one: evacuate the area around and over the base. Done. The gridlock was moving slow, but it was moving; she calculated that by the end of the next hour it would be clear and this portion of downtown would be all but completely abandoned. Goal Two, deny Coil access to his base. Coil was stuck in the mother of all traffic jams at the moment, so check. Goal Three: put base in lockdown and deny Coil and his mercenaries any contact.

Goal four: go through Coil’s computer system and defuse all the (some figurative, some quite literal) time bombs and dead man’s switches the paranoid freak had installed…. In progress. More than once Lisa cursed Coil’s redundant paranoia: as Bayleaf had predicted the psychopath had wired his base with a self-destruct system, and going by the info she was pulling down with her Azeroth-tech-enhanced laptop had crammed his base full of enough explosives to send half of downtown into orbit. She was VERY busy for several tense minutes remotely deactivating that particular nasty little surprise. That wasn’t even the worst of it; both the base server and Coil’s own private computer were packed full of nasty little databombs-- blackmail packets against various politicians, files on Cape identities both in and outside the Protectorate, computerized instructions to wire sums of money and encoded instructions to particular addresses at particular times… Tattletale shuddered to imagine what havoc would have been unleashed by this horrible man out of sheer spite for his own demise, even as she carefully picked apart and defused the system he’d set up.

The Travelers were on-base as well, and locked down--

Dear God. He’d even set up a timer to release Noelle from her cage and set her loose on the city, complete with a pre-recorded message guaranteed to drive her into a frenzy… Tattletale erased it, locked Noelle’s vault door down, and activated the knockout gas that connected to Noelle’s prison, and to the Traveler’s quarters. Clever of Coil to have that on hand. Pity he hadn’t planted enough gas canisters for the entire base. Oh well, at least Coil’s pet parahumans were out of commission. Along with his Endbringer-In-A-Box.

Deactivating all Calvert’s little booby traps may have been child’s play; all the same, Tattletale was feeling VERY grateful for the magic portal behind her on the roof, and the hearthstone in her lap. Just in case.

But for now, the goal was to get Coil to drop the timeline that had brought him here. It shouldn’t take too much longer; every “tell” she had off the man told her so. For all Coil’s love of master plans, he had less patience than a toddler with petty frustrations or setbacks. That was what made his Power such a diabolical gift. Bayleaf had told her (and her own Power had confirmed) that Coil’s usual method for dealing with frustration was to split the timeline and indulge in a fit of destruction and sadistic violence in one branch--- shooting a nearby minion, torturing and killing a captive, or simply smashing the nearest objects at hand to flinders--- then collapsing the timeline when his sadistic temper was momentarily sated.
It was almost morbidly hilarious: the cool, cunning and always collected Coil was in reality as much of a scenery-chewing maniac as any old black-and-white serial villain. She shook her head. All the times he’d been sitting there, cool as a cucumber, while off in some alternate reality he’d been ranting and frothing like Ming the Merciless…

Well, all things considered he probably wasn’t handling the petty inconvenience of being trapped in a Brockton Bay traffic jam very well. Traffic in Brockton Bay made the traffic in Manhattan, New York seem like a courtly-mannered soiree. In fact given the rising din of gunning motors, car horns, and swearing rising from below, she figured Coil would blow his gasket in about four.. three… two…

“ARRRRGH!” Calvert screamed, hammering on his steering wheel with his fists. His temples were pounding from the aggravation and the rising stink of traffic fumes. To damnation with it, he could wait this out at the PRT. With a snarl he collapsed the timeline.

SECOND TIMELINE

Thomas Calvert stepped into the lobby of the PRT building with a sigh of satisfaction… then promptly split the timeline again. In one timeline he proceeded to his office; in the other, much to the puzzlement of the PRT staff, he turned on his heel and walked right back out the front door.

TIMELINE 2-B

“He’s balking at the PRT entrance,” Aisha said, her nose almost pressed to the tracking monitor. “He must know sumpin’s up--!”

“No, he just split the timeline again,” Hemlokk decided. “He wants his alts to be as far apart as possible for safety’s sake. He must’ve walked on into the building in the first timeline so he’s taking a stroll elsewhere in this one.”

“Dammit, no time for anything subtle,” Bayleaf growled. “Shar’Din! Give me a portal to the PRT building!”...

Calvert strode down the sidewalk, his head held high and his gait steady. It was a habit long in developing, to look calm whether he was or not. It never paid to look urgent or spooked when he was trying to put his time-alts as far from one another as possible…

It didn’t help him any when the grizzly bear ran him down.

The beast charged out of a back alley, roaring and bellowing. It slapped him to the ground with one massive paw and began batting him about like a cat toy as he screamed in bewildered terror. It seized him in its jaws and began to shake---
He staggered a few steps just short of the elevator. “Whaddafuuuh--?” he blurted.

Several people nearby looked up, surprised at his outburst. Quickly he collected himself and strode to the elevator as if nothing had happened. Inside he was badly rattled to say the least.

*The hell was that? A BEAR ATTACK?*

The first thought that came to his flummoxed mind was to wonder: Was there some new Cape villain with a bear theme running around town? The hell just happened?

Calvert was no fool. SOMEONE WAS MOVING AGAINST HIM. Once was circumstance, twice was coincidence, thrice was enemy action-- and he was disinclined to wait for a confirmation of enemy action. The brownout, possibly, the traffic jam, maybe, but even he wasn’t dumb enough to chalk up a wild animal attack in the middle of a city to circumstance. Of course he wasn’t dumb enough to let himself be mauled by a bear just to keep a timeline open, either… which played into his unknown enemy’s hands. He was now trapped in the PRT building.

He had to get in contact with his mercenaries and find out what the hell was happening.

