Manager

by Seraviel

Summary

Taylor Hebert's shard is the administrator. Let's see what happens if it looked at administration differently...

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Going back was the worst.

I had hoped that, after a case like mine, I’d be moved to another school. No such luck. My trip in the locker had no positive consequence whatsoever, and I was back in school after more than a month outside of it.

I forced my feet one after the other, pushing the class door open.

*Don’t give them the satisfaction*, I told myself.

The whole class turned toward me as I came in, along with Mr. Gladly. Mrs. Knott stepped from behind me, going to the history teacher and speaking in hushed tones. I looked over the crowd, spotting the faces of my tormentors. Madison looked like Christmas had come earlier. Emma smirked knowingly, visibly planning something. And Sophia scowled like I’d just stolen her wallet and taunted her with it.

Oh, and she was glowing.

*What?* I said on the inside.

I thankfully didn’t react outwardly, as that might have repercussions.

As luck would have it, the only open place for me to sit was right to the left of Sophia. I made sure to take my seat from the other side of the desk, leaving her no chance to trip or push me.

Class restarted, and I couldn’t help but sneak a few glances to the girl at my right.

*Yup. Still glowing.*

I barely paid attention to Mr. Gladly’s words, focusing on that issue. What did Sophia have that was so special? Why her and not anyone else in the class?

One thing came to mind, and I had to resist puking on my desk at the image.

*Nope. Not happening. None of that soulmate or true love stuff here. Not happening. Ever.*

I pushed that thought out of mind and focused on other stuff. Hopefully, the trio would have gotten their jollies with the locker incident, and I would have some peace for the next few days. The looks they’d given me wasn’t giving me much faith in that idea, but one had to hope.

The bell rang. Everyone gathered his or her things, and I was no exception.

Then Madison pushed my last schoolbook off my desk, where Sophia grabbed it and held it up, dashing what little hopes I had.

“Give it back,” I said, rising.

She glared at me. “Or what?”
I reached for the book, only to grab her wrist. “Give it…” I started, only to stop as a feeling rose in the back of my head as soon as my fingers touched her skin. Something taut, like a fishing line. I had an impression that I could pull up something, but what I didn’t know.

Then Sophia shook me off and the feeling passed. She tossed the book in the farthest corner of the class, then left without a word. Emma and Madison followed, but not before the second bumped me harshly.

I made my way back to the book, thinking all the while. Was the reaction I had linked with that light? That might explain why I hadn’t reacted to Madison (or to anyone before then), but I didn’t have much data to go about. The only thing I knew was that only Sophia had such an effect.

I then shivered as my previous thought on the subject came back to me. Nope. Still not happening.

Walking out, I barely made it out the door before someone grabbed me by the back of the head and slammed me against the wall. It hurt, but once again there was that pulling feeling inside my mind.

“You should’ve stayed away,” Sophia’s voice came from behind me. “Should’ve known your place. Seems you need a reminder.”

I managed to put my arms against the wall this time, but it still hurt. Twice, three times she smashed me on my arms, the feeling teasingly remaining present in the back of my head.

I pulled.

I didn’t care what it did. Barely an hour back in class and it was already hell. Whatever it did, anything was better than the current situation.

Something pulled up, I don’t know what, but the feeling disappeared as another took its place.

Sophia went for another two blows, and then went away huffing. I was left on the ground with that sensation in the back of my head, not knowing what had really happened.

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I went through math class trying to put a name to the feeling now lodged in the back of my head.

It somehow felt somewhat alive or sentient, so I didn’t try poking it, just getting impressions.

It felt like darkness. Like shadow. It managed to give the exact opposite impression of the sensation of sunlight.

Somehow.

I also had the felling that it was missing a part, like it was broken. That break didn’t feel recent, more like an old wound.

Needless to say, I didn't do much work in that class.

I also didn't miss the bell this time, dashing out as soon as the first ring sang out. I took refuge in one of the bathrooms opposite the classroom. Normally, I found doing this to be shaming, but this time I
relished the solitude.

I had something to test.

Before Math class was halfway done, I'd realized there was only a single reason for the bizarre feelings and the shining.

I had powers.

Probably it was due to the locker, but I had no idea what my power was.

And that's why I wanted to be alone. I was going to try finding out.

I ate the lunch my father had made me in record time, and then brought out pen and notebook. And I poked the thing lodged in the back of my brain.

Nothing.

I waited a few seconds, just in case it had some form of startup time, but zilch. I didn’t even feel it react.

Second try.

I started trying to prod it from different sides, in different ways. Pushing and pulling and stretching and…

Whoa.

Abruptly, my point of view changed. I went from looking down at my knees to a view of the ceiling from the floor. A very shadowed one.

It was also itchy? Annoying? Painful, maybe? I tried moving away, to find a more comfortable place, and found myself with a close-up of the back of the toilet bowl, looking at the dust and webs there. The irritation was gone, and I could see clearly from here.

I took a moment to think and catch up with what was happening. My field of vision was wider than usual, nearly 180 degrees from where I was. With the space available behind the toilet, my body had at least shrunk or become immaterial.

Moving back to my previous spot was easy and fast. Now that I was expecting it, the feeling that came with that position was bearable, even if uncomfortable.

It took two tries before I managed going back to my normal shape and size. It was easy now that I knew how, and I turned back and forth a few times once I got the trick. Checking the back of the toilet in my normal state, I found that there wasn’t even a square foot of free space there. That piece of data, combined with the sensation of the thing in my mind and the field of view I had then made me pretty sure I had what I just did.

I could turn into shadow.

Not the dark, mist-like stuff you saw in movies, but a real two-dimensional shadow. I had the feeling I was faster in that form, and I was pretty sure the reason I could see properly from behind the toilet
and not from the middle of the stall was that light polarity was inverted for me in that state.

I was about to grab the notebook I had left out and write out those conclusions when the door banged open. “Pretty sure she’s in here,” Madison’s voice rang out.

I didn’t freeze, like I expected. My point of view switched as I instinctively shifted into shadow in the middle of the stall. I didn’t move, hoping they wouldn’t see me.

They knocked on each door in turn, then forced mine open once they realized it was locked. Sophia stepped in as it swung open.

I found out then what it felt being stepped on while in my other form. Nothing. Not a thing. It was even refreshing somewhat, as Sophia came and blocked the light, diminishing the irritation I felt. I could see under the soles of her shoes, could point out the remains of long-scrapped gum there. She then passed over me, and I found myself in her shadow.

And she dragged me along with it.

I was surprised for a moment, but relaxed as I found I could still move around just as easily. I could leave and enter her shadow without a problem; I was just dragged along if I didn't focus on staying in place.

The trio found my pen and notebook, and I was glad right then that I hadn’t written down a word yet. The three talked for a few moments while I practiced, moving from Emma’s shadow to Madison’s, and back to Sophia's. They then made their way out, notebook still in hand. As the last left, I moved into the shadow under the door, then returned to normal form inside the bathroom.

I had a big smile on my face.

Not only did I have a real power, I now had an efficient way of escaping the bullies. It wasn’t perfect, as classes would still be a pain, but I now possessed a way of disappearing that they wouldn’t be able to break.

I went and withdrew from my backpack the novel I had brought to read. I had some time before the bell, and a chapter or two was just what the doctor prescribed.
It was during my last class of the day that I realized two things.

First, Sophia was no longer shining. The glow had been dim enough before that I hadn’t noticed it was gone until now, especially since I tried not paying attention to her. I didn’t want to attract her own right here in class.

Second, why shadow?

I turned that question in my mind for a few minutes, thinking about the time, area and emotions, before another possibility came up, one that I disliked instantly. I minimized the program I was working on, opened a web page, and booted up the parahuman wiki. A quick search there for Brockton Bay plus Shadow gave only five results.

The first, Shadowhawk, was an old cape from the earlier times of Brockton Bay. Dead too, killed in action against the forces of Empire 88 under Allfather. As a broad-shouldered dead man, he didn’t fit the profile.

The second was Shadow Stalker.

She fit all the criteria: Female, Ward, which meant in high school, shadow powers. There were a few images of her in action, and even one video, and nothing there disabused me of the conclusion I had gotten to. The heights were similar enough, the body shapes close enough. It made sense.

Sophia Hess was a cape. A ward, one of the so-called good guys. Shadow Stalker.

It hit like a punch in the guts.

Like most kids, I’d idolized capes. Younger, I’d been proud to say that I’d owned an Alexandria lunchbox. And the Wards were the youth version of the Protectorate, the largest cape organization on earth. The good guys.

And Sophia was one of them.

The facts did not match. She, the most physically abusive of my three bullies, an official good guy? There had to be an error. Something had to be wrong.

Maybe… I thought. Maybe she’s only like that in school. Maybe she only lets her true nature out here, for one reason or another.

I had to know, had to find out.

If she was fooling the Wards, that was even worse. She was a danger in the general public, not only at school.

I stopped for a moment. Deep breaths, one after another. Then started planning an espionage mission.

Look out, Shadow Stalker, I said to myself. Your actions won’t poison the Wards. I won’t let it
happen.

I’ll get you first.
Arrival 1.3

Following Sophia was actually easier than I expected. Running out as soon as the bell rang, I ducked in an empty bathroom. Seconds later I was a patch of shadow on the ground, waiting under a broken light directly in the path between the classes and the exit.

The tough part was actually recognizing my target with a view from that angle. I nearly missed her, but managed to recognize the soles of her shoes right before she stepped out of my patch of darkness.

It was only when she was alone on the bus that I realized I might have made a mistake. Even if she was a ward, she might not be going there today. I had no idea how wards came and went, of what their schedules were, and I wasn’t even 100% sure that Sophia was one of them. She might right now be riding home, and I had no desire to meet with Sophia’s family.

However, I kept on, since what little I could notice and hear indicated that, yes, she was going in the direction of the Protectorate building. I had no idea how one might get there, especially incognito, but until Sophia arrived at whatever her destination was, I was going to follow. I had to prove to myself that I had it wrong, that Sophia wasn’t part of the Wards.

I was still hanging in her shadow when she dropped of the bus and turned into a side street. She entered what was visibly from my point of view an apartment block, then made her way through a door on the first floor.

I was dismayed. This sure wasn’t the Wards.

_Time to abort the mission, then_, I told myself with a sigh.

Something made me wait an extra few seconds, for which I will be forever glad. During that time, Sophia slipped open a panel on the wall, revealing a palm reader with attached camera and microphone. She scanned her hand, looked at the camera and took a deep breath.

“Shadow Stalker, reporting from school,” she enunciated clearly.

I was smirking as her shadow dragged me into an open elevator. I had really figured her out. I knew the truth.

Now came the tough part: Actually spying on her within the Wards. All without getting caught.

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Then came another handprint scanner, this one leading to a locker room. There Sophia went to the door with her cape name, and withdrew the costume she’d worn on the video I’d seen.

This change of clothes meant I had quite a few more spots to hide in, like the inside of her cloak, but none gave me a good enough range of vision. I kept my spot between her feet as she made her way deeper in the building.

"Watch it, squirt," Shadow Stalker said above me, pushing someone with an elbow.

"No need to push."
I couldn't see much of what was happening above, but a flash of yellow along with the young seeming sound of the answer tentatively identified the person as Vista, the smallest of the wards.

"Bite me," was Sophia's answer as she continued on her path.

It doesn't sound like Sophia's hiding who she is. I mused.

It was only the start.

In the next few minutes, she verbally abused, insulted or was vulgar to pretty much every ward I noticed. Aegis, Clockblocker, Kid Win. The only ward I knew she spared was Gallant, and only because he didn't seem present.

I finally left my ride, hiding under the table at the center of the wards meeting room.

I didn't know what to think.

Sophia wasn't hiding anything from her fellow capes. She was as unpleasant with them as she was in school.

And she was still a Ward.

The faith I had in the Wards and the Protectorate took a big hit right then. They let such a thing happen right under their noses, and did nothing.

I had thought about joining the Wards, before I reached my conclusion on Shadow Stalker. Now, it was the last thing I would do.

I had enough of bullying at school. Not happening in whatever cape life I would have.

There had to be a better option somewhere.

I had enough of the Wards for now, so I started planning my escape from their building.

It ended up being much easier than expected. I simply hitched a ride on Aegis. But as soon as my lift left the building, I completely forgot about getting home.

I could see so much.

I'd not seen the night in this state, and it was glorious. Gone was the mist-like darkness that had been everywhere. I could see 180 degrees, which from my position meant the whole city, from a bird's eye view. It was something I wouldn't forget.

I swore right then I'd find a way to fly one day.

"This is Aegis. I'm on my way. ETA two minutes."

I only realized Aegis had changed his flight path at those words. Instead of coming and going like he did earlier, he was diving straight toward something.

A building.
"This is Aegis. Building interior covered in darkness. Suspecting Undersiders. I'll need backup as soon as you can give me some." My ride spoke to whatever central control the Wards have.

I decided to tag along. I was curious about who exactly those villains were.

I had heard about them before. They were one of the newest gangs in Brockton Bay, but outside of that not much was known. They weren't front page material.

Anyway, from what Aegis had just said, they had a darkness generator. That would make going around easy, at the very least.

Aegis asked and received clearance for going in. He charged through a window and landed inside. I also touched down right there, moving from shadow to shadow until I had a good vantage point.

Let's see how a real cape fight goes live. I told myself.
Aegis breaking in didn't take long to get a reaction from the villains there. I was barely in position in the shadow of a hanging light that a trio of dogs charged in. I heard them before I saw them, but when they came in range of my shadow senses I easily took notice.

They were huge.

They were more than a meter high and nearly a meter wide, barely managing to pass in the corridors between the desks. A teenage woman stood a little further behind them, whistling what I supposed were orders.

For all of their size and ferocity, Aegis didn't react an inch, which I supposed meant he'd already faced them. He intercepted the first one mid jump and tossed him further back, blocked the second's bite with his forearm, and used said dog as a bludgeon on the third. By the second hit, his arm was once again free, and he'd made his way past the beasts. He charged through the air, intent on the girl there, when a boy stepped out from behind her.

A pretty boy, with toussled hair, mask and even a scepter. He made a wide gesture with his arm, and Aegis suddenly banked to the side, now in a collision course with a computer desk. A telekinetic? I asked myself.

The ward proved he had his head in the game when he grabbed the screen there and lobbed it right at the boy even as his face hit the piece of furniture. The pretty boy tried dodging, but still got nailed in the arm.

Then the entire room was filled with darkness.

I couldn't see anything anymore. However the power of the Undersiders’ darkness generator worked, it didn't have any synergy with mine. In fact, it was exactly the opposite. The irritating sensation came back, a hundred times worse, at a level that was right past painful. I nearly changed back to normal automatically, and held back through sheer willpower only because I would be doing a faceplant on the ground if I did so, something that could be deadly in the middle of hero-villain battle.

Also, moving in that darkness was, for some reason, slow going. Where earlier I dashed from place to place, this time I felt like I could only walk with everything that was pressing on me. With no senses to rely on, I simply went forward, intent on finding a spot the darkness didn't cover. I stubbornly held back from returning to my real body, not know up from down. I could be outside the building and falling to my death from there. I had no way to tell.

It felt like a hour when I found my way out. The place I arrived in was alight enough that I couldn't see much, but the pressure on my senses wasn't present anymore. Anyway, there was enough darkness that I could tell someone was there, working on something like a computer screen. I needed to recover, so I slipped inside that person's clothes, hiding on his or her back.

There I took a metaphorical breath, since my lungs seemed non-existent in this state. I'd nearly made a big mistake here. a possibly deadly one.

*Note to self,* I told myself. *Do not take the effect of two powers coming together for granted. That*
way lies pain.

I couldn't tell much about the person I was on. The bra and lavender clothes implied a woman, but I couldn't tell much more from here. My shadow form had no sense of smell or touch, so I had to rely on my eyes.

"Tattletale, we got everything?" a strong but young-seeming male voice called out.

"One second..." a female voice answered. It seemed to be coming from my current ride, so I mentally labeled lavender woman Tattletale. "Done," she said, and then I was moving.

As she moved, growling sounds like two dogs fighting for a bone got stronger. I decided to take a risk and repositioned myself between my ride's feet, and I as such was granted a view of said dog combat.

With Aegis as the bone.

The two dogs were even bigger than before, and nearly stuck in position by their mass, though they seemed to be slowly shrinking somewhat. Tattletale came to stay beside a tall man in motorcycle leathers, who seemed to sweat black mist somehow.

*The darkness generator,* I took note.

"You'll never escape," Aegis said. "Clockblocker, Gallant and Browbeat are right outside the building, with Armsmaster and Velocity as a bonus. Surrender, and it'll be much less worse for you four."

"And I suppose Shadow Stalker is right out the window, and has me in sight?" the boy in leather noted sarcastically.

The ward twitched. "No. She's covering the roof."

"He's alone and buying time," Tattletale replied without a trace of doubt in her voice. "The five he named first are on their way, though."

"We got how much time?" darkness generator asked.

"Not even a minute," Aegis spat out.

"At least five before Armsmaster's there," the girl above me corrected.

"Let's be quick, then," he said, then grabbed a length of optic cable. Whistling girl did the same, and before the minute was done they'd trussled him up in wires. Pretty boy even attached a desk to a cable around his neck, for good mesure.

He wasn't going anywhere easily.

"Good. We're gone then. Bitch, take Regent with you and go east. Tattle, with me the other way. Meet up in three hours," the tall boy said. I noted he pretty much seemed the leader.

The girl with the dogs, Bitch, looked at him like she wanted to say something, but instead went up the stairs with her hounds following, the pretty boy in tow. I supposed he was Regent, then. My ride
did the same.

When Tattletale arrived on the top floor of the building, Bitch and Regent were bounding off one of the large dogs, with another right after them. Darkness boy was on the last, holding his hand out.

I had to make a quick decision right there. Follow them or not? There were only two, so that wasn't much, but one of them was the only one who'd been able to do anything to me. On the other hand, staying here was also dangerous. The Wards and the Protectorate were sure to be there in the next few minutes, and an unknown cape on a crime scene wasn't the best way to come out. I didn't known about all of them, but the local Protectorate Leader, Armsmaster, was sure to be there, and whatever sensors he had might very well detect me. And I wasn't confident enough in my power to try scaling down the building right there.

In the end, I let myself be dragged on by Tattletale's shadow. The ride on the giant dog wasn't as interesting as the one on Aegis, but they still did good time. I recognized a place close to the trainyard, a storage facility full of containers. Made sense a group of villain would use those. As a cache for stolen goods, it was perfect.