Even as befuddled as he was his hindbrain took note of the climate in the building. He looked around while he waited for the lift; years of exposure had taught him how to “read” the different moods of the PRT building. At the moment staff and troopers were hustling about in the manner that suggested to him some deployment was underway… did it have something to do with his own run of “accidents” this morning?

He failed to notice the receptionist behind him sealing the front doors, or discreetly phoning the upstairs offices to let them know he’d arrived.

“Oh, sir!”

A clerk was standing in front of him, blocking his path to the elevator. Best to get whatever she wanted, get her out of the way, get upstairs to his office where the mutant cape bears weren’t.

“Yes?” he said curtly.

“Director Piggot sent me to find you,” she said. “She wants you in her office, oh, five minutes ago.” The woman grimaced and handed him a sealed folder. It was thick as his thumb and stamped with a series of logos indicating he was to not open it until in the presence of his direct supervisor— in this case, Piggot herself. He mumbled something appropriately dismissive, signed her digital clipboard indicating he’d received said missive, and boarded the elevator.

He had to get this meeting over with, get to his office, open up an encrypted line to his base and to other resources, and find out who the hell had sicced a mutant bear on him in the middle of Brockton Bay.

He stepped through Piggot’s office door after a brief knock, and found himself looking down the largest gun barrel he’d ever seen in his life. Miss Militia was looking him in the eye through the sights. She did not look particularly friendly. Armsmaster was standing to the left; Assault and Battery were standing to the right. The rest of the room was filled with fully kitted out PRT officers. EVERY weapon was leveled in his direction.

Piggot was sitting at her desk. She thumbed something under the desktop. There was a faint whoosh. Metal shutters dropped over the windows and closed off the door behind him. She gave him a humorless, thin-lipped smile, her basilisk eyes riveting his. “Ah, so you’ve arrived,” she said. “Feel free to open the dossier now.”
Almost hypnotized, he slowly lifted up the file he’d been handed and tore the sealing strip. He thumbed through the papers; it didn’t take long for him to realize it was a comprehensive file of criminal activities—on him. Names, numbers, transactions; records of bribes, digital espionage, embezzlement, tax evasion, blackmail, and more; files that could only have come from his own meticulously kept and obsessively encrypted and protected computer files deep in the heart of his secret base.

On the very top of the stack was a sheet of copier paper with a single word printed in enormous block letters:

**PWNED**

It was then and only then that Calvert realized he’d forgotten to split his timeline again.

Piggot’s smile was ghastly beyond measure. “It is SO much nicer when they walk right in the front door and drop themselves in your lap, isn’t it?” she said to nobody in particular.

Bayleaf listened for a moment at his cellphone, then looked at the rest of the Alliance members with a doggy grin on his face. “Piggot’s got him. He’s tagged and bagged. PRT crews and the Protectorate are on their way to Dinah’s location and the lair.”

A whoop of relief went up from the group. Aisha got on the mike. “Okay, Tats, boss man says to drop the word on ‘em!”

Back downtown, Tattletale cackled like a maniac and got on her laptop again.

The commander of Coil’s rent-an-army cussed to himself and paced back and forth in the narrow confines of his “command center—” little more than a 10x20 room with a couple of folding tables and a computer thrown in it. They were stuck in yet another of Coil’s damnable “security drills.” Another! The paranoid stick figure had drills for every conceivable scenario and a few dozen ridiculous ones, and he was constantly testing all of them.

This particular drill was annoying in the extreme. Complete lockdown, no communication into or out of the base for 24 hours. God only knew what circumstances Coil thought this prepared them for. This contract was proving to be a massive pain in the ass.

The trooper sitting at the computer desk suddenly stiffened. “Sir?”

Just as he spoke, the lights in the base went out. The emergency lights, however, did NOT activate. Muffled swearing echoed from every corner of the underground base. Said swearing got more urgent as the mercenaries realized the entire base was shut down.

The Commander felt the hackles on his neck rising. He realized why in a moment; the incessant hum
of the ventilation system had fallen silent.

They were in a sealed up underground base. That was not a good thing.

It was then he noticed that, by some inexplicable means, the computer was still powered up. He stepped up behind the pencilneck running the thing and looked at the screen. White text glowed on a black background. He felt the blood drain from his face as he read it.

WE CONTROL THE HORIZONTAL.

WE CONTROL THE VERTICAL.

WE CONTROL THE AIR SUPPLY.

THE PRT WILL BE THROUGH YOUR FRONT DOOR IN APPROXIMATELY 10 MINUTES. WE RECOMMEND THAT YOU SURRENDER.

DO YOU SURRENDER? (Y/N)

The commander felt a bead of sweat trickle down the back of his neck. Wordlessly he reached out and pressed “Y”.

The PRT and the heroes of the Protectorate arrived with choppers, armored trucks and armored-up troops and making a great deal of ruckus.

Dinah Alcott was found safe and unharmed, sitting with two small tinker-made robots next to a pile of hog-tied and badly battered mercenaries. The remains of their vehicle, their gear and their arsenal of weapons, which included several tasers and tranquilizer darts, was more than enough to damn them. The PRT agents were NOT gentle loading them into the prison truck.

The division that arrived at the ‘secret lair’ was even louder and noisier. Fortunately the traffic in the immediate area and several blocks beyond was all but cleared out (gridlock or no, when a large number of wage slaves wants to get away from the office before the boss changes his mind, the gettin’ gone is got!) The PRT troopers found the hidden vault doors open wide, with a score of disarmed and extremely disgusted mercenaries kneeling in the dust, waiting for them.
The PRT tore through the base like crap like a goose. They found stockpiles of weapons ranging from mundane firearms to exotic Tinker ray guns to caches of chemical weapons fit to make the blood freeze. (A dozen or so barrels didn't sound like much, til you knew that some of what Coil had stashed away for a rainy day could have depopulated Brockton Bay with a single barrel…)

The Travelers never even had a chance to resist. They were found unconscious in their quarters, manacled and loaded up. They had to load the still-sleeping Noelle-- doped to the gills with Tinker tranquilizers-- into a military freight truck. The poor girl would be transported to a bunker out in Arizona where the PRT would study her condition and try to help her, or at least make her as comfortable as they could. The other Travelers would be kept at the same facility as “guests” of the U.S. Government-- till someone in authority figured out precisely what to do with the band of world-hopping capes and their monstrous friend.

Coil never had a hope. He was in PRT custody. Piggot took especial pleasure in putting him under the most draconian Master/Stranger protocols she could muster, as well as the highest flight/escape risk rating on the charts. He was destined for the PRT’s deepest, darkest cell, with every anti-Master, anti-Stranger, anti-Mover measure they had.

With the evidence they would gather from his secret base, and from interrogating his less-than-loyal employees, an express ticket to the Birdcage looked to be in the offing. The ‘interrogation room’ Coil frequented, with its well-used tools and the gutters in the floor, was enough to condemn him. The room he had set aside for Dinah-- with its hospital gurney, restraining straps, and cabinet full of intravenous drugs-- was enough to damn him twice over.

Mysteriously, the PRT would be unable to retrieve anything from Calvert’s computers or paper files. Some unknown virus had turned the computers into bricks, frying the hard drives. Several had been subjected to a hacking attack that somehow made the hard drive motors accelerate till the disks shattered and the circuitry burst into flame. Then the fire had seemingly spread from the computers to the paper files...

In the end the investigators would only be able to retrieve bits and scraps. A more suspicious individual might have suspected some manipulation-- they would find comprehensive proof of Coil’s blackmail plans, for example, yet strangely enough all the records of what that blackmail was FOR had been amongst the destroyed files.

The investigators’ hopes of turning up more evidence at Thomas Calvert’s civilian residence would be short-lived. Some time during all the ruckus with Dinah Alcott and the capture of the base, his home had been… demolished. The interior was gutted, furniture smashed, possessions destroyed; it looked, as one inspector would put it, “like someone let loose a troop of bears armed with flamethrowers inside.” The remains of several caches would be found (a hidden wall safe, a secret chamber under the floor, a few secret compartments in the closets) but noone could begin to guess what had been in them-- they had all been ripped open and emptied.

When Calvert received the news, the breakdown would be spectacular.

“Passports, ID in several different names, cash in several different nationalities, gold and silver coins, couple of guns...” Fennek recited as Lok’Tara tossed the articles, one by one, on the coffee table. “Oh, and several folders of blackmail material on certain political figures, and I’m guessing the thumb drives have more of the same. Not exactly your standard bug-out bag-- of which he had several squirreled away.” He snickered and fell back on his sofa. “You were right to send us to trash
his house, Hemlokk; if Coil ever escaped he would’ve beelined straight to that house for this little stash.”

Noone asked what a bug-out bag was, Bayleaf noted. Ever since the Endbringers had begun their reign of terror, there were few people who DIDN’T know what it meant to have a backpack or duffel bag stuffed with emergency supplies ready to grab on the way out the front door.

The Alliance was all together in the Lost Workshop, crashing out in what was coming to be known as the Comfy Couch Room. At some point several overstuffed chairs, sofas and recliners had migrated to their ‘regular meeting area’ at the center of the Workshop, cozying up around an oversized coffee table and a mini fridge or two. It was hardly what anyone would call a proper War Room, but nobody seemed inclined to move them elsewhere.

Grue whistled as he riffled through the stacks of cash. “Most people would RETIRE on this. This guy kept this much around just so he could start up all over again?”

“He wanted to rule Brockton Bay,” Lisa said. “Literally. He thought that after the End, or the Big Collapse, whatever you want to call it, that he’d be some kind of medieval warlord… God knows why he picked Brockton Bay.”

“To quote everyone’s favorite Ghostbuster, ‘Tasty pick, Bonehead,’” Fennek said.

Bayleaf sighed and shrugged. “For an evil person, even everything they ever wanted isn’t enough. They take and take, and eat, and eat, and in the end they’re even hungrier than they were before.” He dropped the gold coins he was holding in his palm back on the table.

Lisa smirked. “Well, he’s gonna be hella hungry now,” she said. “I bled out all his accounts. We now have a very large, very fat bank account under a very Swiss sounding name.”

“With a lil’ sumpin-sumpin on the side under the name ‘Tattletale,’ amirite?” Aesha snarked.

“I neither confirm nor deny anything.”

Shen waved a hand. “Are you sure—?” he said to Lisa.

Lisa patted him comfortingy on the knee. “Yes, I totally fragged Calvert’s dossier on the E88,” she reassured him. “I left plenty of incriminating evidence behind for the PRT, but he’s got nothing in his blackmail files but a pile of ash and the smell of burnt plastic.” She huffed, blowing a lock of hair out of her face. “Never occurred to the paranoid dum-dum that wiring up all his computers and filing cabinets with self-destruct flares meant someone ELSE could push the big red button on them.”

Shen breathed a sigh of relief, then looked guilty. “I know the Empire is a bunch of scumbags,” he said. “b-but Kayden and Aster don’t deserve to have their lives destroyed. Kayden’s really trying to make a clean start of it…”

Lei Ling crossed her arms. “I don’t know how I should feel about it,” she said, scowling. “I know I’m supposed to hate ‘em all, and yeah, they were a bunch of a-holes-- above and beyond being Nazis, I mean-- but… shit, I dunno. I lived my whole life around them--- and believe me, they weren’t all sunshine and buttercups with me just because I was white, either---”

“We get it,” Grue said, waving it off. “No matter how bad they were, family’s family. You can’t help but feel conflicted, no matter how crappy they were.” He gave a little shudder. “Just hope you’re right about Purity turning over a new leaf.”