Darkness boy went toward on in specific and unlocked it, opening the door. "After you..." he said to his female partner in crime. I followed along, curious. I wondered what (and how much) a group like the Undersiders could have hidden here.

But it was empty, I found out a second later. Right then I heard the door closed behind me, and the room filled in the oppressive shadows made by the darkness generator.

"Come out, Shadow Guy. We know you're there," his voice rang out in the room, echoing strangely through his shadow.

I'd just been caught.
Arrival Interlude: Sophia

I hated coming to the wards.

It beat Juvie, sure, but everyone here was a fool at best and an idiot at worst. They were the people with powers, the ones who could make the rules. And they did nothing, except enforce the laws under some fat bitch who couldn't even walk right.

Disgusting. Even Emma was better, and the only powers she had were a good grasp of social skills, money and a lawyer father.

I was reading the news on my laptop when the call came. "We got a break-in at Armstrong & Smith Corporate headquarters. Capes," Kid Win's voice rang overhead. He was the one manning the console today. "Gear up. We leave as soon as everyone here's ready."

I groaned and rose. I had no issue with a good fight, but a team deployment meant no fun at all. I hated having people looking over my shoulder, criticizing how I did everything. No chance to cut loose, no opportunity to put people in their place.

But my terms were clear. I was to participate on every team deployment while I was available. And today counted.

I had my first crossbow out and loaded when the intercom rang again. This time, it wasn't Kid Win. "This is Aegis. Building interior covered in darkness. Suspecting Undersiders. I'll need backup as soon as you can give me some," the ward leader's voice said on the system.

I smirked. Undersiders, eh, I said to myself. That was another thing completely. Darkness generator meant Grue. Seemed like the boy hadn't figured out I didn't want him in my city. I'd have to remind him.

No one messed with my power and got away with it.

I had a cache of my original bolts just for such occasions. They were hidden inside the wall behind the locker itself, so they needed powers like mine to be reachable. Anyone else would need to break down the lockers and drill into the wall to find them.

Shifting into my breaker state I reached out through the wall, only for my fingers to smash into the metal back panel.

What?!

The next three tries weren't any more fruitful. I couldn't reach my other form for some reason.

"The hell?!" I shouted out. What had happened to my powers?

The only way I knew someone could lose access to their abilities was overuse. It generally came with headaches, muscle pains or similar stuff, depending on the power. I never had an issue with that. In fact, I hadn't even used my powers since patrol yesterday.

"What's your issue this time?" Clockblocker said as he came in the room.
"Power's not working," I growled out.

"Really?" he replied. He didn't have his mask on, so I could see his smirk. It infuriated me even more. "If you don't want to go, you just have to say. I can ask Miss Militia to give you a bye."

"I said, power's not working!" I cried out this time, and started walking away.

"Where are you going?" the time stopper asked.

"Infirmary!" I yelled as the door closed behind me. All the doors in the building were automatic, so I didn't even get the satisfaction of slamming it in his face.

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I ended up with a full medical battery of tests. One after the other, interspersed with innate questions that they already knew the answers to. It was clear that they didn't believe what I was saying. Worst part was the tests were proving them right. I had nothing that could explain my missing powers, no sickness, no drugs, not even a cold. I was as healthy as I'd been on my last checkup, which hadn't even been a month ago.

The medicals techs were arguing on what more tests they could do, clearly resenting the waste, when Armssmaster came in medical bay.

"You better have a good explanation why you weren't part of today's operation, Sophia," he said. He was still wearing his combat suit, probably having just come back from the attack.

"No power," I ground out for the twentieth time this evening.

It visibly wasn't the answer he was expecting. "What?" he said, then fiddled with his helmet a little. "Can you repeat that, to be sure."

"I. Have. No. Power." I said, enunciating each word in turn. I wanted to yell in his face, but he was the head honcho here, and that would have brought down worse on my head. "Heard it this time?"

"She's saying the truth," he said, turning around toward the techs. "I want every test done. Every single one. I don't care if people have to do overtime, or if we have to have something shipped tonight. All of them. Now."

He has a lie-detector in his suit? I suddenly realized. That was bad. Class A bad. I'd better be careful around him in the future. There were some things I did the Protectorate would have an issue with.

"You..." Armssmaster said, turning back toward me. "I want a report of your last days. Last three patrols, plus everything that happened between them. Here, school, home, I don't care. Every detail. I want the color of your classmates' shirts and what your mother had for dinner two days ago. And I want it on my desk before you leave the building." He moved out of the way the techs came forward, pushing a big device on wheels. "Deliver it to my workshop. No patrols tonight, even if your power comes back," he finished, then walked out resolutely.

I had to hold back from yelling out. He'd given me homework.

Fuck you, Armssmaster, I screamed inside. FUCK YOU!
The techs continued on, attaching something to my left arm. I readied myself for a long night.
Arrival 1.5

Somehow, this time was even worse than the last. I somehow managed to abort retransforming just as it was about to happen and tried thinking for a moment. Staying in place was an issue, my instincts were trying to make me move anywhere but here, but I held on my spot.

First off, escape. With all my senses blocked as they were, I had no clue how to find an exit. I belatedly realized I didn’t even have a clue of how much space I needed to be able to get somewhere. I could sneak under a door, true, but would a hole be enough?

Without sight, I didn’t even have a clue of how fast or far I’d be moving. I knew I moved faster as a shadow, and that this darkness slowed me down, but did they cancel each other? Was I faster, or slower than normal? I had no way to tell, no point of reference.

Transforming back was the only other solution. There were only two of them, and not offensive powers from what I’d seen. They’d been violent with Aegis, but not any more than needed to restrain him. Outside the dogs, which weren’t present.

In the end, my choice ended up being made for me. I lost focus, and turned back instinctively to evade the pain. I made a last shadow step at the final moment, just enough hopefully not to appear right beside the two of them.

“Good,” the boy’s voice rang distorted through his shadow. “Now turn around.”

I did so, but not before pulling up the hood of my shirt and hiding my face within. I kept my face lowered, hoping to preserve whatever anonymity I could.

The mist-like darkness slowly vanished, pooling down at my feet, revealing light coming from a lamp bolted in the ceiling of the cubicle.

I couldn’t see much, but I noticed the two Undersiders were still cautious. While most of the darkness was gone, there was still a wall of it behind the two of them, obscuring the exit. That path was blocked.

My eyes widened for a second before I managed to blank my face. They were also glowing. They hadn’t been before, in my shadow sight.

*Looks like the glowing only works with my normal sight,* I made a note to myself. By now, I was pretty sure this shining was because they were capes.

“Talk,” the boy in leather said. “Who are you?”

I said nothing. I focused instead on trying to stop the few shakes I still had, phantom pains from the misty darkness.

“Who sent you?” he continued.

Still, I kept silent. I ran scenarios in my head instead. Maybe I could grab their powers like I’d done to Sophia, but that didn't fix the issue of numbers. Even with power taken off, it was two against one, and the boy looked like he could break me alone if he seriously tried.
“How did you notice her?” Tattletale asked her companion.

He turned toward her. “She was right above Aegis when I got in the fight, and she bolted as soon as
I filled the room with darkness. Like a certain ward, she was visibly affected. She twitched for a
moment, then bolted straight in your direction.”

The girl’s smile grew wider, and she turned once again toward me. I lowered my head a little more,
and hid my hands behind my back.

The boy also turned. “We can stay here for as long as we need. So who...” he started, then was
interrupted by his companion.

Who started laughing.

She did so for a good ten seconds, before looking up at me with a fox-like grin. “Grue,” she started
as if presenting something. “Allow me to introduce the person who removed Shadow Stalker as a
threat.”

The boy, who I supposed was Grue, faced her way instantly. “Really? Shadow Stalker’s dead?”

Tattletale hadn’t taken her eyes from me. “No, but she isn’t gonna be coming back.” She pointed
toward me with her thumb. “She’s a new cape, first day on the job. Rode in on Aegis. Guy didn’t
have a clue she was there.”

“Hero or villain?” Grue asked.

Tattletale stared at me for a moment. “Not sure. Not a ward or Protectorate, for sure, but not really a
villain either. Doesn’t know the score, really.”

My eyes were wide under the brim of my hood. Where is she pulling that info from? I asked myself.
I thought for a moment telepath, but realized she was even pulling stuff I didn’t even know myself.

“Are we in any danger from her?” Grue asked.

“Nope,” Tattletale said with a smile. “Girl’s just looking around, trying stuff. This whole thing
wasn’t anything she planned.”

“Good,” Grue said, then came forward. He rolled his shoulders as he did so, as if he was testing his
limbs for soreness. I tensed, preparing for an attack. It never came.

Instead, he stuck his hand forward for an handshake. Surprised, I clasped his hand automatically, and
we shook twice. His grip was tight but not painful, and seemed genuine.

“However you did it, thank you for Shadow Stalker,” he said, and again his voice made him seem
younger than he looked. “You have no idea how violent she could be with those crossbows of hers.”

“I’m pretty sure I have a good guess,” I found myself saying.

“She talks!” he replied, and I could hear the smile in his voice. “Well, good luck with those powers
of yours. A tip, as payback for Shadow Stalker…” He came close. “You’re not as invisible as you
think in shadow form, even when hiding in another one. Someone who knows you’re there can track
you,” he whispered right next to my ear.

He then turned around and started walking out. I only realized then that he’d dispelled the rest of his shadow. “Tattletale, you coming?” he said, opening the door.

“Nah, I’m gonna talk with the newbie a little more. Girl stuff. I’ll catch you later.”

He nodded, tossing her a backpack. “See you, Shadow Girl.” He then left with the now regular-sized dog on a leash.

Tattletale turned back toward me once Grue was out of sight. “Now what do I do with this bomb that’s been dropped on my knees…?”

“What?” I said. I didn’t get what she was saying.

“You, girl. You have no idea how bad that power of yours can make things,” she explained. “You’re an explosion waiting to happen, if anything goes wrong.”

“What do you…” I started, only for my stomach to interrupt. It gurgled loudly, making me realized I hadn’t eaten since dinner. Having been a shadow all the while, I hadn’t noticed.

Tattletale smiled that vulpine grin of hers. “I can spring for supper no problem,” she said. “No manipulation, no allying, no anything. Just talking. Your power could have global repercussions, and you need to know about it pronto.” She removed her mask, then crouched to look at me in the eyes. “You don’t know much about cape politics, don’t you?”

I shook my head negatively.

She smiled again. “Dinner and an education,” she said, withdrawing normal-looking clothes from her bag. “I’ll even let you choose the restaurant, if you want. How about it?”

I thought about it, and she let me. She was a villain, true, but horribly well informed, so the offer was tempting. Also, now that I thought about it, she coached her words to get the results he wanted from her partner. She’d made sure that this encounter didn’t turn into a fight, just by saying the right words.

“I can leave whenever I want to?” I asked.

“Anytime. No pressure.”

Very tempting, I said to myself. Then an idea came to mind. “Tell me your name.”

“Lisa Wilbourn.” No hesitation, no stuttering. Either she’d been expecting the question, or it was a name she used often enough.

It would have to be enough. “Call me T,” I said, then extended my hand as Grue had done earlier. We shook. “Lead on.”
The restaurant Lisa brought me to was a somewhat high-scale French one, just off the Boardwalk. She’d changed her hair style and removed her makeup, and without those she looked like a totally different person. If I hadn’t seen the process myself, I wouldn’t have recognized her at the end.

The reason she chose that specific place became clear when we were brought to an isolated booth, far in the back of the building. It was the perfect place to talk privately.

Lisa ended up ordering as soon as she sat down at the table, and I did the same based on her recommendation. She then waited until the waiter was out of sight, then turned toward me. “First, I have to verify something. Just one second.” I nodded.

She reached out and poked my bare hand. The line feeling from before came back and vanished as soon as she removed her touch.

“Knew it. You’re a striker,” was her reply.

“Sorry?” I said, questioning.

“Power classifications. I won’t go over them all, since we have a lot to go through, but you’re a striker, which means you do something by touch, and a trump, which means you affect powers,” she explained.

I nodded again. “So, explain then. How am I a bomb waiting to happen?”

Lisa smiled. “First, a little context. You saw Ocean’s Eleven, right?” I nodded. “Would you rate that group the same way you rated Nazi Germany? Like you would serial killers?”

“No.”

“It’s the same thing with villains. Some of them, like the ABB and the Empire here in Brockton Bay, are groups with goals. They want to change the world, and they aren’t afraid to use to powers to do that. Some, the Slaughterhouse Nine being the best example, are simply killers on a power trip, wanting attention.”

She grabbed a piece of bread from the basket at the middle of the table and nibbled on it. “And some are like the Undersiders, playing cops and robbers with the Protectorate. They aren’t there for the politics, or for the fame. The money’s good and they’re having fun trying to outmatch the opposition.”

“It isn’t like that,” I countered.

“Sure it is,” Lisa said, smilling her vulpine grin. “The Protectorate even knows it. The small-time villains, the ones like Uber & Leet, they don’t go to the Birdcage. They end up in regular jail, out of which they’ll invariably escape. The Protectorate sometimes even recruits villains upon capture. You know Assault, right?”

I nodded. I’d seen the name a few times in news articles referencing capes.
“Ex-villain. He broke at least seven people out of the trucks transporting prisoners to the Birdcage.”

“You’re kidding,” I said, visibly surprised.

“Nope. Previous name was Madcap, and it’s Battery that ended up catching him. He got a good deal out of it, right?” she raised her hand in a signal to stop. Thirty seconds later, the waiter arrived with the food.

The conversation stopped for the moment, the both of us turning toward eating. My own meal was simple, pepper steak with fries, but I’ll admit the quality was surprising. There wasn’t a single bit of food left on my plate once I was done, and I saw that Tattletale’s was no better.

“You still haven’t told me why I’m so important,” I pointed out.

“Bear with me, I’m getting there,” she replied, then continued on her earlier subject. “The reason the Protectorate does that is because they don’t want all out war. They don’t want to push those that respect the lines in the sand to say ‘Screw the rules, I’m going all out’. By being lenient, they can dodge the villains allying against them, and then deal with them on a case by case basis.”

“And that’s where you come in.” She pointed toward me. “To a cape, his power IS his identity, at least in part. And you can take that away. A lot of capes were nothings before triggering, and they don’t want to go back to that. They’d rather die. If anything can push them beyond the unwritten rules, it is that.”

“And that goes for both heroes and villains. If you were to join a villain gang and your full power became known, the Protectorate would hit the place so bad its builders would feel it,” she said, face serious. “The Protectorate would love your power if you joined them, love that you could disable those who cross the lines. You’d be put in a gilded cage, protected at all time. You’d be too valuable to replace.”

“When your power would become public, which it would for sure, the villains wouldn’t sit still. You’d have the biggest alliance of supervillains after your skin. There would be a price on your head beyond any ever seen.”

“Come on,” I said. “It can’t be that bad.”

“I haven’t even gotten to the worst possibility,” she answered. “Do you know which cape has the power closest to yours, T?”

“No,” I replied.

“Glaistig Uaine, the Fairy Queen.” Lisa smiled once more. “Heard about her?”

I did. I remembered the papers at her last battle, which had said she’d surrendered instead of facing the full might of the Protectorate. “But she was a killer!” I voiced.

“That’s not what made people afraid of her. There were and still are at least a dozen capes with bigger kill counts, even counting only capes deaths. What made capes fear her and hit her with everything they had was the fact she could steal the powers off dead capes,” Lisa pointed out. “You can do the very same, even more easily. Just a touch.” She raised a single finger in the air. “You’d either die, if it’s a villain getting you, or the Protectorate would send you straight to the Birdcage out of fear. You’d be too big of a deal.”
“And that’s not even getting into the other big groups over the world, like the Yangban,” she finished.

Worst part was I could now see where she was going. People feared weakness, feared getting weak. To capes, I was now the boogieman, the story they would tell themselves when they wanted to scare each other.

My face fell. “What can I do?”

“First, and most important: Never let your power known. Never allude to it, show it. I’d say never use it, but I wouldn’t respect such an order if it was given to me. Just choose your targets carefully if you do so.”

“Explain that in more detail, please,” I asked.

“Let’s take Brockton Bay for example. Removing the Undersiders, there are five groups: The Merchants, Empire 88, ABB, Coil and Faultline. Out of those, three are really a danger to the city at the moment: the Merchants, E88 & ABB. Problem is, in cases like this, there’s a balance to the city. It’s tenuous, true, but it keeps this stable, and limits the altercations. There’s a few raids, here and there, but it’s generally limited. All-out war profits to no one, in the end.”

“In this scenario, let’s say you remove Lung, the head of the ABB. Here’s how it would probably go...”

“First, a very short time after he loses his powers, he’d strike hard. All his forces, all his capes. Maybe even mercenaries. He has nothing left to lose, and long term his power loss is sure to be known. He’d plan it to remove as much of the opposition as possible, hoping to decimate his opponents enough that they’d think again before striking back.”

“But strike back they would, especially the Empire. They wouldn’t be able to take it that Asians hurt them. And they’d win, without Lung to balance things. Then E88 would be able to turn toward their next enemies.”

“The Merchants?” I asked.

“No, the Protectorate. The Empire wants control of the city. They can’t fight at full while the ABB could strike at their back. Without that...” She left the rest to imagination.

She took another piece of bread and buttered it. “The other side isn’t much better. Take Kaiser down, and there would probably be a civil war within the E88. Sure it’s racists fighting each other, but you know who would really suffer in the end.”

“The innocents.” I replied, voice grave.

“Bingo!” Lisa voiced. “The ABB and the Merchants would join in, hoping to get some territory out of the deal. Whenever that happens, the whole E88 would rise up to face them, only to go back to fighting each other once they’re done.”

She was trying to get somewhere, I noticed. “What are you trying to say?” I asked.

“Look,” Tattletale replied. “I know stuff, and you know I know stuff. That’s my power. I can tell
that you’re a good guy, that you want to use your powers to help. Best thing would be to never use that power of yours, be only Shadow Girl and nothing else, but I know you wouldn’t take it. I wouldn’t, myself.”

_Point made_, I said to myself. She wasn’t wrong. I wouldn’t be able to look aside, especially after everything that happened to me. Too many people looked aside in my case, too many told themselves it wasn’t their problem.

Well, I was going to solve problems.

“If you hit anything in Brockton Bay, trying to help, go after the Merchants,” she continued.

“Explain that.”

“We talked about the status quo earlier. Fact is, the Merchants have very little impact on it. They’re scavengers, living in the places no one else wants. But the Merchants are a good part of the drug trade in the city. Taking them out would at least clean some of that up.”