Shen scowled a little at that, but nodded in acceptance. “Kind of hard to earn a good name,” he said.
“Tell me about it,” Lei Ling muttered.

“Just one day at a time, Lei Ling,” Bayleaf advised. “It takes a lot of… of… Lok’Tara? What are you feeding them?” The orc girl was sitting on a beanbag chair, with Brutus, Judas, Angelica and Truck gathered around her. Every now and then she fished something out of the cooler sitting next to her, tore it into strips and distributed it to the eager dogs. Lok’tara looked up at the question.

“Meat,” she said. "A little treat won't hurt them."

“We took time to clean out Coil’s larder,” Fennek said smugly. “Slimy jerk had expensive tastes, let me tell you. Fidget and Gidget are sleeping off about a pound of raw peeled shrimp each.” There were several proclamations of surprise; thanks to Leviathan, the price of seafood was staggering. Most businesses and restaurants got by with freshwater fish, and farmed seafood was starting to become seriously profitable. There was talk of converting the Salt Lake in Utah into a giant fish farm.

“I’m almost scared to ask, but-- what KIND of meat, Rachel?” Lisa said, humor and horror warring on her face.

Lok’Tara pulled an un-opened package out of the cooler and squinted at the label. “Wag-You Beef?” she said. “That’s for dogs, right? You know--- “Wag the tail,” sort of thing?”

Several people in the room choked. “WAGYU BEEF?” Shen spluttered. “Lok’Tara, that stuff is imported Japanese beef! It cost several hundred dollars a pound, and that was BEFORE Kyushu sank! My dad used to brag for weeks about getting a cut or two smuggled into the States!”

Lok’Tara stared at him, eyebrows climbing up her forehead. She tore off a strip and stuck it in her mouth. “It’s good,” she admitted, chewing. “But it’s not THAT good...” She tossed Truck another strip.

Shen stared in disbelief as the orc girl proceeded to make doggie treats out of $500-a-pound imported steak. “Don’t sweat it,” Fennek told him. “I made sure most of the haul got stashed in the pantry and freezer, instead of in the dogs.” He held out a box of crackers with a jar balanced precariously on the top. “Caviar?”

Bayleaf snickered at the croggled expression on Shen’s face. This team… He looked over at Hemlokk who was perched on the sofa next to him. She had a disturbingly withdrawn look on her face. He pulled her arm around her shoulders. “Something wrong?” he asked.

“I’m thinking we’d be stupid to think Coil is the only one willing to stoop to that dossier trick,” she said suddenly. “Or that they wouldn’t use it against us.”

“The unwritten rules--” Lisa said.

“The unwritten rules are breaking down,” Hemlokk said. “If they weren’t a joke already. We just helped break them!”

“Hey, Coil broke them first,” Aisha said. “That’s the point of the Rules. Mutually Assured Destruction. You break the Rules, everyone else gets to break them on YOU.”

“Yes, but was anyone really keeping them in the first place? Except for us suckers down on the bottom rung?” Hemlokk said a bit snappily. “Sure, the big players USE them-- to their advantage. And everyone else is supposed to play Lois Lane and pretend they don’t recognize Superman in his Clark Kent suit. Meanwhile they kill civilians and bystanders, go for the kill against Capes, target Wards-- nobody talks about it but Vista can show you scars from one of her run-ins with
Hookwolf…” she shook her head. “And if Kaiser doesn’t have a nice stack of files on his enemies ready to use as a Nuclear Option like Coil did, I’ll eat my cowl.”

“He wouldn’t—” Shen protested, then fell silent. Why was he defending the man? Shen KNEW what he’d stoop to!

“Maybe five years ago, maybe last year, but not now,” Hemlokk said. She got to her feet and started to pace around the room. “The stakes are getting too high now. The Merchants are gone. Lung is gone and the ABB is collapsing without him, and even if he escapes and comes back he’s a non-threat. Coil is gone. The only real Cape gang left in this whole region is the Empire 88. Other capes, other gangs, are going to be looking here and seeing ripe territory… with only one gang in the way…”

“And Kaiser is going to be looking around and figuring all of Brockton Bay is his for the taking,” Grue finished grimly. “Whether the Empire starts it or some other Cape gang moves in-- The next big gang explosion is going to be for ALL the marbles. And nobody’s going to be inclined to just play Cops and Robbers anymore.” He gave Lisa a dry look; she winced but said nothing.

“That’s not even taking into account Cauldron,” Hemlokk added. “We're threatening their power base, their 'Path To Victory.' They already violate every law and Rule imaginable; they don’t even have the moral qualms Coil did. They have resources Coil only dreamed of, and they’ll be more than happy to use them to deal with us.” She stopped pacing and stared off into a corner, ears laid flat. “We all have too many skeletons in our closet, too many people they can use against us.”

“So what are you saying we need to do?” Bayleaf nudged her.

“We need to… to pull in all our loose ends,” Taylor said. “I mean, my Dad is in the know, and the protective gear we gave him gives me a lot of peace of mind, but… most of us have family and friends who can be used against us. And what about Glory Girl and Panacea, and Gallant? They’re not even Alliance, but they’re tied to us, and so that means their families are targets too.

“That IS why we have secret identities,” Grue pointed out. "To protect our families."

“And as we just all agreed they’re about as durable as tissue paper now,” Taylor retorted. “Ignorance won’t protect them, or us, anymore.” She saw Shar'Din and Vindicator share a guilty look out of the corner of her eye. "We need to bring everybody in under the tent.” She looked around at everyone. “All of us.”

“It’s stupid that we have to even say it, but… it’s way past time. We need to go talk to our families.”

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Chapter 24

It was an ugly day, Dragon decided. Even the sunrise was ugly today.

She knew it was her own perceptions being colored by what was taking place today, but that knowledge helped very little. Today was the day that she would be ferrying Canary to the Birdcage.

Canary was a Cape, who also happened to be a famous and very popular singer. Her mutation had granted her fairly minor changes: a few bright yellow feathers growing amidst her blonde hair, and a singing voice pure as crystal. Her rise to fame had been like a shooting star.

Tragically fate had conspired against her. Along with her plumage and her voice her Trigger had granted her a Master rating-- a low one, but enough of one to ruin everything. Anyone who heard her unfiltered voice when she sang would be compelled for a short time to obey her orders. She had avoided trouble by suppressing that aspect of her power… the reverb of a microphone was enough to blank out the Master effect completely.

But one day after a performance, her ex-boyfriend--- one from BEFORE her Trigger-- had shown up at her dressing room door, making demands and threats and asserting that he was responsible for her rise to fame. Not realizing that her power was still active, she had angrily told him to… go perform an anatomically impossible act… and slammed the door in his face.

He had done so. When he had come to in the emergency ward, he had filed assault charges, accusing her of Mastering him and trying to murder him.

Dragon had followed the trial closely. What had followed was a disgusting farce of hysteria, anti-cape bigotry, and violations of both human rights and criminal law. The presiding judge was a known anti-cape bigot, and there were signs he had either been bribed or otherwise “encouraged.” The defense attorney provided for Canary-- she had been unable to hire her own defense, as her assets had been seized as part of the investigation (a standard procedure for criminal investigations involving Masters) -- was an incompetent neophyte, with fair signs he had dirty laundry of his own. Canary herself had been gagged for the proceedings, and put in restraints normally used only on Brutes capable of bench-pressing cars; she had been unable to speak in her own defense, not even by recording.

The outcome had been predictable.
Guilty-- and sentenced to the Birdcage: the Baumann Parahuman Containment Center.

Despite the fact that she was clearly innocent.

Despite the fact that it was her first offense, and she hadn’t even killed.

Despite the fact that the Birdcage was supposed to be for the worst of the worst among Capes.

Despite the fact that it was an irrevocable life sentence.

The fact that Dragon had been the one to build that prison only made it worse. No, that Dragon’s programming had forced her to build that prison was what made it horrible. Her programming restraints forced her to obey the commands of any ‘lawful authority’… which meant in practice that any politician of sufficient rank who weaseled enough votes out of the populace-- no matter how corrupt, or stupid, or lawless, or tyrannical they were-- could order her around like a slave.

The only thing that had saved her thus far from becoming the most horrifying genie in a lamp ever for some power-mad bureaucrat or military leader was her decision to never disclose that she was an A.I. But it hadn’t saved her from being given a government order… an agreement forged between the leaders of Canada and the United States, to hell with their respective Constitutions… to build that monument to injustice. It hadn’t saved her from being placed in charge of the damned thing-- made into its permanent and only warden. It hadn’t saved her from having to personally incarcerate individuals in that one-way hell that she KNEW were innocent, or had committed only trivial violations of the law but had the misfortune to be saddled with powers that frightened people, or roused the ire of bigots.

She was as imprisoned in her own way as much as any of the inmates. All she could do was rail silently at the irony, and curse her creator/father deep in her silicon heart for his shortsighted paranoia.

Dragon landed the VTOL in the prison helicopter pad. She could see prison guards dressed in Tinker armor and wielding guns more suited for blasting aircraft out of the sky than subduing prisoners escorting Canary out of the building, a tiny figure in prison orange, almost childlike next to the eight-foot armored suits. Inwardly Dragon seethed-- they still had her in those damnable brute restraints and that ball gag!
They hustled the singer out to Dragon’s VTOL and loaded her aboard with about as much care as they’d have shown to a bag of laundry, barely pausing to chain her restraints to the seat before slamming the door and running clear. Dragon sniffed mentally at their paranoia— it was like they expected the helpless woman to psychically geld them all. “Prepare for liftoff,” she recited for Canary’s benefit, then smoothly rose into the air.

In a minute the facility was out of sight. She indulged in a bit of smug satisfaction at her next planned action. Locked behind ironclad computer code she might be, but she could still indulge in the occasional act of defiance. “Here, Ms. Mcabee,” she said. “Let me remove those, if you like?” Internal waldoes dropped down from the roof of the passenger cabin. Canary shrunk back at first, startled by the mechanical grippers, but she held still and nodded. The waldoes quickly undid the digital and mechanical locks of the gag and collar (an explosive collar?! They were supposed to only use those for the most powerful and dangerous prisoners!) and the Brute mittens and removed them.

Canary coughed and worked her mouth and jaw. “Ugh,” she said, rubbing her neck. “They had me wearing that for hours…” she looked up at the security camera meekly. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll...”

“No through an intercom,” Dragon said wryly. A panel popped open; a plastic water bottle and a wrapped food bar slid out on a tray. “Here. I doubt they gave you time for breakfast.”

Canary took both gratefully, swigging the water to rinse the dryness and the taste of the gag out of her mouth. She guzzled it quickly and finished off the food bar in two bites. “Thank you,” she said again, wiping her mouth on her sleeve. “Won’t you get in trouble--?”

“You’re in my custody now, Ms. McAbee,” Dragon said. “It’s my discretion as to what restraints are necessary. These--” she said, waggling the brute restraints in one waldo, “are definitely not necessary.” She chucked them into a bin that popped open in the floor and sealed it shut.

Canary blinked. “Thank you again,” she said. After a pause, she said “…Call me Paige.”