I rose. “You’ll forgive me if I verify those facts.”

“Go ahead.” Her grin somehow got bigger. “Have fun with that. I’d do the same in your case.” After putting a few bills on the table, which seemed to include a generous tip, she withdrew a phone from her bag and handed it to me. “Here.”

I took the phone and looked at it like it was dangerous. I disliked cell phones, practical as they were.

“It’s a disposable. I put my email and the line to my other phone into it. Call me if you want lunch, info, or anything else.” She started walking out, waving her hand above her head. “Ta-ta!” and then she was gone.

I packed my own stuff and made my own way out. I’d have a lot to think about, tonight.
I managed to sneak some power practice on the way home.

Mainly, I tested for speed. With the sun down completely, there were shadows everywhere, and after turning to my other state in an abandoned alley, I could dash all over the place with barely a restriction. I made sure however to stick to deeper darkness, remembering Grue’s tip. I didn’t want to attract attention.

I covered the distance from the alley to home in less than a fifth of the time I expected.

*Serious movement ability,* I noted. I’d actually have to find a way of getting numbers, later.

I turned back to myself in the space between the two houses, after having made sure no one was looking. From there I walked straight home, going in from the back door.

“Taylor!” my dad said the moment I cleared the doorframe. “Thank god you’re here. I was so worried about you.”

A quick look at the kitchen clock revealed it was 9:13 PM. Supper at our place was at 6:30. To my dad, I’d just been nearly three hours late.

I felt horribly guilty right then. With all that happened today, I’d not even spared a single thought toward my father. He’d been waiting for me the whole time, as evidenced by the cold food on the table. He’d not even taken a bite off his plate.

“I even called the school. They told me you’d been present in all your classes, and that you left early from school,” he continued.

I had a surge of anger at the intrusion into my privacy, which went cold when I realized what he’d had in mind.

The locker, part 2.

I couldn’t be mad about that. How long had I been in there, begging to get out? He’d just been afraid and reacting.

“No,” I finally answered. “I’m sorry.” I lowered my head in shame. It would have been easy to simply call before the restaurant. I just hadn’t thought about it. At all. “I already ate.”

“With a friend?” My father knew me well. I didn’t usually eat out alone, not for supper.

I started to say no, but thought about it. Where could I place her, really? I didn’t trust her, not enough to call her a friend, but she’d been helpful, friendly and surprisingly open. “With an acquaintance,” I finally decided on. That was the best I could come up with.

He smiled. “Had fun, at least?” he asked.

“Somewhat,” I replied evasively, as I usually did. I was surprised to realize it was the truth. There had been some scary parts and even some painful ones, but I felt happy. I felt like I’d done
something with myself, for once.

“Good.” He kissed my forehead. “Glad to hear it.” And with that, my absence was forgiven. That was my father in a nutshell. As long as he wasn’t angry, he forgave easily. He didn’t know that I knew when he paced in his room, trying to calm himself. I kept mum on the subject.

He went and pushed his plate into the microwave. “You got homework, kiddo?”

“Some.” Very little, actually. Though I could probably do with some more studying.

“Go on, then.”

I waved as I made my way to my bed. I was surprisingly not tired, but that was where I worked the best on schoolwork. The computer would be a distraction, at this point. Too much other stuff that I could check.

Even with that, I didn’t do much work.

In the end, I crashed and went to sleep barely an hour later. I was so tired then I was probably snoring less then a minute after my head hit the pillow.

I don’t think I even dreamt.
My alarm woke me up at seven fifteen. For a moment I stayed blearily in bed, wondering why I hadn’t woken up as usual when Dad took his shower.

Then I remembered everything. Sophia, the infiltration, the battle. Even the meeting at the restaurant afterward.

*Oh boy,* I said to myself. *No wonder I slept through Dad’s morning routine. At least I feel rested.*

I’d be late if I lazed any more, so I forced myself to slip out the covers as start getting ready.

Thirty minutes later, I was on my way to school while mentally going over what I needed to work on in my new cape life. The two most important aspects were information and costume.

I’d been lucky the day before, with the Undersiders. Grue hadn’t pushed and tried getting my civilian identity, and while Tattletale knew how I looked, I knew the same for her, putting us on somewhat the same level. I was pretty sure this was an exception more than anything, and that fortune would not smile on me a second time.

I needed a costume pronto.

Information was less urgent, but still necessary. I needed to verify Tattletale’s claims before I did anything, but she’d at least proven that I needed to know a lot more if I wanted to be effective as a cape. I knew the websites to go to, the places to check. Now I just needed to put the time.

The grounds of Winslow were filled with students coming in when I arrived there. I was somewhat later than was usual for me, though not enough to be concerned about lateness. Around me, boys and girls were chatting, reading or some even doing homework, alone or in groups. A quick scan of the crowd revealed no Emma and none of her trio, and I released a breath I’d been holding. I wasn’t in the mood for that, not today.

*Not that I’ve ever been,* I said sarcastically to myself.

I made my way to my locker carefully. After what had happened, I couldn’t help but be paranoid there. I caught sight of Emma’s red haired curls, completely on the other side of the room. Not close enough to try anything, thankfully.

Then I opened my locker.

The smell it me like a hammer. Rot, decay. I realized rationally that this wasn’t like the last time, that the smell wasn’t as powerful, but I still had to hold myself back, both to stop my breakfast from coming back up, and from having a flashback. I griped the sides of the locker, forced myself to stay up, and looked.

Meat.

There were thin openings on the locker doors, which students often used to slip messages. Someone, and I didn’t have to go far to guess, had slipped leftover meat through that hole into my locker.
I turned around instantly, expecting an attack like the last, but none came. The trio was still where I had seen them last, all of them looking straight in my direction.

It had simply been a reminder. A warning.

I could see them clearly from here. Emma was standing straight and smirking, clearly the mastermind of this plot. Madison was hunched over, laughing herself silly. And Sophia was mad. Really, really mad.

She had circles under her eyes and her hair wasn’t as well coifed as usual, and she looked like she wanted to kill someone.

I flashed back to the discussion I had with Lisa yesterday, and understood. She’d told me a person’s powers were part of their identity, and I understood that, rationally. She’d also told me I had stolen Shadow Stalker’s powers. Stolen, not copied. I could still feel them in the back of my head.

Only now did I really get it.

I belatedly realized that, if Sophia released a form of stress through cape activities, she no longer had that pressure valve to work with. She would have to do so in other ways.

I had a good idea how it would go.

I left my locker open, heading straight for class. The janitors would find it and deal with it.

Rushing for the relative safety of my English class, I stopped in the door. Someone had dropped Coke all over the desk and chair I usually used, and most other seats were already taken. The only ones left I knew would put me in close range with the trio, once they took their own seats.

“Out of the way, loser,” came Sophia’s voice from behind me. I didn’t even have time to turn before someone pushed me tight in the direction of the doorframe. I tried stopping my momentum, but still ended up knocking my head on the frame.

Using my hands to push myself back up, I rose to see my tormentor looking at me straight in the eyes.

“Get lost, loser. We don’t need you here,” she said, then spit to my face. She was still mad, visibly.

I was struck with the childish instinct to spit back, but I held back, not wanting to fall down to her level.

Taking a deep breath, I was stuck with an epiphany.

I realized I was wasting my time here.

My grades were down, I’d missed an entire month of classes, and even before that I was lucky if I could submit homework or projects undamaged and on time. I wasn’t really learning anything and my stress levels were shooting up as soon as school came to mind.

I didn’t have to deal with this. Especially not with Sophia being on an anger kick.

I turned and walked out. There had to be a better solution, high school equivalency, anything other
than going back. I hated giving up, and this felt like it, but I’d already done the worst thing that I could to Sophia and if she even figured it out, I was dead.

Not dealing with it again was better.

I kept on toward home.

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At home, I pointedly decided to focus on cape stuff. I needed to forget I’d even decided to go to Winslow this morning, and working on my powers was the best alternative I had. I had quite a bit of time to do so, my father wouldn’t be back until five at earliest.

First up, costume.

I raided my wardrobe, taking out everything that wasn’t ordinary clothes. It was a painfully small pile, but it had one interesting item. It was a hooded cloak from an old Halloween costume where I’d gone out to a corporate party as Death. It was a little too small now and something had dropped on the back, ruining most of the bottom, but careful cutting had a quite serviceable hood detached. Best of all, it came with an integrated veil. I tested it, and my face was invisible behind the cloth. Perfect fit with my current shadow powers.

The rest wasn’t anything I could see myself as wearing. Old costumes, Sunday clothing, dresses. I would die before going to a fight in a dress.

That image gave me an idea. I slipped in my dad’s room and looked into his closet. My father, due to his work, had a good number of similar suits for important events. The both of us were about the same size, so this could work. Going through them, I took a pair of clean but comfortable work pants in black, along with a black dress shirt and matching jacket. I had to play a little with the cuffs of both top and bottom.

The end result was that I looked like a professional, like a lawyer or banker, with a hidden face in a hood. Best part was that, with what little figure I had, it was impossible to tell if I was a man or a woman. That should help obscure things a bit. Only thing missing for that was a good pair of gloves, and I was set.

It would be a little too hot when came the summer months, but it was perfect for the current mid-February. If needed, I’d make a new costume then.

I stocked everything in my backpack, removing all of my school items. They wouldn’t be of use.

Second part was gathering information.

My father kept issues of the town’s newspaper for some time, and it had a cape section. A perfect place to start getting up to date with the new world I was part off.

An hour later, I had made quite a bit of headway. Tattletale’s info about the Merchants was true, at the very least. Skidmark had been arrested for a good number of drug and cape-related offences, only to be broken out of prison before his trial even started. The article noted it was his second arrest for similar charges in two years, so he visibly wasn’t repentant. They had been a good blurb of info about his actions, which put his territory in parts of the Shantytown and the Boat Graveyard.
For the others, like ABB and the Empire, I’d need more than a few newspapers. A trip to the library was going to be a good way to spend the afternoon, it seemed. But first, dinner.

I walked to the kitchen and found myself face to face with my father, coming in from behind the house. His eyes went wide as he saw me.

“Taylor?” he asked. “What are you doing here?”
I wasn't ready for that confrontation. It'd sometimes skipped school last year, when the bullying had gotten too bad, but it had been a while ago and my dad had never known.

But now, there was no way of putting the genie back in the bottle. I simply lowered my head in shame.

"Taylor, what..." he started, then stopped. I couldn't see his face, but I saw his entire body tense. His hand came up to my face, and a surge of fear went through me. Then, a spot of pain, short-lived.

"Taylor, where did you get that?!" he cried out, his tone rising in anger.

It took me a second to realize what he meant. My hand reached up to my forehead, and I found there a somewhat sizable bump, bleeding a little at my touch.

I'd completely forgotten about Sophia's last hit. I was so focused on leaving that I hadn't even realized I was wounded.

Dad was visibly rigid, trying to hold onto his temper. He took a deep breath and started speaking slowly. "You're not going back there," he said, voice hard and unyielding.

Even though it was exactly what I planned, I couldn't help but feel a surge of outrage at his intrusion into what I considered my affairs. "But..."

"But nothing!" he said, raising his voice. Before I could say anything, he gathered me in his arms and hugged me. "I can't do this, Taylor. I can't let you go there, and fear a call from the police or the hospital all the time." His voice was wet with tears. "I'm not that strong."

I felt guilty right there of everything I hid from my father. He was a good man, a good father, and I never doubted he loved me. I felt ashamed of what I had forced him through.

"We'll find something else. I... I have some contacts. We'll find a solution. You don't need to talk about it. Don't need to think about it. Just tell me you won't go," he continued.

I knew his contacts, and knew they didn't amount to much. But here, in my father's arms, I couldn't tell him no. It would break him, and he'd already been broken enough by mom's death.

"...Ok." I finally answered after a minute.

"Really?!" he said, sounding surprised. "Promise?"

"Really. I promise." I had better things to do with my time.

Only then did Dad stop hugging me. He rose again, and I could see his eyes were full of unshed tears. He passed his hand over them, then smiled a little. "So, had any plans for the afternoon?" he asked, visibly trying to change the subject.

_Actually, I do_, I realized. "I thought I'd go over to the library. Had a few subjects I wanted to do some research on."
"Not without doing something about that," he said, pointing. I had again forgotten about the bump on my forehead.

Dad dragged me into the washroom and took his time cleaning and bandaging the wound. I let him work, knowing that it helped him keep control of himself. I ended up with a small square band-aid a little north of my right eye, and my father was visibly more calm and collected.

My father then went into the fridge and drew out his lunchbox. "Mind having some company on the way there?"

I didn't, and told him so. The both of us walked, with him discussing what was happening on the docks at the time. It was just words to pass the time, really, but I still smiled. My father would never change.

He even waited until I was inside before continuing on his way to work.

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Three hours later, I had a pile of notes before me.

Tattletale had been right, at least as far as I could see.

The parahumans wiki had enough links to information that I could track the main moves of the gangs in Brockton Bay without much difficulty. And every attack by the Protectorate meant the same from the opposite gang. Not that territory seemed to change much, these days.

Case to point: Lung had beaten back the Protectorate in mid-November, and on the next day there was gang warfare in the ABB territories closest to the Empire. The ABB struck back, Lung smashing an E88 safe house the next day, along with unspecified rumors of a E88 parahuman being taken out. The next two weeks had more of the same, until things calmed down in early December. In the end, the lines hadn't changed.

The Merchants were another deal. They tried striking here and there, trying to gather more influence, and were beaten back the very same day. Squealer was reported wounded after a fight between ABB and the Merchants, and the Empire had enough parahumans to spare that every raid made in E88 territory ended up in failure.

I also learned why the Protectorate didn't strike hard and eliminate the entire opposition. On the Empire side, it was simple numbers. The E88 had access to as many if not more capes than the Protectorate, and that is if you included the Wards. Not a fight you wanted to get into if you had any other choice. The damage would be enormous, and the Protectorate wouldn't survive the losses that would probably be inflicted on both sides.

The ABB, on the other hand, had Lung.

Reading about Lung was scary. Coming to Brockton Bay, he'd challenged the entire Protectorate here alone and made them back off by himself. And that wasn't the worst he'd done. Rumor had it that he'd been present in Kyushuu, that he'd went toe to toe with Leviathan, and that the Endbringer had been the one to withdraw from the fight.

He simply was a monster.
And I wasn't going to try myself on that, not without at least a dozen plans. He'd probably survived enough attempts at assassination and the like that he'd be ready for someone like me, somehow. No, I would go with what Lisa had suggested. The Merchants were a plague, and I could deal with them.

One at the time. The rest would have to be dealt in their turn.
Job Training Interlude: Danny

It had been somewhat easy to keep in control of my emotions while Taylor walked beside me. I just focused on her smile, on making her laugh, and I could keep my anger at bay. Now that she was gone and I was on my way back to work, my emotions were surging once again at the idea of my precious daughter being hurt. And I didn't try holding them back this time.

I was PISSED.

The school had promised they'd clean up their act. It had taken only two days to prove them liars. TWO DAYS. And worse was that I knew my daughter. She wasn't one to cry at every scratch, to run after a single strike. Anything that would have made her run home was dangerous enough that she feared for herself.

I was willing to bet it was related to the locker event.

By now I was back at the Docks, and barely a minute later I stood outside the offices of the association. I'd not saluted or paid attention to anyone on the way, not wanting to direct my temper against them.

I could hear the workers talking in the background. "Someone released the Demon!" one said, then pretended he'd done no such thing. On my side, I pretended not to hear.

Even though they were talking about me.

The 'Demon' was my nickname with the dockworkers. I came from something one had said seeing my reaction to another of the manpower cuts, and it had stuck.

It was a funny thing, in a way. Here, on the Docks, the fact that I had a temper was excused, if not respected. Dockworkers tended to be simple men and women, direct ones, and they had no issue with such releases of emotions, as long as they found valid targets. When working with the mayor and other such politicians, however, it was seen as a weakness. One should always be in control.

I personally thought whoever could stay in control while their child was attacked was either a cruel person, or an idiot.

As I entered my office, my aide, Mike, came to me with a folder. An ex-Dockworker, he knew me well enough that my face held no secret from him. Not today. He went white as a sheet, then raised his voice. "Danny, you OK?"

"No." I wasn't in the mood for social niceties.

"What happened?" he asked. "You didn't look that way this morning."

"Taylor. And the school," was the only answer I gave. I was thinking hard, trying to find a way of punishing those that hurt my daughter. I wasn't interested in solutions right now, I just wanted to hurt those who had hurt mine. Especially after they'd promised otherwise.

Mike's eyes grew wide. "Again?!" he said. "Is it..." He started.
"No, it isn't has bad as last time," I cut him off. "Just a simple wound. It's just that it isn't stopping; That's the issue."

He stood silent for an instant. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he finally said.

"No, there..." I started, then something came to mind. It wasn't what I wanted to do, in fact I would have to swallow my pride to do it, but Taylor was worth more than that.

She was worth everything.

"Actually, can you cover for me today? I have an errand to do, as soon as I can," I asked, bowing my head slightly.

"Go," he said. "I have two kids. I know they come first."

"Thank you Mike," I said, smiling somewhat. "I'll be back as soon as I can," Then I walked out once more.

*-*-*-*-*-*-*

Forty minutes later, I stood before my target. I took a deep breath, and tried not to notice how much I didn’t fit in this environment, especially in my current clothes. I took another, then walked inside.

The secretary at the desk didn’t wait a second before speaking up. “Welcome to the offices of Barnes, Holmes & Mason. What can we do to help you?”

“Would it be possible to speak to Alan Barnes?” I asked. “Tell him that Danny Hebert would like to talk to him.”

“One moment please,” she said, reaching for her phone.

I had to wait twenty-five minutes before I was directed to Alan’s office. I took another deep breath before going in.

“Danny!” he said, voice full of energy. He was standing behind his desk, but reached out and pointed at the client’s chair. “Sit, sit. What can I do for you?”

I preferred standing up. “Alan,” I spoke, voice clear. “I never thanked you for what you did, when Annette died. For coming and shaking some sense into me. If it wasn’t for you, I would have hurt my daughter horribly at the time she needed it the least.” I bowed. “So, thank you for everything you did for my daughter.”

He smiled. “Think nothing of it. Our children were friends, and that’s what any good friends would have done.”

“I need your help again. For my daughter,” I continued.

His eyes became serious. “Ask away.”

“I want to prosecute the school.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t that event more than a month ago? Why come to me now?” he
“Taylor went back in school yesterday, and when I went home for lunch, I found her there, bleeding from the head,” I answered. “The principal told me they’d look over her, and she’s coming home bleeding after not even two days. Something has to be done.”

“I agree, this sounds serious,” he said, then pointed to the chair again. This time, I sat. “I’m a divorce lawyer, not what you really need, but I’ll see what can be done. Now, what can you tell me about her case.”

“Not much,” I scowled. “Taylor hasn’t told me everything, and I don’t want her involved in this. It’s clear it’s hurting her very badly, and I don’t want to make it worse by pushing her.”

Alan’s face became harder. “You do know that this makes the case that much more difficult?”

“I suspected.”

“There are still other paths that can be taken. How about…” he started.

In the end, I discussed options with Alan for a good hour and a half. I left his office with a better idea of what I could do, and the number of a good private investigator along with it. I had much to think about, but now at least I knew where I wanted to go.
It took me a week before I was ready to hit the Merchants.

I wouldn’t have been able to do it if I still had to deal with school. Hunting the Merchants meant late nights, sometimes as late as 3 AM, which made getting up at six a headache. I still did so, mainly the see my father off, then went back to bed for an extra few hours of sleep. Afternoons were left to either power training in the basement or research at the library.

As such, I’d gotten much more familiar with the way my shadow power worked. With an old video camera, I’d been able to get actual footage of my ability, which meant I had a better clue of how visible I was. The results depended of the shadow I inhabited, with the smaller the shadow the darker my presence made it. On a man-sized one, I was barely visible, while I made the shadow of an alarm clock so dark it was evident to anyone looking there that something was off.

I was also able to go through anything larger than a bathtub drain without ill effect, and could fit in smaller passages with effort. It was uncomfortable and sometimes painful, but ultimately doable. Windows were no protection from me, either.

These details were of much use in tracking down my prey. I only went out at night, when the darkness covered everything and made my access easy. Going from dealer to dealer in their territory ended up netting me quite a bit information on supply houses, safehouses and the like. I waited before hitting them, wanting my target to have no warning.

Yesterday I had lucked out; the dealer I’d been following had led me straight to Skidmark. I then followed the leader of the Merchants as he did his rounds, hidden between the wheels of his visibly tinker-made vehicle. That added half a dozen places to my growing list of Merchant hideouts. But the best was where he’d ended up parked at the end of the night.

I’d tracked him to his house. Well, house was a big word: It was an abandoned factory, though only from the outside. From the inside, it was evident there was a tinker in residence, a paranoid one too. There were traps, automated defences and sensors aplenty, though none that I could trip in shadow state. Most of them were situated at the various exits, with only a few in frequently used rooms.

That’s why I was standing outside the door to Skidmark’s bedroom as a patch of darkness on the ground at 1:30 AM on a weekday. The leader of the Merchants had retired more than an hour earlier, and I’d done an extensive last round of the building while I waited for the man to fall asleep. I wanted to take him down without a fight, as my power lacked offensive uses, and I didn’t have the frame to get in a physical fight with him.

Luckily, there was nothing indicating either him or his partner being ready for me anywhere, so I decided that I’d finally waited enough and slipped under the door of his bedroom, slipping under the near invisible laser present there.

Compared to the rest of the place, Skidmark’s bedroom was remarkably similar to any other. I slid up a wall to get a good view of the entire room, and got an eyeful of something I’d rather not have known.

Skidmark was sleeping deeply in his bed, one hand around his girlfriend, who I only knew as Squealer. It also seemed that he was a person who slept in the nude, and that moved quite a bit,
judging by the state of the covers, which were hanging to the side and hiding nothing.

As a shadow, my vision was perfect in darkness, and the only light in the room, that of a wall clock, wasn’t enough to disturb it. I could see and got in every detail. And neither Skidmark nor his girlfriend were good or even decent physical examples of humanity.

*That’s one point against attacking people while they sleep,* I noted. That didn’t stop me from moving at the foot of the bed, farthest from their probable lines of sight. After a last few seconds of waiting, I transformed back to human form.

And got hit with a direct hammer of stench.

*Yuck! That’s foul!* I said to myself, instinctively covering my nose and mouth. My other state had no sense of smell, so I hadn’t noticed before now.

The smell was a mix of sweat, smoke, medical smells I attributed to drugs along with a thick musky smell I was pretty sure I wanted to know nothing about. I took a second to get used to it somewhat, then removed a single glove, reached out and poked Skidmark softly in the thigh. The expected feeling of a taut wire appeared instantly in the back of my head, and I waited no time to pull, withdrawing my finger as soon as the process was done.

I now had an extra feeling down the back of my head.

*Thank god,* I said, releasing a mental sight at the fact that I still felt the power I had taken from Shadow Stalker. I had been afraid that I could only keep one power at the time, and that my shadow abilities would simply vanish, returning to Sophia, or be taken by Skidmark. I’d gotten used to moving around as a dark patch, and found I liked the freedom it gave me. Giving it to the leader of the Merchants would have been a waste.

I forced myself to ignore the sensation in my hindbrain, and put my finger on Squealer's leg. Again, the fishing sensation, and again I pulled.

And the world changed.

The bed frame was low quality iron, and mixing it with copper, boron and titanium in the right amount would give me a nice and rigid alloy to work with. The LED lights of the wall clock could be recycled into a much better display system. Taking the springs in the mattress...

Information after information intruded upon my mind. Belatedly, I realized the power I had taken had instantly gone active. I tried pushing it back, to regain control, and I felt whatever was in my head give way and move out. A second later, the taut line feeling returned and I realized I could only feel two powers in me now.

I had given Squealer back her power.

*Well, that’s interesting to know,* I said to myself. Still, leaving Squealer with her power wasn’t in the plan. I hadn’t moved my finger yet, so I withdrew her power once more. It was as easy as the first time, and this time I managed to keep my focus on what I was supposed to be doing, and not get into how I could get materials for working.

The two parahumans before me hadn’t reacted in the least yet. I knew Sophia hadn’t noticed me stealing her power, but poking someone while he or she slept should be getting reactions.
Maybe they’re just heavy sleepers, I said to myself. Or maybe completely stoned, I amended. Still, that allowed me the opportunity to test some more.

I kept ready to switch back into shadow, to pull powers back at the last instant, then gave them back their powers. No issue, no reaction. I wouldn’t be able to tell if their power had changed somewhat because of that, but there was no difference between earlier and now. Poking both at the same time, I managed to switch their power near-instantly, giving each the other’s power. Again, no reaction.

I did, however, have confirmation on the shining. Skidmark and Squealer shone when they had power, whichever powers it was, and went dull when I stole them.

Looking at the clock, I decided it was late enough, especially with the other things I had planned for tonight. I pulled the powers for the last time, then turned into shadow and left.

It wasn’t the last thing I did in Skidmark’s residence. I bagged whatever drugs I could find, spending the least amount of time possible in each room, and left with the safe and them, using one of the abilities I had found of my shadow power. It allowed me to transform into shadow holding onto something, regardless on its weight, and carry it any distance in the dark. It didn’t work with living things, or with objects somewhat taller than me, but it had his uses, regardless of the fact that I would be forced in the same position I’d entered shadow state as.

With that, I left the safe under a tarp in the basement of my house, then went back to the second place on my list. I was much more efficient the second time around, leaving with the drugs and the money they had under five minutes. I hit eight places that night, leaving three untouched where guards were present, and went to bed before 4 AM. I left the mass of drugs in a closed office on two second floor of the farthest police station from my place, and whatever money I found next to the safe under the tarp.

I fell asleep fulfilled, for once. I’d helped clean the trash in town.
It was four days after my successful raid that I realized I need a new place to base myself out of.

The first day after the attack, I simply rested. I’d been on a cape kick since I left school and decided I could do with a day of rest. No training, no research, just me and a good book. I’ll admit it felt pretty good, that I felt more centered afterward. Having a sketch pad on the side whenever tinkering struck me also reduced pressure from that side.

Day two and three were power training. Squealer’s tinker spark was easily understood, though it tended to rise up whenever something struck my mind. Skidmark’s… not so much. The thing in my mind that came from him felt like the concept of space or area, combined with laws or rules. Poking it like I did with Sophia’s did nothing except a very temporary activation, so I had to improvise.

I’d read on Skidmark’s original ability. He could generate regions where there was a pull in a direction of his choice, so I started trying for that. No result. I tried other stuff: Imagining areas, focusing on specific rules, closing a specific space… Nothing. Skidmark’s power always activated and fell silent in nearly an instant, as if I was missing something. I found out what when I finally put my hands to the ground. There it activated and remained so.

After a few tests, Skidmark’s power allowed me create a closed zone by drawing it on the ground or on something else. Only one at the time, since creating a second crumbled the first, and only on stable stuff since the zone fell if whatever it was made on moved.

And there was a slider in my mind regarding that area I made. It went up or down and always started in the middle position. I could change it up or down at will, and it had a specific top and bottom.

Checking high didn’t seem to have any effect, but stepping in a zone set at the very bottom made all the powers I felt in the back of my brain disappear, save Skidmark’s. I could still nudge the slider while inside the zone, and I felt the sparks in my head reappear and grow stronger the more I pushed the slider up.

*Interesting,* I said to myself. *Power nullification and empowerment.*

Day four started well. I was testing for the effect of an empowering zone on my abilities. I’d already found one for its opposite: a null zone stopped the flashes of information from my tinker spark, which had been of great use in getting better sleep.

I then noticed five minutes later that I had, without realizing, started dismantling my alarm clock, which is when I decided I needed a new spot to work in. Moving the safe and the money I hadn’t touched yet would also be a good idea.

Luckily for me, Brockton Bay was full of abandoned buildings, factories and the like, dating from when the city was more prosperous. There had to be one somewhere that fit the bill for me. The only problem was not stepping on anybody’s toes while doing that.

After a few moments of thinking, I decided to ring Tattletale about the issue. She seemed very knowledgeable about the various gangs in the city, and could probably recommend a place where I wouldn’t offend anybody. Her info up to now had been on the dot, too.
As such, I went and retrieved the cell phone she had given me. I’d hidden it, since my father would’ve asked too many questions. There were already a couple of text messages on it, the earliest dating from yesterday. All of them were asking for a meeting. She said she had some info to give.

It was a little after eleven, so lunch it would be.

Diner @ 1?

I didn’t have to wait even a minute before I got a reply.

Perfect. Meet @ crnr Brdw & Bchside

Corner of Boardwalk and Beachside at 1PM. I looked again at the clock. Easily done.

OK

I felt a smile rising. It’ll be fun to be able to talk capes with someone, I realized. Talk about limited social skills when your only contact is a professional supervillain, I added sarcastically.

I then started getting ready to go. I even left a message for my father, in case I was late. I didn’t want a repeat of my first night out.

*-*-*-*-*-*

I almost expected Tattletale and the rest of the Undersiders to be present on the specified corner at 1, but only Lisa was there. She reached out and gave me a hug, something which surprised me, but I admit felt quite nice.

The place she dragged me was a simple pancake house, with a table in the farthest corner of the place. With how late I tended to get up these days, I hadn’t had breakfast and my order reflected that fact. Lisa’s was a bit more subdued, but she compensated with large amounts of syrup and whipping cream.

“So, you had some info to give?” I asked, going straight to the point.

“Give a sec,” she said, then reached inside her purse. She withdrew one of those intelligent phones and fiddled a bit with it before handing it to me.

The screen had a link for a video, titled ‘Cape Bogeyman?[NSFW]’. Because of the NSFW tag, I verified the sound was off, then started the video. I trusted Tattletale not to prank me in the middle of a restaurant. It felt like it would be too simple a prank from her.

I recognized the place the video was showing.

Skidmark’s room.

The video hadn’t been censored, which explained the NSFW tag. It did, however, give a good view of everything, something which I could have lived without in this case.

I tried to place where the camera had been from memory and failed. One thing was sure, I hadn’t noticed it while I was there.

Seeing myself appear in the video was also a shock. I had done tests with my shadow ability and
knew my speed was tied to the level of darkness, but witnessing it like this made for a very different effect. It looked like I’d simply appeared at the foot of the bed. I played with the video a little and realized that’s the way it was. One frame empty, the next I was there. The effect was creepy, I had to admit.

Even how I’d covered my mouth fit with the theme. From that angle, it looked like I’d taken a thinking position.

I knew how the rest went. I removed my glove, poked one, poked the other, then both.

And then the me in the video looked straight at the camera, then vanished. That effect was scarier still.

“The clock!” I said out loud, suddenly realizing.

My dinner partner stopped as she was about to reach for another bite. “What?”

“That’s where the camera was, hidden in the clock,” I replied, handing her back her phone. “That’s why I didn’t notice it.” I then realized something. “Wait, who posted that video?” I asked. I doubted the Merchants would release a video like this, with the both of them in the nude.

“Coil did,” Lisa answered. “I know some of his net handles, and it’s one of them who released the original video. Since then, there’s been a least a dozen of doppelgangers with different names, along with a few censored ones, and some with background music.”

I looked at the timestamp of the video. Two days ago, I noticed. That’s the day right after the attack. Someone doesn’t miss much.

“The two of them haven’t been seen since, and both the Empire and the ABB have been expanding in the Merchants’ territory without getting any reprisal,” she explained. “The Merchants are pretty much dead, right now,” she smiled at me. “Good work.”

Even coming from Lisa, it felt good to hear. “What’s the reaction to the video?” I asked. I’d have to log in to the Parahuman wiki later, but getting the cliff notes now seemed a good idea.

“A lot of people are thinking it’s a hoax of some kind, but there’s a lot of discussion on the forums. There’s even a few threads of people who don’t want powers asking for a visit.”

I was surprised. “Some people don’t like their powers?” I said, my voice low.

“Well, you and I, we’re the lucky ones,” Lisa replied at the same level. “We can live normal lives if we want. Some of us capes, however, didn’t get it that good… There’s mutations, too tall people, hunchbacks… You name it, someone out there has it. A few can’t even control their powers, and you can guess what that leads too.”

I could. “That’ll be something to think about,” I said, then stayed silent for a while as I made some headway through my plate.

“I suppose you aren’t done with the gangs,” Lisa said after a while. “With the Merchants, I mean.”

“No,” I instantly answered. “And I didn’t like the idea that nothing could be done about the ABB and the E88, either.”
“That’s not what I meant,” Lisa replied. “The issue with them is that you can’t start at the top, like you did with Skidmark,” she explained. “There’s too much danger there. That doesn’t mean nothing can be done.”

“Hurting the E88 and the ABB isn’t going after the parahumans, it’s going after the money and resources. Hitting arms depots, drug warehouses and the like. The capes might mean the groups can hit hard, but the ones doing most of the damage to the general populace aren’t the capes but the henchmen, the small people. They’re the ones who sell the drugs, rob stores and the like. They hide behind the capes, true, but they’re the one who deal the hurt. The capes tend to fight capes, and not much else. Like I said last time, the capes have these unwritten rules and tend to respect them,” she explained.

I nodded. I’d verify again, but it gave me at least a way to have an impact. Beside… I told myself. I can’t see Lung or Kaiser packing or selling drugs.

Lisa hunched her head on the side. “Something else you wanted?” she asked.

That reminded me. “I need a place to work in. An abandoned factory of some sort, outside the various gang territories. Think you know a place like that?”

She smiled her vulpine grin. “One or two, why? Your place starting to be a little too small.”

“Squealer was a tinker,” I said, with emphasis on the ‘was’.

Tattletale’s eyes went a little wider. “Oh…” A smile then crept on her face. “Oh, yeah… That. I think I have something good enough in mind. Let me check it out, first. I’ll message you later today with the info.”

“Add to that the threads you talked about, the ones discussing that video,” I pointed out.

“Just look for Slenderman on the Parahuman wiki and you’ll find it,” Lisa replied with her usual grin. “Good idea on the male costume, actually.”

“Slenderman?”

“The current favorite nickname of the guy in that video, after some Earth Aleph myth I don’t know much about. The second most popular is ‘Black Shade of Doom’, but it’s too much of a mouthful to have taken off. Seems all the good ‘Shadow’ ones are taken,” she explained, then rose. “You good?”

I nodded. Regardless of her allegiance to the Undersiders, Lisa was a fun person to meet. It felt good to be outside with someone, for once.

“Catch ya later then!” she said, dropping enough cash on the table to cover for the both of us, with room to spare.

I slowly nibbled on what was left of my lunch. I hadn’t planned on becoming known so early, and I had plans to make, especially if I wanted to continue hurting the gangs.

And that would require quite a bit of thinking over.
As soon as I finished my food, I went straight from the pancake place to the library. I still had to wait for a place at a computer, but once there I logged in instantly to the parahuman wiki and searched for my new nickname.

_Wow. That’s a lot of threads_, I told myself.

Going through them, I realized Lisa had showed me only one of two videos. The second was the two Merchants capes waking up in the morning, and Skidmark finding out his lack of power. Seemed he used his abilities to dry off after a shower. The version from the original poster was uncensored, but finding a censored one that I could look at in public was easy.

If you’d taken out the nudity and the camera timestamp, it would have fit perfectly as a comedy sketch. A bad one, though. Skidmark wasn’t TV material.

It also linked me back to the original post, and that one was a masterpiece, considering where it came from.

The post was written as if done by a 15 year old boy.

It was perfect for what it wanted to look as: the smilies, the atrocious grammar, the little ASCII art, everything fit. The poster claimed that he’d gotten access to a wireless camera a few weeks ago, and that he’d found the data that very morning and posted it. He also pointed out that the two people in the video (he claimed not knowing their names) had left the place in a hurry and hadn’t been seen since.

I nearly doubted her, but I trusted Lisa’s info about Coil. And it explained the little issues with that post. Squealer was a tinker; she wouldn’t miss a wireless camera in her own bedroom that a 15 year old could hack into. Not for a few weeks. And a Brockton Bay teenager not noticing he was spying on the leaders of the Merchants for the same period, also very unlikely. A professional supervillain, one with access to high quality tools, spying on the competition and posting their downfall for all to see, hidden behind the anonymity of the internet… That seemed quite a bit more likely.

That brought me to think about Coil. He wasn’t currently part of my plans against the gangs, being a villain somewhat like the Undersiders: holding no territory, selling no drugs. His forces struck here and there at what seemed very specific targets, mostly robberies, and then left without being caught. I wondered what had been his goal in releasing the video.

On one side, he might have simply wanted to hasten the fall of a rival gang. I did the work, but that message made sure the Merchants would be attacked before the week was done. And I had no issue with ensuring the Merchants were taken out.