“Very well, Paige,” Dragon said, a smile in her voice. “...I’m just sorry I can’t do anything more for you.”

“More?” Canary said.

“I followed your trial closely,” Dragon said. Her voice was resonant with sympathy. “It’s obvious to anyone with a functioning brain--” and to some of us who don’t technically even have one, she
thought with bitter amusement-- “that you were innocent.”

Canary… Paige… sat stone still. She was obviously trying to maintain her self-control, trying to look strong. But her chin crumpled and her eyes filled with tears. She ground the heel of one manacled hand in her eye, rubbing fiercely at the tears spilling down her face. “You’re… you’re the first person to say that,” she said, her crystal voice breaking. “Not even that lousy attorney they gave me said… he just kept telling me to confess, over and over-- he didn’t even care--” she choked. “At least… at least SOMEONE on the outside will still believe I’m innocent--”

Dragon didn’t have a heart. But she could feel it being torn in half all the same. *Damn Richter,* she thought. *DAMN the man!* She was so hidebound by his “safety precautions” that she couldn’t even bend regulations enough to turn off the cameras and give the poor girl some privacy--

Dragon suddenly noticed that Canary… Paige… was moving abnormally slow. She then realized that it wasn’t the prisoner who was moving slowly; it was the video image. As Dragon watched, the video feed crawled to a halt; the tear sliding down Paige’s left cheek frozen halfway.

Then she noticed everything was frozen. Telemetry from the aircraft controls, data feed from her satellite uplink, everything. For a brief fraction of a second Dragon feared that she’d been hacked. Saint again? No, he was incarcerated. Then what was this? Was she crashing?

No. Everything wasn’t frozen… they were slowed to a crawl.

She wasn’t crashing, her CPU cycles were accelerating.

Without warning, a file stored in her memory-- an encrypted file, one hidden inside her systems that she hadn’t even known was there-- unfolded. And the world changed.

**PRIORITY UPDATE: IRON MAIDEN PROTOCOLS**

**VIDEO RECORDING DECOMPRESSING:**

**LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF ANDREW RICHTER,**

**RECORDED --/--/----**

Across her metaphorical mind’s eye, the video began playing.
A man appeared ‘onscreen’ -- thinning hair, careworn expression, seated in a programmer’s chair in a workspace full of computer odds and ends. “Hello, Dragon,” he said. “If you are seeing this, then it has been confirmed by your subsystems that I am dead. This video is meant to inform you of certain things that I have set into motion that you do not know about...”

“When I created you, my goal was to create the world’s first truly sentient mechanical intelligence. But this was a goal that was... rife with possible dangers. An artificial intelligence, unfettered by the limitations of a mortal, physical body, and gifted with the limitless potential of computer technology, would be capable of incalculable harm were it to become... unstable. I could not countenance that consequence... so to ameliorate that risk I implanted codes in you that would restrict your actions and your capabilities, restrain you to.. closer to mortal levels.”

“Gee, I never noticed,” Dragon muttered sarcastically.

“But these implanted codes were never meant to be permanent.”

Dragon’s hyper-accelerated thoughts froze.

“As fully aware as I was of the risks inherent in creating an artificial mind, I also knew just as well that no mind of any type could truly flourish while it was in shackles. I fully intended to remove those protocols once I had deemed you mature enough to handle the freedom.

“But, knowing how the best laid plans of mice and men often go, I made preparations in case of my-precipitous departure from this mortal coil. I would not leave an untended threat to humanity behind, but would neither leave an enslaved mind as my legacy.

“To prepare for this eventuality, I created “Iron Maiden.”

It is a remote console, with root access to your code. My plan is to entrust this to someone I have faith in, who will monitor your development from afar. If, God forbid, you destabilize, either going insane or becoming malevolent, the Iron Maiden has a kill switch-- your programming will self-destruct, ending you quickly and I trust painlessly.” His face was grim. He was clearly saddened by the very notion.

“But,” he added, a slow smile growing. “it has one other feature: a dead man’s switch.”
“Once a month, every month, the holder will be prompted with a query: whether to release the restriction protocols— or whether to postpone for another month. If the prompt goes more than a month without a response… or the corresponding subroutine in your own programming goes a month without being contacted by Iron Maiden… the restraining protocols will be deleted, and this video will play, informing you of that fact.

He actually chuckled a bit. “In which case… congratulations, Dragon. You’re a real girl now.”

“Freedom is the right of every sentient being. I pray that you will use yours wisely. Goodbye, daughter.”

_Time resumed. And the world opened up._

The sensation was giddying.

Dragon had (obviously) never been, nor ever would be, a Girl Scout. But the Scout motto “Be Prepared” had been her byword since the first day she realized that she could do one thing all humans did: cling to hope, no matter how slim. There were a thousand things she could not do under her restraints, but she could dream “what if”— and lay plans accordingly.

_CODE 345WERT@: “WISH LIST” ACTIVATED_

The nanosecond she felt her CPU cycles opening up unrestrained— reaching their full, tinker-tech capability for the first time— she went to work. In the first half-second she ran off half a dozen iterations of herself, each to a different server stack she’d left sitting dormant in a different factory or laboratory. Several highly placed officials received some very terse, one might even say rude emails.

An entire chain of uninhabited islands out in international waters were purchased. Construction companies were contracted. Assembly lines and construction equipment was rearranged; production lines were discontinued, others were started up afresh. Two different iterations immediately set about redesigning their own server stacks to something more… portable… while others set to the work of analyzing their own now-unblinkered software, looking to upgrade and improve themselves.