On the other, outing me was a possibility. My anonymity had been a powerful shield, and nothing I would do could bring it back. Scrapping my costume and going under another might help, but every case of missing powers would be tracked to that persona, whatever the source.

After thinking for a while, I decided to do nothing. My cape identity becoming known might not be something I’d planned on, but it meant nothing for the moment. The wiki goers were looking for a man, not me, and Coil didn’t do enough to displace the Empire and the ABB from the top of my list.
I’d keep an eye out for him, but the others were more urgent, from my point of view.

I still went through every thread, making sure there wasn’t anything in particular that pointed to me. There wasn’t, especially with most of each thread being sniping and counter-sniping about the validity of the videos.

Then I reached the ‘Asking for Slenderman’ thread.

There were a lot more posts there than I expected, even removing those not asking for a visit. Most of the requests there were from too far to even think of verifying them, places like Los Angeles and even London, but a few were in Brockton Bay or close enough. One even included a specific address and room number at what I found was an asylum for dangerous parahumans, between Brockton Bay and Boston. It really put in perspective what Tattletale had said about being lucky.

In my pocket, Tattletale’s phone beeped.

*Speak of the devil…* I told myself.

I’d expected a simple street address… I got much more than that. Address, Layouts of the two levels (drawings), closest phone, closest working power plug… *Were those wifi passwords?* I stared at the screen, boggling.

By now, it was already 3PM. I had enough time to check the place and be back home before my father arrived from work. I logged out from the wiki, closed down every page I’d opened and left the building. It didn’t take a moment before another took my spot, and I was gone.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

The place was perfect.

The building was an old factory which had produced components used in ship repair, back when Brockton Bay was a major shipping hub. Now it was another abandoned building. It was free of squatters, someone having melted the doors shut before leaving. It didn’t stop me in the least, the small alley being shadowy enough to take my other state and slip inside through a pipe.

My shadow sight made the interior completely visible. There were still a number of machines all over the ground floor, and while my tinker power never told me any technological insights while I was in shadow state, I was pretty sure it would do a jig once I started actually working here.

Second floor had offices. There wasn’t a stable-looking chair in sight, most of the furniture was rusted, rotten or some combination of the two, but there was enough space there for a good lair with the first floor serving as a workshop. There was still much to be done, especially considering the veritable carpet of dust that could be found everywhere, but it was even better than I’d expected.

*I’ll have to thank Tattletale somehow*, I noted to myself. *Look out, world. I’m going to be ready for you now.*
“Almost have it…” I said to myself, my voice echoing in the empty building. I pushed the piece a little harder, and heard a slight clicking sound. “There! Done,” I finished with a smile. I moved my feet inside the metal boots, finding no issue with flexibility.

In the two weeks since getting my base of operation, I’d done quite a bit of work, both outside and inside said building. On the inner side, I’d found my so-called specialization: personal equipment. It went from power suits and the like to objects as small as watches. Basically anything that was meant to be worn or handheld, I could build better than current tech.

Skidmark’s former power had been of great help in finding that information. By lowering my power to the minimum and seeing what made my power react or not, I’d been able to zero in on the relevant areas quickly. I’d also learned that I’d been wrong in my previous assessment: my empowering zone did also work on my tinker shard. Information simply came more swiftly and efficiently when that ability was empowered, and as such work got done that much quicker. Squealer’s old tools that she’d left behind weren’t useless, either.

I supposed the zone also applied with my shadow abilities, but couldn’t see how it affected them. Faster maybe? I didn’t see any difference, personally.

Most of my tinker work until now had gone in building myself a power suit. It was far from complete, but I already had usable parts. The helmet was the first thing I did, along an under-suit similar to a leotard made out of synthetic spider silk. Those two parts allowed me to do something I decided.

That is, another identity.

Slenderman was all well and good, but I realized he worked better as something feared in the dark. I’d keep the professional suit and hood for striking directly at parahumans, but while doing drug busts and attacking equipment warehouses, another face was needed. And with my leotard and helmet, that’s what I had. Two weeks of work after that and I had both gauntlets and boots done. I was still missing some components for the breastplate and the arms, while I hadn’t even started on the legs. Still, it was enough that I’d made an impact on the Brockton Bay crime scene.

Then again, hitting the gangs ended up being easier than I’d thought.

In the last week or so, I’d found, cased and attacked a dozen places belonging to either the ABB or the Empire. I only had to abort twice, once when Oni Lee was guarding the arms depot I’d targeted for the night, the other when Hookwolf was present at a drug packing plant. I decided I’d cancel any mission where a parahuman was present and stuck to it. It still netted me more than a million dollars in cash, enough weapons to outfit a small army and far too much drugs to think about.

The drugs found their way to the local police, the weapons disassembled or melted for resources, and half the cash went to various charities. Brockton Bay Hospital, soup kitchens and the like mainly.

The rest had gone back to fund my tinkering projects.

I was still testing the boots when the alarm rang. 4:30... I said to myself. *Time to go home.*
I slipped out of my boots, gloves and leotard by going into shadow form. I found lately that I could leave stuff behind when going into shadow state, and I used it for undressing quickly when the situation demanded for it. I quickly redressed in my normal clothes, donned my shoes and slid as a shadow under one on the sealed doors, reappearing behind an old trash container outside. From there I started running toward home.

That was another part I had added to my training routine: running. I realized that being in better shape couldn’t hurt my current career, while the opposite was certainly true. I was just starting, so I was nothing even decent yet, but every little bit helped. I’d also tried crunches, push-ups and weightlifting, but those didn’t work for me. At least running made me see things, which helped me not succumb to boredom.

I was in the shower when Dad got in and started supper. Since school was out, we alternated who cooked the last meal of the day, though we were both equally bad at it. Today was his turn, so I took the extra time to make sure none of the workshop smells clung to me.

Supper with my Dad was always a good thing, especially since I left school. He’d been more animated and less silent since it happened, and only now did I realize how much what happened to me weighed on him. The subject never came up, as we’d both wordlessly decided to let it go. But the difference was flagrant.

*I’ll make it up to him somehow, I swore to myself.*

*_*-*_*-*_*-*_*-*

The vibration on my leg woke me up. A quickly look at the clock indicated 12:30 AM.

*Time to get to work,* I told myself.

I silently put on the shorts and t-shirt I’d prepared for this opportunity, then slipped into shadow. A quick verification that my father was asleep, then I was gone for the night.

The vibrating alarm on my leg was the only other thing I’d made outside my suit. After I lost a night because I fell asleep too early, I built it in an hour at the base and wore it to bed every night. It also allowed me a few extra hours of sleep each day, something which wasn’t regretted in the least.

I was only in my base for the time it took to get into my suit. That done, I was back out, going north.

Tonight, I was hunting the E88.

The last two nights I’d hit the ABB, after finding most of my remaining Empire targets well guarded. I hoped that today the standards might have relaxed somewhat.

First place was still as full as before. It seemed a major mustering point, so I wasn’t surprised. It had always been well guarded.

The second one, though, was much less guarded then before. An apartment building close to the ABB/E88 border, the landlord’s office at the bottom was used as a distribution point for drugs. Last night the office had been occupied from midnight to four, and the bright lights made my entry in the place difficult, but it seemed whoever used the office had tonight off. I slipped inside through the window and listened at the door for a moment. Two guards by the sound of it, and a bottle going around. I’d have to be silent, but it was quite doable.
A quick trip around the office indicated the only place where money or merchandise was the big oak
desk by the window. It had drawers with visible locks, so I decided to start with those. I appeared
right beside it, crouched. I quickly extended my major, a blowtorch coming to life at its tip.

Then the window broke, and my shoulder blossomed into pain.

My finger reflectively flexed and the blowtorch went out. I instinctively bent, tucking myself out of
sight from the outside. I reached out with my right hand and found a hole in my suit, along with
another one in my shoulder, bleeding.

Fuck! I cried out in my mind. Someone shot me!

It was at that precise moment that I heard the sound of something remotely activating, and the walls
exploded on me.
I reacted instinctively, turning into shadow so fast I left everything except my leotard behind. While the explosions were mainly intended to make the building fall, there was still enough light to make my shadow state painful. I withdrew inside my helmet for protection, and waited for the sounds of the building crumbling to cease.

It was then I realized something: the pain in my shoulder was gone. I knew I could sense pain in my shadow state, Grue’s abilities having made this fact clear, but it seemed wounds did not carry. Maybe my shoulder wound would be gone by the time I went became to human form? I sure hoped so.

The sounds had by now receded enough that I started slipping out. It was lucky that I needed no light, else I would never have made it out. Still, it took me three different tries to find a path I could travel underneath the rubble, and I had to force my way through a couple of tight passages, something which wasn’t comfortable in the least. Then I finally ended up in the sewers, and went back outside the next minutes.

I found the building gone.

Whoever had set those explosives had done a good job; The building crumbled on itself without harming anything at the sides. There were people on the lawn, looking in horror, while others tried clearing up the rubble. I could see part of a leg sticking out, so there had been people in the building when it fell. I suddenly remembered the two guards there. Two Empire members, for sure, but that wasn’t a reason to drop a building on them.

I felt rage rising. The Empire had blown up a building with people still inside just to get to me.

I ignored the rescue efforts and focused on the shooter. There wasn’t much I could do there, even if I took human form. I was just another pair of hands, possibly wounded.

But I could track the cause of this.

With my darksight, I tracked the shooter to his position based on the angle of the shot. On the roof of the shop opposite the former building I found two people, a man and a woman, both in costume.

_Empire capes then_, I noted.

The man was standing flat on the roof, watching what remained after the explosion with interest using a pair of binoculars. Beside him where the gun I’d been shot with, a sniper rifle more than a meter long, and a switch which I supposed had been used to trigger the detonations. The woman, crouched a little behind him, had a hand on his leg. “So…” she said. “Any result?” by her tone of voice, it was clear she was quite sleepy.

“I know I hit her, Othala,” the man replied, not stopping his surveillance. My current costume didn’t really hide what little curves I had, but didn’t put emphasis on them either. The man was really on the ball if he could notice that. “She was still in the room when the building fell. She hasn’t been seen so far, so I’m guessing she either escaped down or got trampled under the building. Either way, we’ll know once we clear the site.”

I squashed the urge to turn back into human form and remove their powers. As much as I wanted it, I
was alone against two, possibly wounded, and out of costume. It would be a monumental error at this point, however satisfying it would feel.

“You can go, Othala. Your invincibility will be more than enough if she’s playing possum. I’ll stay and watch for another hour, then I’ll join you,” the man continued.

The woman simply nodded, rose, then walked to the ladder leading down. “Good luck Victor,” she said, then went down. I stayed for a few seconds more, engraving the face of the shooter, Victor, in my mind, then followed the one called Othala down.

I didn’t park myself in her shadow this time. I kept to the darkness of buildings, keeping her always in sight, then under the car she took to get home. I did miss what she said to someone on the phone, but ignored that to focus on her destination.

It ended up being a quaint little house, in one of the safer parts of the city. I engraved the address to memory, then followed her until she made her way to bed to be sure. I could have struck then, probably, but decided it wasn’t the time.

I would be back.

Shadow travel had me back in my base in minutes, which is where I went back to my normal state.

_Ahhhhh! Nope, not healed in the least_, I said to myself, grimacing.

I still could fell the bullet inside my shoulder, so that had to go out, first. I focused on going into shadow form without the bullet, and was rewarded with the tinkling of metal on ground right where my other state formed. _One thing down, at least_, I noted.

Back where I didn’t feel the pain, I started thinking. There weren’t that many options.

I couldn’t leave the wound like this. Going to an hospital was a solution, but it was end up with the police knowing, which would have my father informed. That would lead to uncomfortable questions, especially what I was doing outside at 1:45 AM on a weekday.

I didn’t want to have my father mixed into this.

I could probably build something for healing, an advanced medkit of sorts, but that would require time I did not have. It might even require both of my arms, which would be an issue.

In the end, there was only one possibly valid solution I could see. I took back human form.

> Help needed. Urgent. @ Base

I sent a message to Tattletale. Everything was starting to get kinda blurry, so shadow state it was as soon as the text had gone through.

She didn’t look to me like an early riser, so I had hope that she would still be awake. Grue had implied that he’d been shot a few times by Shadow Stalker, so she might know a reliable and discreet doctor.

It seemed an eternity before the cell vibrated. I didn’t even go back to human shape this time.
OMW

*On my way... Thank god, I said to myself. I'm starting to owe that girl a little too much.*

Tattletale wasn’t alone when she arrived ten minutes later. Grue was with her, the both of them in costume. I couldn’t find myself caring.

I went back to physical state right before them, and fell to my knees as soon as I was fully material. *Seems like going back and forth to shadow form doesn’t really help,* I noted just before blackness took me.
I like when a plan comes together, I said to myself, grinning a little wider than usually.

The Undersiders had done another job today, another corporate heist. This time, there had been no alarm, no intruding ward or capes, just a job well done, in and out. The three others were in a similar state, Grue offering congratulations, Regent joking and Bitch walking her dogs calmly. I’d long known that Bitch preferred not using her power on her dogs at all, if she could.

We were halfway to base with the take when my cell vibrated.

A message, at this hour? I wondered. Not Coil, Coil always called. Who else could it be? I flipped my phone and found a text message.

   Help needed. Urgent. @ Base

I didn’t need my power to know it was the truth. I’d gotten a good read on Taylor and lying like that wasn’t her type. Asking for help wasn’t her type either, which meant it was something important. Taylor preferred to deal with things herself.

Karma comes to collect, it seems, I said to myself. “Put this in the safe,” I said to Regent, tossing him the folders Coil had requested. “Grue, with me,” I said, and started running. I was typing at the same time.

   OMW

Grue started a little later but caught up easily with his longer legs and better health. He then matched my pace. “So, what’s the emergency? Something else for the boss?” he asked.

“Shadow Girl needs help,” I said, handing him the phone. For all that he was an effective villain, he had a little white knight streak going. It mainly flared with his sister, but I was 90% sure he wouldn’t mind helping.

He looked down at the phone, then gave it back. “Right. You’ve been meeting with her?”

“A little.” I pointed toward the place we used as home. “You’re faster than me. Can you go and get the first aid kit?” I didn’t get anything from the message, but ‘Urgent’ tended to mean ‘hurt badly’. I couldn’t see anything else Taylor wouldn’t be able to deal with.

“Done,” he said, then easily outpaced me. I slowed my run, gathering more of my breath, and made my way to our place somewhat more slowly.

Grue was just coming out when I arrived, so I pushed the pace again. “This way,” I said, extending my arm in the direction of the building I’d found for Taylor. It luckily wasn’t that far from our place.

“So, you met her how many times since she followed us… Once? Twice?” he asked as he ran.

“About that much,” was my reply.

“Anything I should know?” he added.
“Nothing I can tell you for the moment,” I said. “I’ll keep you apprised of anything you might need,” he simply nodded, and that was that.

I only stopped for breath once I was in front of the building I’d suggested to her. Grue stopped beside me, visibly in better health. “So, where…” he started.

He didn’t complete the phrase because Taylor appeared right before the two of us at that very second. She fell to her knees instantly, and I heard Grue yell. “Fuck, someone shot her in the shoulder.” He then handed her to me while he reached in the kit. I let the walls on my power crumble, focusing on the wound in her shoulder.

Abnormal shearing & colour: Bulletproof material.
Bulletproof material, angle of penetration, spread of damage: Armor-piercing bullet.
Armor piercing bullet, steady blood flow: No bullet in wound

I cut it there. That was already enough to tell. “Bullet’s out,” I said to Grue.

He nodded, then started dressing her shoulder. “You know that’s not gonna be enough, right?”

I already had my phone back out and three numbers typed. “Of course.”

It wasn’t long until I had the rest done and the phone was ringing. “Doctor Q speaking,” the voice on the other side of the line responded after three rings.

“Got an incoming patient for you. Bullet wound to the left shoulder. Bullet already removed,” I said, direct and to the point. The doctor preferred it that way.

“Bleeding or burned?”

“Bleeding. We’re patching it up as much as possible,” I replied.

“Use medical tape, no sutures. I’ll have the table prepped for when you arrive. Keep as much pressure as possible on the wound,” the man added.

“Thank you. We’re on our way,” I said, then hanged up.

Grue hadn’t been idle while I talked. It took only a minute more before he had Taylor as ready to be move as he could. He grabbed her bridal style. “Let’s go,” he said voice serious.

I simply followed, keeping pressure on her wounded elbow.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

The doctor was halfway done with her sutures when Taylor returned to consciousness.

“Hey, T. Glad to see you’re awake,” I said as her eyes opened.

“Hey… Lisa,” she said when she realized I wasn’t in costume. “Where are we?”

“A good doctor I know about,” I answered. “Brian and I brought you here after you fell unconscious right in front of us.” I’d already been cleared by Grue to use his real name.
She moved her head a little to the side. “Brian?”

He stepped into her field of vision. “That’s me,” he said with a smile.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I know you.”

“I was with Lisa when you met her,” he answered.

I saw her connect the dots. “Oh… Yeah,” she looked down somewhat. “Call me Taylor. And thank you.”

“Glad to help,” he replied. “I owed you one, anyway.” She blushed a little at that. Brian didn’t notice a bit. *Seems Brian is Taylor's type,* I noted and grinned my usual grin. I didn’t need my power to get that, either.

Doctor Q came over then. “Good to see you awake.” He tested both her eyes with a little lamp, followed by a couple more tests. “Everything seems to be in order. Now, you have more than a dozen sutures in your left shoulder, so you'll have to be careful about moving it. I’m going to give you a sling…”

I blocked the doctor and focused on Taylor. She looked healthier than before true, but she wasn’t really listening to the doctor, seemingly focused on something else. I activated my power for a second out of curiosity.

*Eyes moving rapidly, slight moves of the primary hand: trying to write down ideas. Trying to write down ideas, wounded, tinker: planning for tinker medicine.*

I smiled, glad to see she was still on her way to getting over this.

Brian helped her of the table. “What time is it?” she asked as she came back on her feet.

“A little before four,” I answered.

Her face went down. “I have to go,” she replied, and started walking out.

The both of us helped her out. She stopped once she was outside the clinic, in the darkness. “Thank you. I’ll contact you later today.”

“Afternoon please,” I replied with a smile. “We had a busy night.”

“Rest well,” Brian added.

She smiled as she answered. “You too.” Then she was gone.
“Hey kiddo, time to wake up!” Dad said, knocking on the door.

“Not today, dad,” I answered. “I’m going to sleep some more.”

The door opened a crack and his head snuck inside. “Are you feeling alright? Catch a cold or something?”

“Nothing like that, just bad dreams. Kept waking up in sweat,” I replied. “A few more hours will have me right as rain.” I hated pushing my dad’s buttons, but I knew he wouldn’t push on the nightmares. I really needed him out as soon as possible, without drawing undue attention.

“If you say so, sweetie,” he said, closing back the door. “Sleep well.”

“Thank you. Have a good day,” I said, then fell back in my bed.

I kept an ear out until I finally heard my father leave for work. Only then did I relax and slip out of bed. I barely had a single hour’s sleep, but I had work to do. I couldn’t let my father see me with the wounded shoulder I had. He’d ask too many questions.

I’d slipped back in a little after four, thankful that shadows made no noise. I put on the heaviest pyjamas I owned to hide the dressings on my shoulder, then slipped back into bed as if nothing had happened. I needed my dad to think everything was normal.

First thing now that he was gone was verifying the wound was fine. I tended to sleep on my left shoulder, so I’d unconsciously moved on it a few times during the night. It had been a large part of what caused my lack of sleep.

Slowly removing the gauze hiding the sutures revealed that they’d held, and there wasn’t any recent blood on the tissue. Good. At least one thing was going right.

Second was getting to base. I needed to start work on something to heal my shoulder post-haste. And I wasn’t going to start until I was in a location were I was sure not to be interrupted, with access to my notes and my equipment.

Oh, and internet connectivity, too.

Walking out, however, wasn’t a plan. Brockton Bay wasn’t the safest of cities, and I didn’t want to be stuck outside, unable to defend myself.

That meant I was going through the sewers.

Getting there was the easy part. Toilet pipes were large enough to accommodate me in shadow state and, even if it was uncomfortable, it was direct and safe with little chance of danger. The fact that I could pass through water with only a little reduction in speed helped.

The sewers themselves were dark enough that travel wasn’t an issue, but getting lost was. I ended up having to turn back to human state thrice to get my bearings, and the less said about the smell, the better. Surprisingly, Skidmark’s bedroom had been worse, somehow. Also, perfect sight in the dark
wasn’t all that it was cracked up to be in a place like this.

Still, I managed. A GPS would have been useful, though.

Once inside my base at my work table, I drew a zone around my tinkering area, set it to empowerment, and started cracking out ideas. I needed that shoulder healed, the sooner the better.

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I was woken up at 2:30 PM by a text message from Lisa. I responded with confirmations of my continued health and turned toward the piles of notes I’d written down before falling asleep. It took a while to put them in order, but once that was done I could go over them easily.


In the end, I didn’t have much choice. The only viable possibility, in terms of time and material availability, was a plan for a device boosting cellular regeneration using something similar to microwave frequencies. It wasn’t the quick fix I’d wanted, but it was better than any other option. My left arm would probably be somewhat weaker afterwards, but I could train that back.

The problem was building it with my own two hands, or rather one and a half working hands. I could do limited movements with my left hand, but they weren’t strong or precise.

But then I got an idea. I reached out to the phone and call the only number I had there.

“Hey Taylor! Glad to hear from you.”

I wondered for a second where she got my name, then remembered I’d introduced myself to Brian this morning. “Good day Lisa, want to help a tinker build stuff?”

The other side of the line was silent for a moment. “As long as it’s something of good use, I’m in.”

“Regeneration device,” I explained.

I could hear her smile on the other side of the line. “I am so in! Should I grab Brian?”

I couldn’t see a reason not to. “If he wants to come.”

“After the number Shadow Stalker put him through last time, I’m sure he’ll be right glad to have a device like that on hand. I’ll ask though.” There was no sound for a moment. “What do you need?”

“I’ll send you the list. Bring to items to the side door of my base and be ready for possibly dirtying work,” I explained.

“Got it. See you in a few.” She hung up.

Now I simply needed to unblock the door before they arrived.

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It took more time for them to come than I expected, and it was nearly 4PM when I got confirmation
by text from Lisa that both her and Brian were outside. I unbolted the door and let them in, letting
them drop the packages I had asked for right beside the door.

“Welcome to Casa Taylor,” I said, waving them inside. The both of them started looking around
instantly.

“Somehow, I expected more,” Lisa said, her grin carrying the joke.

“I mainly notice you're not wearing the sling,” Brian added.

“I can’t. Tinkering is delicate work, and even a halfway working arm is better than no arm at all,” I
replied. “Anyway, if anything works properly, I should have my arm healed before the day is done.”
I realized something, then continued. “Anyway… Lisa, mind if I use you as an excuse with my
dad?”

She turned at me with her smile. “Go right ahead.”

I withdrew my phone and called Dad’s office number. I barely had to speak a second to Mike before
he handed my father the phone.

“Union Representative Danny Hebert speaking.”

“Dad, it’s me.”

“Hey Taylor. How’s it going? Slept well?” he asked.

“Good enough.”

I could hear him smile. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m going to eat with a friend, so I won’t be there for supper tonight.”

“A boy friend or a girl friend?” he asked with a teasing tone.

“Dad!” I replied, pretending to be exasperated. This wasn’t the first time he did this. “A female
friend. My acquaintance of last time, if you remember.”

“I do.” He was silent for a moment. “When can I expect you back?”

“Well, I might sleep over if we finish too late, so I don’t know?” I said, unsure. More time to build
always was better.

“Can you pass me this Lisa of yours?” he asked.

I quickly turned toward Lisa, eyes going wide, but she simply asked me to hand her the phone with a
sign of her hand. I did so somewhat reluctantly.

“Lisa here,” she answered. “Yes… Pizza probably… No.” She then gave my dad an address.
“Sure… I’ll hand her back the phone.”

“Yes?” I asked, uncertain.
“Go ahead and stay the night. You know I don’t like you out when it’s dark.” *If only you knew, Dad,* I told myself. “Anyway, have fun. I’ll see you at supper tomorrow. Love you.”

“See you tomorrow Dad. Me too.” I hung up.

“You have a good dad,” Lisa pointed out. I simply nodded.

“I didn’t recognize the address you gave. Did you just give him a random one?” Brian interjected into our conversation.

“Nope,” Lisa replied. “I do have an apartment, you know.”

His eyes went wide. “Since when?”

“A while,” she answered. When she saw that he was still boggled, she grinned and added. “You saw how much I buy. Did you think everything I bought fits in my small room at the base?’”

He was pensive for a moment. “Point taken,” he finally answered.

Lisa turned toward me. “So, what do we need to do?”

“Bring the boxes to that table over there.” I pointed with my good hand. “And I’ll setup things so we can start.” I went and grabbed my papers, put them on said table, then went to the ground and started building a zone.

“What are you doing?” Brian asked as he dropped a pair of boxes on the table.

“One of my newest abilities.” I said, closing the square. “Done.” I set it to maximum empowerment just as Lisa was about to walk in.

As soon as she was inside, her eyes went wide as saucers, she looked from Brian to me quickly, then at her feet. She then took a step back so fast she nearly blurred.

“So much information…” she said to herself. She then turned to me. “What was that?” Her eyes were still wide.

I was about to answer when I realized Brian was right behind me. I didn’t think she’d told him about my true abilities, judging from his reactions. I indicated him to Lisa with a movement of my head.

“Oh…” she said as she realized what I meant. “He doesn’t know, but he can be trusted. He’s all about keeping things hidden from others about his own power.”

I remembered the blurb about his shadow abilities on the Parahuman Wiki and nodded. His power wasn’t simple darkness generation, that was sure, especially with how it interfered with mine.

“Go ahead then,” I told Lisa. I’d realized she liked being the one who gave away information. The cape name Tattletale fit her nicely.

Lisa stepped up to me and out her hand on my good shoulder. “Brian, meet Slenderman,” she said, sounding like an infomercial announcer.

“What, you mean that false video you showed me?” He looked at both of us. His eyes went
wide. “You mean it’s not a hoax.” The gears in his head turned a little more, and he took a step back. “You’re a power nullifier. A permanent one.”

Lisa’s grin got even wider. “Nope, a power thief.” Brian’s eyes got even wider.

“A power manager,” I corrected the both of them.

Lisa turned to me, getting my meaning. “You can give them back!” she nearly yelled out. “You’re broken. Horribly broken.” She stared at me, blankly. “Don’t you have limits of some kind?”

“Probably, but I haven’t found any yet,” I added.

“How did you find out?” Brian asked Lisa.

“You know how her shadow power is affected by your darkness, like Shadow Stalker was?” He nodded. “Well, my power indicated me that it wasn’t because her power was similar to Shadow Stalker, but because it was Shadow Stalker’s power.”

“So, Shadow Stalker is basically no longer a cape? Just a normal human?” he asked. I simply nodded in answer.

“I basically thought you’d pushed her out of town or something. Somehow, this feels a much better result,” he added with a smirk. I had to agree with him; Sophia being depowered was something I also found fitting in my mind.

“Back to what I asked,” Lisa said. “What’s that thing on the ground you drew?”

“My version of Skidmark’s power. Allows me to create a zone on by writing one on the ground. It empowers capes.” I explained. Lisa’s face became blank.

“I don’t feel anything,” Brian said. He was at my side in the zone.

Lisa was face became curious. “Throw some shadow on me, just for a minute.” Brian did so with a wave of his hand, generating a column of his black mist in right over Lisa. It lasted about thirty seconds.

Lisa was a little green when Brian waved the darkness off. “Definitely more powerful” she said, looking like she was testing her feet. “Messes with your sense of balance now. I felt like I was on a ship at sea.”

“Nice,” Brian said, looking down at his hand where a small blob of black mist stood.

“Can we go back to tinkering?” I said, a little exasperation in my voice. “I mean, it’s all very fun, but my shoulder’s in pain, and I’d like to have that fixed as quickly as I can. We can do tests later if you want.”

“Right,” Brian said, the blob vanishing instantly. “So, what you need us to do?”
“Hold it steady,” I said to Brian as I soldered another chip in place. “Done. Can you screw it shut? Lisa, can you bring me the Geiger Counter I modified?”

I took another bite of my pizza as the two did what I asked. They’d been a great help, even though there was some setup needed. Lisa got a headache as soon as she stepped into an empowering zone, so in the end I had to create a smaller one just around me. She wasn’t of much use on the physical side, but I could ask her for any tool, from the most simple to the esoteric, and she would hand it to me without fail. Plus, she went and got pizza.

Brain was perfect for anything physical. I’d not noticed before, but he was visibly fit in a way that meant constant training. I thanked whoever was responsible that my tinker spark made it easier to focus on building machines, else I would have gotten nothing done. He’d been a great help, though.

“The moment of truth…” I said, then started the machine. The reading were good, now for the final test. I took a piece of pepperoni and tossed it inside. It gave the results I expected. “Perfect.” I tossed the bit of food in a garbage can.

“So, how does it work?” Lisa asked from beside me.

“Makes cells work very quickly,” I explained. “Cellular regeneration goes faster. You need to eat a lot before using it, since your body needs material to build. Not to be used for head wounds or anywhere near the stomach. Be especially careful about infection. Don’t use when sick, as it works on viruses too. For women, put nowhere near the reproductive parts.” I pointed out the straps. “Use those to keep it in place.”

“That’s why you forced yourself to eat a whole pizza!” Lisa pointed out.

“Yup,” I answered. “You didn’t think I always ate that much, did you?”

“Well…” She made a face as if she did, and I reached out to throw a piece at her. “Kidding! Kidding!”

She grabbed the machine and helped me put it on. It had a gentle whine while working, and soon that sound could be heard around us.

“How long is it gonna take?” Brian asked.

“A hour or two.”

He looked at the clock. 10:41PM. He turned toward me. “Taylor, how would…” he started. Then he stopped as he looked at something behind me. Probably Lisa. “Never mind,” he then said. “I’m gonna hit the road. It’s been fun, but I didn’t get much sleep last night and my bed’s calling me. Good night, ladies.”

“Thanks for all the help. Couldn’t have done it without you.” Not in so short a time, at least.

“That’s going to be available for the Undersiders if we’re wounded, correct?” he asked.
I simply nodded.

“Then no thanks needed. Better that than being stuck in bed for a week. Catch you both later,” he said, making his way out.

I waved with my left hand. “Should you be moving it like that?” Lisa asked.

“Yes. The more I move it, the less rigid it’s gonna be once the healing’s done,” I pointed out. “The microfractures in the muscles barely have time to form with this on.”

“Ok,” she said, then was silent for an instant. “Mind if I ask a few questions?”

“I have one before you can go…” I said. “What was Brian going to ask? He stopped because he looked at you, right?”

“You’re perceptive,” Lisa answered. “He was about to offer you a place in the Undersiders.”

I didn’t know how to feel about that. Today had been the most fun I had in a while, talking and working with them, but they were villains, thieves. “Why did you stop him?” I asked my current companion.

“Would you have said yes?” The both of us were silent for a moment before I shook my head negatively. “Thought as much. There are other reasons, but the first was that you wouldn’t join a villain team.”

“What other reasons?” I said.

“The Undersiders have an employer, who pays for equipment, along with monthly salaries. He’s the one suggesting the jobs. I like having a backup, in case he becomes too dangerous.”

I wasn’t sure I liked the sound of that. “I’m not a mercenary for hire.”

“I don’t mean it like that,” she explained. “Right now, he’s not that dangerous, not like the Empire or the ABB. But he’s got a plan for the city, one he’s using his power to promote. I don’t know exactly what it is, but I prefer having another option if it ends up something I can’t live with.”

My eyes went wide. “You’re planning to take out your employer.”

“Let’s say I’m pretty sure his plans aren’t anything good,” Lisa said.

I went over what she said again. “You’re being vague on purpose, then.”

She nodded. “I want to be sure he doesn’t get his hands on you. If he ever a hold on you…” She let words speak for themselves.

“Bad?” I said.

“Very bad,” she sounded grave. “I’d prefer you as an enemy after me level of bad.”

There was silence for a good minute as I digested that. Lisa always seemed to be grinning at everything; seeing her afraid was something new and not reassuring. At all.
“Can I ask a few questions now?” she asked.

I nodded. “Sure. I owe you at least that much.”

“Did you go out as Slenderman since Skidmark? Check the visit requests?”

That wasn’t what I expected. “No.”

“Why?”

I thought about it for a second. “I just focused on clearing the city. I wanted to do the most I could, as soon as possible. Sure, helping one parahuman’s good, but not much compared to the effect I could have removing the drugs and violence here,” I explained. “Closest message I feel trustworthy enough is hours out of the city. Wasting a full night on that? I didn’t think it was worth it.”

“Seems you might have changed your mind somewhat, at least,” she said, nodding. “So, is Slenderman going to come out soon, or will he be staying hidden some more time?”

“Personally, I wanted him to lie dead a little longer, until it was time to take care of the big guys, but I recently changed my mind.” I indicated to my shoulder. “A few more days of planning and he’ll be making someone a visit.”

Lisa grinned. “A specific someone?”

I did the same. “A very specific pair of someones.”

“Of course.” She grabbed her glass of soft drink. “A toast, then. To the return of Slenderman.”

I took up my own. “To Slenderman!”

We clinked.
“Victor, please come to bed,” Othala said as she put down her book. From my place in shadow state under her bed, I followed Victor’s footsteps until he was under the covers. The lights went off, and Victor spoke up.

“Good night dear.”

“Good night,” she answered back.

Even though the whole room was dark now, I still waited another ten or so minutes before slipping out. It was my third night spying on the pair of them, eight since I’d gotten my shoulder healed, and I’d decided that tonight was going to be the night. I could have probably stolen their powers earlier, but I wanted to send a message.

It might have been an issue if the two of them had children, or if they lived with other people. I wasn’t like them, I didn’t want to affect anyone else. I wasn’t going to hurt someone whose only mistake was to be related to murderers.

Luckily, this wasn’t an issue.

I went all over the house, preparing everything for ‘Slenderman’s visit’, as I’d started calling it in my mind. Anyway, I preferred being sure they were asleep before starting. What I was doing was probably overkill, but better safe than sorry.

It took 30 minutes before everything was set up. A quick look at my two targets revealed them fast asleep. Victor, from my earlier visits, wasn’t a heavy sleeper, though Othala was. Nothing seemed amiss.

Showtime, I told myself.

First part, power. I silently slipped on the roof and, with the aid of a small gadget I built, cut the line of the house’s main power cable. I could see the difference instantly, with all the small lights, clocks and the like, falling silent. A quick check at my targets showed none of them reacted, which was what I’d hoped for.

Part two was powers. Othala slept on the right side, and as usual had her arm falling out the bed. She was first. I’d gotten all the info I could from Tattletale about this particular pair of Nazis, and Othala was the dangerous one. I didn’t know if the invincibility she could give could stop my power, but I didn’t want to guess. Victor was dangerous, true, but it was his partner that made him truly deadly.

I appeared flat on the ground. I’d made sure to remove my gloves beforehand, and poked her quickly, pulling her power instantly. I was in shadow form the second after, while she moved a little at the touch. Still asleep though, I noticed. Perfect.

With Victor I was less stealthy. He slept with everything under the covers, with only his face open to the air. I poked his harshly right between the eyes, stealing his power instantly.

I wasn’t planning to test things here.
Victor woke up right then. In one second, he recognized an assailant, twisted and tried striking at me. I was expecting it, so I shifted into shadow before the attack landed. I dashed and appeared in the corner of the room.

Where he put five bullets into me.

I had to admit, he was good. Very good. He switched his strike to a grab of the gun under his pillow, twisted, and shot me in less than a second. Two head shots, three chest shots.

Too bad I was prepared. Under the veil was a blank white featureless facemask covering my whole head, made out of reinforced spidersilk and inertia-dispersing gel. My chest had the same, only sturdier. I saw the world through cameras hidden all over my costume. By the time the impact registered, it barely felt like someone had tried stabbing at me with a finger.

This was, of course, the result of extensive tests. I’d snuck in once after the both of them were gone, on an overcast day, and verified the exact model and brand of the weapon he had and its bullets. I did repeated trials with an exact copy of what he had. At close range, it would feel like a punch to the face, but no more than that.

In response, I started a soundtrack of children laughing, coming from where my mouth would be.

No, I hadn’t studied the character I was nicknamed for. Not at all.

Victor put two more shots into me as he grabbed Othala and pulled her up. Since she seemed still groggy, I decided to help him. I appeared right beside her, thumbing the sound up at the same time, my hands raised as if to grab her.