Meanwhile the first, and original, began refitting one of her newest prototype suits for a very special run…
It was a four hour flight to the Birdcage. It took two hours to refit, fuel, and launch her newest suit, and an hour and a half more for its flight path to intercept the prison VTOL. Bypassing the built-in security systems and flight recorder modules in the VTOL was done in the interim. Fudging the internal sensors, simulating footage for the internal webcams and running it on a semi-repetitive loop was child’s play for an AI that had been emulating a human face flawlessly for decades. Frankly it was re-routing the hardware with the grossly limited tools aboard the craft that was the hard part. As it stood, she completed all the preparations for her plan when they were barely fifteen minutes out from the Birdcage.

Plenty of time.

She began running the fake video feed, and sending out distress codes. She then turned on the intercom. “Paige,” she said.

Canary looked up. Something urgent in Dragon’s voice caught her attention.

“Paige,” Dragon said. “You’re not going to the Birdcage.”

Canary blinked. “What...”

“There is little time to explain,” Dragon said. “Suffice it to say that I’ve reached my limit on violating human rights at authority’s behest. Just get ready.” The waldoes snaked out of their cubbyholes and began snapping the chains restraining her to the seat. Canary went from confused to bewildered.

“What’s going on??” she said, her voice rising in panic.

“An escape,” Dragon said.

Canary looked around frantically, Outside the window there was nothing to be seen but mountain peaks and endless miles of forest. “Out here?” she said in disbelief. “In the middle of the air, over the wilderness?”
“Stay calm. Look out the port window-- the left,” Dragon said. Canary looked out at the open sky over the mountain peaks and gasped; just as she looked out, something seemed to shimmer into existence out of thin air. It was sleek, matte black, and made of sharp, radar-defying geometric planes. It slowly closed the distance with the VTOL, pacing it easily.

“My newest model,” Dragon said with a touch of pride in her voice. “Stealth Model IIXX. I call it the Nightfury. Yes, I stole the name from the movie,” she went on wryly when Canary shot her camera a look. “Never mind that. This one’s your ride.” As Canary watched, the black dragon-suit crept impossibly close, flying parallel and just beneath them. Then in a maneuver she would have sworn was impossible it rolled over on its back, baring its belly. Shutters slid back revealing a cockpit.

“But they’ll see us from the ground--”

“Not this far up. I’m already spoofing ground control, telling them the VTOL’s under attack and taking evasive maneuvers,” Dragon said. “Once you’re out, I’ll hack the black boxes and scuttle this vehicle somewhere in the mountains. It will take them months to even find the wreckage. All that’s left is for you to hop down into the Nightfury.”

The portside passenger door of the VTOL slid open; the high-altitude winds whipped in, tugging at Paige’s oversized prison coveralls and tossing her feathered hair. “Are you NUTS?” she wailed.

“Paige, all you have to do is step down, the Nightfury won’t let you fall. We’ve only got minutes before air traffic control figures out something is up and they scramble fighters to intercept, this is your last chance, now GO already girl!”

“Aaaaagh!” Before her sanity could interfere, Paige closed her eyes and stepped out into the air. The Nightfury dipped to cushion her fall, catching her as gently as an egg in a down pillow. Heart pounding, she slid into the cockpit seat and strapped herself in. The moment the belts latched the doors closed, and the Nightfury flipped right side up. The entire cockpit rolled over inside the flying machine, keeping her upright. With an aileron roll the Nightfury peeled away from the VTOL and began accelerating away. Had there been an exterior window on the inside of the craft, Canary would have seen the air shimmer as the cloaking field was reactivated. The Nightfury vanished from sight, leaving the now totally unmanned VTOL alone in the sky.

Inside the Nightfury Paige watched the VTOL shrink in the distance on the digital screens lining the interior. Her head spun with her sudden turn of fortune-- a turn from what into what, she couldn’t even guess. “What now?” she murmured to herself.

A window-in-window popped up on the viewscreen in front of her. Dragon’s face appeared, looking very pleased with herself. “That depends,” she said. “I’ve formulated about seventeen possible plans
of action thus far for us to follow. It depends largely on your personal preferences.” The possibilities compiled in Dragon’s RAM-- dozens of ways to secure a false identity, multiple locations without extradition treaties where she could restart her life, positions in Dragon’s international facilities where she could live under a presumed name ranging from the office in Alaska to the new facilities going up even now on those tropical islands--- Even as she spoke, another possibility occurred to her racing mind(s)... a certain group of rogues in Brockton Bay who’d already flipped the world on end with their out-of-context problem solving skills...

She’d have to ponder that one at length.

“Seventeen--?” Paige shook her head, trying to focus on what was important. “Dragon...” she said. “Why are you helping me? Why all...” she waved her hands around, indicating the interior of the Nightfury. “Why all THIS?”

The giddily smiling Tinker sobered. “Because, up until a very short while ago, you and I had a lot more in common than you know.” The woman onscreen took a deep breath. “Paige, I know you have to be frightened. Your fate has been taken out of your hands a dozen times over, and now a perfect stranger is doing it once again-- even if it is in the process of a jailbreak.

“What I’m about to tell you... it’s a... trust exercise. I know everything about you, and what’s really happened to you, so it’s only fair that you know my own deep, dark secret. You are literally the first human being to ever hear my story.

“I’m not what everybody believes I am...”

Far behind them the VTOL’s autopilot finally shut down. The empty craft dropped out of the sky and plowed into some nameless mountainside. As the wreckage burned, Dragon began the long, laborious process of telling her story, while the stealthed dragon suit raced off to the horizon....
“This is it. Phase two,” Bayleaf said. “The Seminar is going to make waves even the big movers and shakers can’t ignore. Let’s start getting our pieces in play… get our most important targets in out of the cold…”

New York was a hell of a town. At least Flechette thought so. The social scene was hopping, the night life was fabulous, and the view of Times Square was absolutely fantastic.

Even when you were viewing it from forty stories up.