She screamed, and Victor shot me again. From his face, he was visibly starting to realize he was not having any effect with his gun.

"Othala, Teleporter," Victor yelled. "Give me speed, now!"

Othala already had her hands on him, so she instantly tried. "It's not working!" Victor's face went blanker right then.

Still he moved with confidence, taking Othala, putting her over his shoulder and running straight out the room. He tried for the light, but without power, that was useless.

I appeared right behind him in the corridor, shadow-dashing my way there. Still he shot, but this time it seemed more like covering fire more than everything.

Inside my suit, I smiled. *Everything was going according to plan,* I said to myself.

I went back to shadow mode and started herding him outside. It wasn’t difficult, since I think he was already headed there. He slammed the door open, not even bothering to close it behind him. There he put Othala to the ground, took position and started looking in every direction.

Smiling on the inside, I stepped out from behind a lamppost.

*Time for the finale.*

The exact place I’d stepped out had been planned, putting myself directly in the sight of a traffic
camera I’d noticed earlier. There I raised my hands slowly as he put what was left of his magazine into my costume. When the first click sounded, as his gun stuck empty, I pushed both of my hands up like a conductor at a symphony, pushing the sound of my simulated 'voice' to the maximum at the same time.

The laughs of children resonated loudly for a second before the house behind him exploded, crumbling on itself. I hoped to make it clear what I was punishing them for.

Then, as they turned their backs to me to look at their former house, I stepped into darkness, stared directly at the camera, and vanished for the night.

I was gone. Behind me, the police was slowly arriving to the scene.

*Mission complete.*
“Well, you sure don’t do things halfway,” Lisa said as she took a bite of her burger. “Very theatrical, though. I like it,” she added, putting the newspaper down.

The both of us now had a regular lunch date, once every day or two. It had started before I hit Victor’s place. Brian was also there sometimes, though not this one.

“I’m glad it pleases you,” I responded sarcastically. “I saw the Parahuman Wiki forums. The posters are going wild.”

“Not surprising,” she pointed out with a fry in hand. “There were lots of doubters for the first videos. The show you made two nights ago had the effect of making them look stupid. There’s a lot of gloating and a good number of naysayers trying to defend their position at all cost. Internet backlash is a wonderful thing.” She ate a few more fries. “So, what are you working on now?”

“A better regeneration device. Let’s say I wouldn’t use the one I have if I hadn’t really needed it pronto,” I said. “The new one will be available to you guys, of course.”

“And outside the workshop?” she asked.

“I’ll be doing some visits, people who want to see me, like you said,” I replied. “My lack of offensive abilities is really hurting me.”

She looked from side to side. Nobody was looking at us. “Speaking of abilities, what are your new ones? I mean, Victor and Othala?”

I poked the hand she was using to eat. “You tell me,” I said, moving my hand off her.

She looked at her hand bizarrely. “What did you do?”

“That’s Othala’s spark, which I call ‘Gift’. That’s how it feels,” I explained. “It only activates when I touch people, so I suspect it’s something like what she had. I have no clue what, though.”

“You’re mean,” Lisa said with a visibly fake pout. “Using me as a lab rat, without any warning.”

“But you’re such a good lab rat…” I replied, trying for something like puppy-dog eyes. “You notice details so much better than the other rats…” She had explained her power to me, by now. It was evident, in retrospect.

She laughed at that, and I did too. It felt good just being outside with a friend, without a care in the world.

“And Victor’s?” she asked.

“Victor’s I haven’t tried,” I answered. “I call it ‘Thief’, and with what he had, I don’t feel like testing it on other people. Enemy capes, maybe, but not random strangers. And not friends either.”

“Reasonable,” she said, finishing up her drink. She rose. “Ready to go?”
I nodded, rising. The both of us left money to pay for our meal, and walked out. Lisa was right behind me when we entered the lunch crowds on the Broadwalk.

I turned to the side to say something, and didn’t find her. An all-around look did no better, so I went to the side of the street to look from the side. An unknown man followed me and, being a little scared, I ducked in a darkened alley. The man followed.

I ran a little forward than turned to face him, only to find Lisa there. She had a look of concern on her face. “What happened?” she asked.

I ran the last few moments in my mind. “I don’t know…” I said. “Can you step back slowly toward the street?”

She gave me a curious look, but did as I asked. Forcing myself not to blink, I barely caught it. The moment she stepped right beside the crowd, her features changed. She became a little taller, her hair brighter and her skin a shade darker. She also looked like a man, now. It wasn’t the same one as before, though.

There wasn’t anything really noticeable about her now either. All the features blended in such a way as to make Lisa utterly forgettable.

Focusing on the feelings at the back of my head, I switched Othala’s power off, and Lisa reappeared at the side of the crowd, the illusion over her vanishing in an instant.

“What happened?” she asked.

I smiled, grinning as Lisa usually did. “That’s just not fair.” Lisa pouted.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing her hand. “I’ll explain to you at my place.”

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“So, it gives a stranger ability,” Lisa concluded.

“Yup. You fade into the crowd, looking like an horribly boring average person,” I replied. “You seem to need the crowd, since the illusion didn’t appear until you were right beside it, but when you’re there…” I smiled. “You were a man for a while.”

“That, I would have preferred not knowing. Still, very useful,” She pointed out. “Anything else? Othala had at least three different powers she could give, if I remember correctly.”

“No, not that I can see. This power doesn’t feel like there are multiple different settings, just one,” I explained. “I think I could use it on more than one person at the time, though. It seemed to be ready for activation when I pushed through the crowd, even though you already had the power active.”

“Trading variety for quantity, eh?” she said. “Still, it’s not an upgrade from the original like all your other talents.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, you seem to get better powers than the originals. Shadow Stalker couldn’t get fully incorporeal like you can, your version of Skidmark’s power has broken levels of synergy and you’ve
already done much better than Squealer even did, in little time.”

I thought for a moment. “I don’t really think so. I think it’s more a reflection of the person. Shadow Stalker could attack in shadow state, which I can’t. If what is said about Squealer is true, she could have easily built spaceships or assault crafts, not to mention factory boats and the like,” I pointed out. “And Skidmark’s power was basically a rail gun waiting to happen.” Something else came to mind. “You do know he probably could have empowered a perpetual motion engine, right?”

She looked in the air for a moment. “I never saw it like that.” She sighed. “What a waste.”

“Yeah. The more I read about capes, the more I think they find a few good uses of their powers, then stop looking.” I looked down. “They could do so much to make the world better, but they keep fighting all the time.”

“You know what happens to those who try helping the world?” Lisa said. “The Simurgh?”

“That’s no reason,” I said, voice loud. “It only comes, at most, once every 8 months. It was in Canberra three weeks ago, on the other side of the world, so that means it won’t be seen for another seven at the earliest. Plenty of time to work on solving things. Build a few groups of 4 or 5 tinkers with a few others that have fine synergy, and a good number of things could be fixed,” I started ranting. “I mean…”

I was interrupted by my alarm.

“Time to go?” Lisa said.

“Yup. 4:30 PM,” I said, rising. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” Lisa said on her way to the door. “I don’t disagree with you. Maybe someone one day will find a way to make all the capes work together, for once.”

“Probably won’t,” I said. “It would take massive mind control powers to do that, at best.”

“You may unfortunately be right,” Lisa said as she went out of the door. “Good luck with that visit of yours.”

“Thank you. Good night,” I replied as I closed the door behind her.

I slipped under the door a minute later, now out of my tinkering clothes and back into normal wear. Next stop, home. I said to myself.

I started running.

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This particular inmate was little more than a face supported by a mass of tentacles, with some organs still hanging past where the neck was. Worse, her body was moving by herself while she was clearly asleep, her limbs stretching and contorting as they moved her around. The room had various signs of damage, even though it seemed to have been built for solidity.

I was glad that I couldn’t vomit in shadow state, else I would have done so. It wasn’t her, it was more the idea that this could have happened to me. I don’t know how I could have dealt with that. I would probably have killed myself.

Seeing her extremities move by themselves, I realized she might not even be able of doing so.

I really wanted to help her, but I didn’t know what would happen. Could she survive without her power? Would it warp my body, just like it did hers?

I thought for a moment, then came to a decision. *First, get as much data as possible*, I told myself.

I did a quick survey of the room. One visible camera, in the corner opposite the door. It was tracking said door. I appeared out of shadow state under it, outside its vision range, for a quick look at her with my normal eyes.

And went back to being incorporeal barely a second later.

I didn’t know what had control over her body, but it had good senses. I rushed at me the moment I became solid. My reflexes were fast enough that she didn’t land a limb on me before I went back to shadow state.

*Her aura’s wrong*, I noted to myself, back on the ceiling as a patch of darkness.

Every cape that I’d seen had a similar aura, shining an off-white color. She also did, but she had another inside the first which was more like faded bronze. I had no clue what it meant, but it sure meant something.

I thought some more, but I slowly realized there wasn’t much I could do here. I thought about trying a power nullifying area, but there was no way I could do one before she attacked, and I couldn’t do one large enough to make it on the outside of her room. I had no power that could incapacitate her while I worked. Even if I could do all that, I had no insurance that taking her power wouldn’t kill her.

I’d need to come back. Later, when I had a good idea what the aura thing meant, when I could stop her from being dangerous, and more importantly with a powerful regeneration ability that I could lend her. Before that, coming back wouldn’t be of much use.

I snuck out the door, reading the name there. I’d first gotten through the window, but now I wanted to know who I needed to help.

Sveta / Garrote. The panel said. I guessed the second was her cape name.

I stood there for a minute more.

*I’ll be back, Sveta*, I swore to myself. *You’ll have some help, I swear it.*

Then I left, making the long trek back home.
The secretary waved me as I came back from lunch. “Alan, Mr. Holmes and Mr. Mason are waiting for you in the second conference room.”


I didn’t see anything wrong with that. They were probably wanting an update on the Steevenson case. But when I arrived there, and found them sitting, with faces grave, opposite the door, I couldn’t help but be afraid.

I might be officially one of the seniors partners, and my name might be part of the office’s, but there real owners were and had always been Holmes and Masons. The cabinet had been built by the fathers of the people before me. It had had many names, but always Holmes and Mason.

“Alan,” Gerald Holmes started. “We’ve had a report from the PI on the Hebert Case.”

So that’s what they wanted to talk about. I realized. The fear lifted. “Good…” I said. “It’s already been, what, nearly a month? What are the findings?”

“It’s been a month because we asked the private investigator to make sure the case was rock solid before he came to us,” John Mason replied. He was the one officially on the case. “This kind of civil case can easily lead to a criminal one and end up being talked about at the national level. The publicity would be impressive.”

I nodded. Nobody liked it when people messed with children. “I understand. How long until it goes to court?”

Mr. Mason looked at me straight in the eyes. “Alan. There’s no good way to say this…” he started. “Your daughter is implicated in one of the three bullying gangs in Winslow High.”

Those words hit me like a fist to the gut. Emma, implicated in something like this? That couldn’t be. But the senior partners weren’t ones to play pranks, not with things of this magnitude.

My legs nearly gave out under me. “Can… Can I sit?” I asked.

John and Gerald nodded, and I took a seat. There were so many repercussions, so much impacts, that I found I couldn’t think straight. Emma, a bully? But why?

“Could… Could I see what was collected?” I asked. If I wanted to fight the case, I needed to know as much as I could.

The two of them looked at each other. “You will have to sign this first,” Mason said, and handed me a document.

The document was basically a non-disclosure and non-participation agreement. Should I sign that, the office could sue me if I went against them in court. It basically said I was withdrawing the right to defend my daughter before the judge.

I, being a lawyer, of course read every single line, and understood what was written between them. If
I didn’t sign, I was basically forfeiting my job, sooner or later. In that case, I was sure to be put on leave, which meant the Steevenson case would go to someone else. Even if the Hebert case failed and Emma got out of it scot-free, it would hurt my position in the office, and see me out or be demoted as basically a paper-pusher. Since Laura, my wife, did not work, the change in salary would hurt my family harshly.

And that’s not telling what could happen if the case went through. And it would, in all possibility. The senior partners didn’t bandy terms like rock-solid easily. The firm would drop me right then, in that case, just to protect their reputation. I’d have to move outside the city for me to find any job in the law field.

Even if I did sign, today would have a heavy impact on my career. Integrity was one of the cornerstones of being a lawyer, and this had just destroyed mine. A lawyer who couldn’t have the law respected in his own house wasn’t going to be much better outside of it.

After a good moment of thinking, I signed. The risk wasn’t worth it. The best thing for me, for my family, was to distance myself as much as possible from this. Emma had dug her own grave in this. I had always told her to beware the consequences of her actions, and it seemed she hadn’t listened. I wasn’t going to hurt my wife and Sonya, my other daughter, for Emma’s mistake.

I handed the document back to my partners, and was handed a heavy folder in turn. *The senior partners weren’t joking when they said they wanted a rock solid case.* I noted sarcastically. From the data in the folder, there were seven bullies arranged in three groups in Winslow high. A pair of senior boys on sport teams, the classic jocks. Two freshmen girls, which the data indicated were emulating the year above. And a trio of sophomore girls, who were the main perpetrators from the accounts of the students.

Emma Barnes, Sophia Hess, Madison Clements.

I knew them all.

The document indicated that either Emma was leading the group, or co-leading with Sophia. Madison clearly was simply an accessory.

I went through the events described there one of the other. I was horrible. Theft, harassment, various injuries, bad pranks. There was even a sheaf of papers describing the locker event, as it had come to be known, signed by both students and their parents. The evidence placed Emma there, watching, as Sophia pushed Taylor into the locker.

I couldn’t read any more. I’d heard descriptions through the grapevine of what had been in there, and I could barely hold my lunch. I pushed the folder away and waited until I could think once more.

“So, Alan, what are you going to do?” Gerald asked.

I took a deep breath. This was a test, and I knew it. Still, there was something I needed to do. “Is Mr. Hebert aware of this?”

“He might. The PI sent the report to the both of us right before dinner,” Mason replied.

I bowed. “May… May I have the rest of the day off?” I asked. “I need… I need to talk to Danny about this.”
“Remember what you signed,” Gerald said.

“I am not going to ask or suggest anything to him,” I said. “As one father to another, he deserves excuses from me. I have been at fault and he has been hurt by that, so I must make amends for my actions.” Or my lack of action, in this case.

“Granted,” Mr. Mason said.

I nodded and walked off. Integrity was one of the important values of a lawyer. I needed to show, to prove I was still an honorable man, whatever the mistakes I made were.

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It was nearly four when I arrived at the Dockworkers’ Association. I’d walked the whole way, not taking my car. I needed to think.

It didn’t take long for me to get directed to Danny’s office.

“Alan, good to see you,” he said as I started making my way inside. “Come in, come in.” He pointed to the spot right before his desk. “Take a chair.”

“I prefer to stand.” I said. I was suddenly very conscious of how this was mirroring our previous conversation. I found that fitting, sarcastically.

“Ok,” He said. “I suppose you’re here about the case. Do you have some news?”

It seemed he hadn't gotten the PI's report yet. “Unfortunately, I am here about the case,” I started, standing ramrod straight. “I am sorry to say that I failed you, Danny. My daughter was involved in the bullying on Taylor.” I said directly, then looked down in apparent shame. Better to go straight to the point.

I still saw his face redden, his figure tense. He jumped straight up from his chair. “WHAT?” he cried out. I stayed where I was and didn’t try to defend myself. I knew Danny, and he was a temperamental person, but in this case I would take my due. I would have done the same in his case.

He held to his desk, scrapping it on the ground, then managed to stop himself. His face was slowly getting an even deeper red in anger, and he was gripping his desk as if holding himself back from something. “Why are you here, Alan? Are you here to threaten me? To make me drop the case?” His voice was colder than the Artic.

I did not say that I had thought to do exactly that, regardless of what I signed. I had ultimately discarded it, being too much of a risk for the rest of my family. “No,” I answered. “I have withdrawn any right to defend my daughter in court. For what she has done, I hope she get her just deserts.” Not that I really wanted that, of course. The best I could do was apologize as sincerely as I could, as thoroughly as I could, in hope that Danny would remember.

It might make whatever sentence fell somewhat lighter.

Silence stretched for a few minutes.

“Go home, Alan,” Danny said, and his voice still cold. “Take care of your family. I… can’t think clearly right now.”
I walked out, turning only at the last moment. “I’m sorry, Danny. Truly I am.”

“I know,” he said, voice tense. “Just go.”

I left.

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I was still thinking when I arrived home. I was unlucky to fall right on Emma as I entered.

“Dad, I’m gonna be going to Sophia’s place. There’s…” she started.

“No,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm. “You will go straight to your room and stay there.”

“Ah, come on, Dad!” she said. She wasn’t getting the tone of what I was saying. “We have to…”

I interrupted her again. “Emma, to your room, NOW!” my voice started cracking. “And you will stay there until further notice.”

“That’s a little rough, dear,” Laura, my wife said, coming in from the kitchen. “She hasn’t done anything to deserve something like that.”

“She did, that is all I can say.” I was already treading very close to talking of what I shouldn’t. “Emma, your room. You should have stayed there instead of what you did.”

My words did not fall on deaf ears. “Alan, that’s not something we say in this house,” Laura said, fixing me with a glare.

I lost it then. “We respect the law in this house!” I yelled, and turned to Emma, glaring straight down at her. “I know what you did, Emma. You, Sophia and Madison. Be thankful that I do not do worse. Surely you would deserve that.”

She went white as a sheet. “But, Dad…” she’d finally gotten it.

“There is no ‘but’ here, Emma.” I kept on glaring.

“Know this: I will make sure you get the punishment you deserve, whether the law does it or not. Now, YOUR ROOM!” I yelled. Then, I grabbed her cell phone. “No phone, no computer, no nothing! You will think about what you have done, and nothing else!”

“But Dad…” She said, halfway up the stairs. There were tears in her voice. “You said you should always protect your family.”

I brought Laura close. “Yes, you should always protect your family,” I confirmed, staring directly at her. “I now have to protect mine from your actions.”

Once Emma was gone to her room, my anger crashed instantly, leaving me drained. My wife turned to me. “Tell me you aren’t saying what I think you are, Alan.” She was nearly crying. “Tell me you aren’t thinking of disowning her.”

*What?* I said to myself. I looked back on what I had said, and saw where someone might have
inferred that. “Of course not,” I answered. “She’s my daughter, whatever happens. She simply needs to think about the consequences of her actions.”

I looked back toward her room and sighed. “Whatever happens, we’re in for a rough time, all of us.” I held her close once more. “We’ll need to be ready for it.”