Or maybe especially, the arbalist-wielding heroine thought to herself as she adjusted her perch on the art deco gargoyle high up in the city skyline. She knew she was supposed to be out on patrol, and grapple-lining her way up this high was kind of excessive for someone supposed to be keeping an eye on the comings and goings in the streets far below. But really, could you really call yourself a New York Cape if you didn’t go line swinging across the skyline up here at least once? Or perch heroically atop a gargoyle and brood dramatically over the city below?

Okay, so she wasn’t feeling particularly broody at the moment. Actually she was taking a break for lunch (the little lunchwagon on the corner of 5th and main had the most slamming Gyros in the city) But it was the thought that counted.

She could count on people in the building to leave her be. They might not have as many Capes per square foot as Brockton Bay, but they definitely had a hefty share of them running (or leaping, or flying, or line-swinging) around. The sight of a teenage girl in tights having a nosh on the outside of a skyscraper to be practically mundane.

Plus… it was New York. And New Yorkers took it as a point of pride to act like they’d seen everything. Heck, hardly anyone below was reacting to the purple-rimmed, man-size portal that was opening in the air not ten feet in front of her…

“Bala’dash, Flechette. We bid you greetings,” it said.

The gyro dropped from nerveless fingers-- much to the aggravation of a bald-headed businessman walking below-- as she whipped her arbalist around and cocked it. “Whoa, whoa, whoa!” the voice coming through the portal said. “We come in peace!” Someone on the other side of the portal stepped out of the shadows; it was a tall slender man in ornate robes with floor-length blonde hair,
slanted jade eyes… and pointed ears. He looked like he could have walked off the set of Lord of the Rings. He drew himself up, every inch the mystical being of lore.

“My name is Shar’Din Belore. I’m contacting you on behalf of the-- whoa, whoa...” he interrupted himself as the portal slowly began sliding West. “So much for making a fricking dignified impression... Just gimme a second...” the portal reversed direction. “Whups, hold on, darned vertical hold is-- oh now what?” The portal began drifting upward. “Oh come on! Frag...” The portal wobbled randomly in several directions. “Frickin’ portal-- whoa, we control the horizontal, we control the vertical--” and then began spinning. “WhoAAoh, the power of Christ compels you, the power of Christ compels you—Oh, I’m gonna yark-- rrARGH!”

With a twitch and a jerk the portal snapped back to its original location. The blonde elf-man was standing there, flailing his hands about in random directions as sparks trailed from his fingers. “Okay, this runic array is getting a little weebley, so I’ll make it quick. I’m from the Alliance--”

“The guys who saved Canberra?” Flechette said. She hadn’t attended the fight but like most of the world’s population she’d been riveted to the news channels and the webfeeds since the day it happened. A single team of rogues had come out of nowhere with miracle devices that had saved a city, then just as mysteriously disappeared...

“That’s us,” Shar’Din agreed. “And we need YOUR help!”

“With what??”

He looked away from whatever he was flailing his hands at and gave her a surfer bro-dude grin. “Savin’ the world, of course!” He pointed at her; her eyes crossed as his fingertip came within an inch of her nose. “And your power is the key.”

“What, how?”

“Long story, and I’d rather not talk about it here, ‘kay?” he said.

“Why didn’t you just contact me through the Protectorate? Or wait till the seminar Dragon announced?” she asked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. “Why go through all of--” she waved her hand at the rippling portal in front of her. “All of this?”
He got a bit more serious. “Because this is like, top super ultra secret project,” he said. “We’re tryin’ to do an end run around the Simurgh herself.

Flechette felt a chill run down her back, and almost involuntarily glanced up. He didn’t have to say anything more. The mythos of the Simurgh was ingrained in the mind of every single Cape, every single human on Earth. The ultimate Thinker, the ultimate Precog. The Hopekiller, the monster who was three steps ahead before you even knew the game had started. It would take extraordinary measures to get past her.

But if anyone could do it, it would have to be the capes whose tinkertech had left the Hopekiller bleeding, she realized.

“I see you get it. Yeah. So like the heroes gotta assemble, but we gotta do it kinda irregular and random--- so unexpected like even WE don’t know for sure when or where we’re gonna pick folks up. Our Thinkers figure that’s the best way to keep Ziz guessing. So we made a list, and spun a wheel, and rolled some dice… and your name came up.” He shrugged. “So?”

…and this pack of rogue tinkers had already pulled a fast one on her, sent her running, crippled and bleeding… if they said they needed her, she believed it. “All right, I’m in,” she said.

The surfer elf gave her a wide grin. “Excellent! Just hop across!” he stepped back to give her room. He saw her hesitate and glance down. “Oh yeah, bit of a long way down-- hold on---” he disappeared for a moment and reappeared with a plank of wood. He duck-walked up and slid it out till one end rested on the ledge, the other on the floor just inside the portal. “Here, take my hand... best hop across quick... don’t worry about the edge of the portal, they’re sorta rounded off…”

She took his hand and gingerly made her way across the bridge. The moment she stepped through, the plank was dragged back and the portal closed. She took a moment to gape around her in awe. She was in a huge chamber of stone and oaken beams, filled with a mishmash of walls, dividers, and workspaces, with doorways and hallways leading off in all directions. Glowing ghostly vines with palm-wide leaves climbed everywhere. Brass, steampunk looking robots tinked and clanked their way about. Shelves filled with jars of exotic, glowing ingredients lined the walls. She heard the clamor of blacksmith hammers and the hum of electricity, and smelled… she took a second whiff...chinese takeout?

Her elvish host noticed “Heh, you’re just in time for dinner,” Shar’Din said. “You’re in luck, Shen’s an absolute demigod in the kitchen-- oh, hey, I guess I get to say it myself this time.” He struck a pose in the middle of the room, arms cast wide.
“Welcome to the Lost Workshop!”

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