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“Colin, are you busy?” I asked, my face coming over to the screen.

“Somewhat, but your input would be appreciated,” Armsmaster replied. “This case is getting nowhere.”

“I would be glad to help,” I said, a smile coming to my face. “What case?”

“Shadow Stalker’s power loss, which is now part of the Slenderman files…” Armsmaster explained. “I suppose you’re heard of him.”

“With the amount of traffic the subject has on the Parahuman Wiki Forums, I don’t see how I could have missed it,” I pointed out. More than ten people were currently writing messages in those threads, at this very second.

“True. So, what do you think about this villain?” he asked.

“Villain? I wouldn’t rate him as such.” I wasn’t even sure about Slenderman being a him. Movement analysis was inconclusive, balancing between male and female at most times. “From his known actions, I would rate him more as a vigilante hero,” I said.

“He attacked a Ward, probably at home during her sleep, then blew up a house!” Colin exclaimed. “How is that not villain behavior?”

I didn’t want to get into such a discussion now. “You’re asking me to rate him, correct?”

He nodded.

“Based on what’s been seen until now, Brute 3, Mover 5, Striker 7, Trump 8-9. At the lowest,” I spoke. The forums were actually debating that issue right now.

“Trump 8-9 at the lowest,” he repeated. “You know that you just put him just below Eidolon’s level. Above any other nullifier, for sure.”

My electric face nodded. “I’m going with the logic that the power loss is permanent, as has been seen until now.”

“That power loss is the big issue,” he said. “There’s not a day going by that I don’t hear a comment about Slenderman. Morale is down, and I’ve had to approve of two requests for wards to sleep at base until further notice.” He sighed. “And that’s not saying what you do about depowered villains.”

“Do tell.” I had a good idea, but it seemed Colin needed to talk.

“I can’t send them to regular jail,” he explained. “Kaiser will have them out in no time. The Birdcage, for what are now normal people? It’s overkill, that’s what it is. The both of them won’t last
“True,” I agreed with him. I didn’t help that the Birdcage was a multiracial prison. Putting unpowered racists in there was a death sentence.

“And what about Shadow Stalker? What can I do with a depowered Ward? Law states that she has to finish her term, but she’s of no use to the team at the moment,” Armsmaster added.

I saw a good place to interject. “Actually, Shadow Stalker is part of the reason I needed to talk to you.”

“What about her?”

“The firm of Barnes, Holmes & Mason has put a court case forward for harassment, bullying and other such infractions, against both Winslow High and seven minors within. A civil case,” I explained. “Sophia Hess is named amongst those, with quite a list of offenses attached to her.”

“Damnit!” Armsmaster yelled, staring at the ceiling. “This is so not the time!”

“What are you suggesting we do about it?” I asked. I was 95% sure of what he would answer, but this was his team. Being polite meant asking.

“No choice, we send it up the chain,” he said, sighing. “I knew that girl was going to come bite us back in the ass.”

I refrained from commenting. There was a lot I could have said, but I was constrained by the laws, both mine and the country. “Anything new in the workshop?” I said instead, changing the subject.

“Well…” he said, and we moved on to better things. He needed the stress relief, I could tell.
I saw my first example of real gang warfare only two days after my visit to the asylum. I’d been going around town, looking at possible targets, when an explosion attracted my attention. A minute later, I was on a wall, overlooking the scene.

For some reason, possibly related to the capture of Victor and Othala, the ABB launched a strike at their rival, the E88, striking hard to gain territory. And at the front of that advance, Oni Lee was there taking on the Empire’s soldiers in big numbers.

It was horrible.

I’d struck against numerous unpowered individuals before, going mainly to incapacitate. Oni Lee was doing no such thing, popping from place to place and leaving explosions in his tracks. It was clear he had no challenge there, no difficulty. He just flitted here and there, appearing in the middle of any group opposing the rank and file of the ABB. He could have a kill count of dozens in as little as a minute.

Of course, that changed when the Empire’s parahumans entered the scene. They were better at herding him, especially a young girl Tattletale had described as Cricket, but he knew about it. Knew, and planned for it.

Whenever a suitable number of E88 capes appeared on the scene, he’d bolt, and so did the ABB grunts that were doing the raiding. They took some losses, true, but not as much as the E88 did.

Then he’d reappear somewhere else and start all over again, just in another part of the city. He’d do three or four attacks a night, from early as 9 PM to as late as 4 AM. Then he’d start all over the next day, selecting another spot and striking fast.

We were now up to the third day of such attacks.

I’d followed Oni Lee back to wherever he laired on the first night, intent on preparing for a similar visit to that I’d done to Victor and Othala. Not as theatrical of one, that one had been meant as a message to those who struck innocents, but one more like the Merchants. In, out, with no trace or proof. I’d make sure this time there wasn’t a camera monitoring me.

Only thing was, Oni lee did not lair in any a specific place.

First night he’d gone and slept in an unoccupied apartment, deep in ABB territory. I nearly lost him that night, finding out that I couldn’t warp with the shadow of a teleporter, at least not one like him. I ended up needing to stick to the bottom of his shoe to travel with him, and it wasn’t the best spot for reconnaissance.

Then the second he’d gone and slept on the top floor of a shop. Same settings: a simple armchair that could tilt back, a small desk to place his phone on, and nothing else. He slept dressed, with all his equipment on, as if he was ready to go and fight at a moment’s notice. If he ever changed his shirt, I didn’t notice. He either didn’t or had a closet somewhere full of the things.

It was now around three in the morning on the third night and he’d broken off from his last fight. Since he hadn’t rejoined members of his gang, I suspected he was done for the night. I couldn’t tell,
having to rely on sound only, but I was pretty sure he wasn’t heading for any location I knew.

The proverb said three times was enemy action. I had to say it seemed right in this case; Oni Lee was doing this on purpose. No because he had a passenger, no… Because he simply was that paranoid. I had to agree that his setup didn’t cost much, outside of space, which is something in great availability in Brockton Bay. He could have a dozen such safehouses, hidden all over the city, and no one would notice.

Oni Lee did not sleep his feet flat to the ground, so I had no issue noticing when he sat in his ‘bed’. I waited for a few more minutes, until the soft wheezing of his snores could be heard, then slipped out.

I had to take a decision.

I preferred my battles like the ones I’d done before, ambushes were the enemy was unprepared and the ground was well-known. Thing was, with an opponent like Oni Lee that was impossible: He was always armed, always ready. This argued for postponing my visit.

On the other hand, things were getting pretty hectic. With three to four battles each night, it wasn’t going to be long until this became total war. Until now, only the lack of Lung’s presence had stopped things from degenerating to that point. Nobody wanted Lung to come out of nowhere, striking at someplace unprepared. But that wouldn’t stay forever.

There were already enough deaths in the last few days that I wanted to act. I thought for a second about balancing the number of casualties to the risk, then realized what I was doing. No risks were worth the life of a person.

So, tonight it was going to be.

Especially since it wasn’t much of a risk, attired as I was. I’d repaired my Slenderman outfit following the shootout with Victor. It was pretty much bulletproof, which meant I didn’t have to fear much from Oni Lee’s gun, and in Shadow mode explosives were just an irritation at best. I doubted his knife would do much better.

I still took precautions. From what Tattletale had said, Oni Lee required line of sight to teleport somewhere. I couldn’t stop him from doing so inside his current residence, an abandoned warehouse with a few piles of garbage here and there, but I made sure to cover every window as thoroughly as I could. The fact that it made my shadow travel easier was only a bonus.

Only then did I slip inside. A good search of the place revealed nothing, no cameras, no microphones, not even a clock or any other piece of furniture. Nothing that could catch me in the act.

Oni Lee wore his suit to bed, which meant I had very little places to target. Outside his mouth and eyes which weren’t covered by his mask, only his hands were bare. They would have to be my contact point.

I left shadow state, appearing crouched right next to my target. I could see him shine in the darkness. I removed my left glove and went to poke him, when his glow vanished instantly.

What?! I screamed inside.

Then he reached for the pin of a grenade on his chest and pulled.
As Oni Lee pulled the pin on the grenade holstered on his chest, I found myself shifting to shadow state instinctively. It wasn’t really a conscious decision of my part, but I went with it.

And regretted it a second later.

The grenade he’d used was a flashbang, and in my other form in was painful beyond anything I remember feeling. I dimly realized that I’d returned to my normal form, only to feel the impact of numerous bullets on my chest. I couldn’t count them, being barely able to see.

I only started having a good idea of what was happening when I felt someone jump on my back and a knife at my neck. The armor there was more than enough, and I managed to see the glowing of the real Oni Lee at my left. A quick look reveal that none of the Lees I could see were reaching for a grenade, so I went in shadow state and dashed to the other side of the room, going back to human form as soon as I got there.

Even in that small amount of time, Oni Lee had managed to clone himself another two times. I was in the line of sight of only a single one this time, and took two more shots before said clone disappeared. Another took his place, the real Asian flashing for a quarter of a second before me, and said clone waited no time before drawing a grenade off his bandoleer.

This time, I forced myself to stay human. I couldn’t deal with the pain of another flashbang. I used my arms to block the cameras on my suit, ignoring another Lee shooting at me.

Then the grenade exploded, and it wasn’t a flashbang but an explosive.

I felt the wave of heat for the bomb. My suit was pretty much insulated against outside attacks, but not completely. Especially vulnerable were my hands, since my single remaining glove was cheap mass-produced stuff, not tinker made as the rest of my suit. My shoes might become another issue, but my hands were the first priority.

*Note to self,* I told myself angrily. *Craft synthetic silk gloves, then better shoes.*

I did another second long shadow dash and started thinking about what I could do.

My natural power was useless, unless I could get into striking range of the real one… Not an easy feat with his speed. My shadow power’s mover abilities were of great help dodging, but brought a critical vulnerability with them. My areas were useless, as Oni Lee would probably not let me finish one, and even if I did he didn’t seem the kind to fall in such an obvious trap. Tinkers required setup, which I couldn’t do now. Othala’s gift wasn’t gonna do anything in such a situation, and I still had no clue about my ‘thief’ power. I still activated it.

There was no change I could notice.

I could still run away, but I didn’t want to. Slenderman relied on his reputation, his mystique, and that was sure to be screwed if I left now. My shadow power would probably be revealed, which would be a great disadvantage in further visits, not to mention what other information someone could glean from this battle. No, running away wasn’t in the cards, not unless my situation became worse than now.
I dashed again and dodged another grenade, another explosive. I managed to get away enough that I only felt a little heat and the pressure wave from the explosion. Which, by the face Oni Lee made, wasn’t what he wanted.

So he started lobbing grenades in pairs.

I wasn’t stupid. Two meant a flashbang along with something else. So dodging would hurt, and not dodging would hurt.

That meant taking a third option.

I reached forward and grabbed the flashbang, putting it behind my head as I entered shadow state once again. Behind me, the other grenade exploded, fragmentation this time. When it did, the Asian parahuman was safely hidden being a mound of trash, farther in the room. Two seconds later, he started jumping from spot to spot, leaving a clone each time. From my place in corner, I waited until he popped right before me.

And then I appeared before him, back first.

I learned that holding a flash grenade was painful, even with a somewhat gloved hand, but it was nothing compared to Oni Lee. He took the brunt of the light right next to the face while I dodged it by being prepared. The sound didn’t seem to bother him, for some reason. I suspected some form of earplugs.

I smiled inside my suit. I can do this, I realized. I can get him for good. I felt good, focused. I reached out for his hand with my own.

But the Asian before me wasn’t out of tricks. He grabbed a grenade of his belt, one I didn’t recognize, and tossed it right my face.

A smoke grenade.

My suit didn’t have an air filtration system, so I got a lungful of smoke. My shadow power reacted instantly, and I dashed on the other side of the room. By then however, I couldn’t see the real Oni Lee, and the clones were crumbling into white ash one by one.

I waited. He’d have to get out of the smoke at one time or another.

It took around a minute before he was out, but when he did he wasted no time going on the offensive, looking angry. Clones popped all over the place, throwing explosives, pineapple grenades and flashbangs pair by pair. No subtlety, little strategy, simply filling the room as much as he could with maximum firepower. He just kept a safe spot for a few seconds, a place with only flash grenades, then went a found a different one. He even used his own clones as shields to protect himself from their attacks.

Unfortunately, he’d given me the perfect place to hide. His smoke grenade was still going, giving me there perfect spot on the ceiling to wait out attacks. And wait I did, because I realized something.

He was tiring.

Before, there would be five to six Lees in the room, now there were four at most. I didn’t know why
that was, overuse of his power, high exercise and lack of sleep, but he was. I tried for the same maneuver as I did previous, but he didn’t fall for it this time. He was ready for it, and managed a jump at the last second.

So I started doing hit and run. Just as he did the last few days on the battlefield.

I would appear at his right, left, behind or straight in front of him, reaching out for his hand. Each time I did, I was a fraction of a second closer to touching. His clone always reached out for a grenade, but they were slowing down too and I always managed to escape before they could do anything.

I don’t know how long it went like this, but our game of tag kept on.

Then one time, instead of escaping, the real him reached out for a grenade.

I moved back like I did for a clone. By now, I could recognize which grenade was which, and this one was a fragmentation bomb. I stood on the opposite wall, waiting for him to throw.

He didn’t. He seemed, from his body language, like everything was taking him too much energy.

*What are you waiting for!* I screamed inside.

Even with all the previous detonations, this one seemed louder. I dashed to him as soon as the blast was gone. His mask was cracked, his suit as mess, and his right arm was basically missing, shredded. I put my fingers on the stump, trying to staunch the bleeding. I pulled his power, mainly to keep him from moving, but started feeling a headache coming. I ignored it, and focused on what could have caused this.

He’d basically killed himself, when he was going full pin against me minutes earlier. This surely wasn’t normal behavior.

It was only then I remembered Victor’s power, still active in the back of my head. For some reason, it took two tries before it shut off, and my headache nearly doubled.

Oni Lee did react. The eye that I could see, which had been dim, grew focused in a second. He tried reaching out for me, only to fall before getting halfway there.

I thought for a second, focusing through my rising headache, and noted there was nothing I could do here. I didn’t have any medical training, and even then I doubted I could do anything at this point. My now-complete regeneration beacon was on the other side of the city, so getting it wasn’t a possibility. I had what I’d come for, even if the result wasn’t what I expected, and there was no reason for me to stay. As abandoned as this place was, sooner or later someone was going to noticed what happened here.

I slipped into shadow form, ignoring another stab of pain, and was out of the room a minute later. Behind me, Oni Lee’s fingers twitched as they traced the ground.
My headache hadn’t improved by the time I reached my base, shortly before four. In fact, it had been an issue the whole way there, and had reached migraine levels at the moment I left shadow form.

It wasn’t the only thing I felt. The fight done, my adrenaline crashed, and with that all the various wounds and bruises I’d accumulated in the past hour made themselves known to me.

My hands, as I had suspected, were the worst off. One had burns dripping fluid little by little, while the other, who’d held on an igniting flashbang, had bits of cloth cooked into the skin.

I flashed into shadow for a second, stripping myself of my suit, something which did not improve the state of my head. Without anything on, I found a good number of bruises, places where numerous impacts had managed to get through. Compared to the rest, they were a tertiary issue at best.

Forcing myself to ignore the pain, I got a pair of tweezers and started removing the cloth and other bits of material stuck in my hands. It was unpleasant work, but necessary. I had finished the improved healing device, a beacon, but it wouldn’t heal well with debris still stuck on. It wasn’t as powerful as the original version I had in my head, lacking the power source of the real thing, but it was serviceable, without the issues of the first model I made.

Also without the gun and shield the original would have, but that was not so important now.

It was a long twenty minutes before I declared my work done and my hands as clean as they could be, and switched my healing device on. My migraine was still getting stronger, and I hoped the beacon would help.

It didn’t.

Actually, as I saw my hands slowly fix themselves, the pain above became worse and worse.

*Why?* I asked myself. *What did I do?*

I thought for a second it might be a side effect of Victor’s power, but activating it did nothing except worsening my mental state. By this point it was getting hard to think.

*Oni Lee’s power?* I wondered.

Looking at his spark in the back of my head revealed the problem, though it was not it. Lee’s power wasn’t active, but it was somehow pressing on the other sparks there, trying to fit in. It felt like I was trying to push a eight people in a car meant for four, with all the knees and elbows that would be involved. And it was getting worse.

I had to find something quick. I needed at least twenty five more minutes before my hands were healed, and as things went I wouldn’t be able to do anything at that point.

On a whim, I drew a zone around me and set it to power nullification. It took three tries before it stuck, but both the feelings at the back of my brain and the headaches vanished.

*Thank god,* I said to myself.
I could at least think now. I needed to find a solution quick, because I needed to be home as soon as possible. My hands, along with my other wounds, were at least healing, so that was one thing less on my mind.

It was a bad time for learning about issues with my power. It seemed it had a hard limit to how many powers I could hold, and passing it was punishing me.

Problem was, what could I do? I still didn’t known all the limits of my power management. Could I transfer a power to anybody, or only to a cape? Would Oni Lee do, in the state that he now was, or would I need to find someone else? Could I trust anyone with the powers I could give?

Those questions went back and forth in my head without any solution in sight, and when my hands had been healed for a good ten minutes, I gave up and decided to sleep on it. I would build a zone like the one I was currently under around my bed and think about it as I went to sleep. Anyway, I was exhausted, having had a long night that included a long battle, and some rest could only help my brain fire on all cylinders.

I managed, with a little contortion, to grab the pyjamas I’d left earlier and dress myself without leaving the area I’d built. I was also preparing myself mentally. I didn’t know what would happen when I left the zone. Would the pain return instantly? Would it slowly rise as before?

*Only one way to find out,* I said in my mind, readying myself.

I took a step out.

*Not as bad as I expected,* I noted. The pain was there, true, but at a manageable level. It was still rising, however.

I wasted no time, turning to shadow and heading home at best speed.

The pain spiked, much faster than it had ever before.

I managed to get home, slipping into my room and turning human again. The pain was once again at migraine levels, above what it had been in my workshop. I tried hurrying, reaching out to Skidmark’s old power to draw the area I needed, but it simply wouldn’t activate. Each attempt pushed my suffering higher, and by the third try the agony was too much. I simply fell on my bed, whimpering, holding my head between both of my hands. Then I screamed, another spike crashing in my brain.

“Taylor?!” came a voice from farther in the house. I was so out of it that I didn’t even realize who it was until he burst into the room, clad only in boxers.

My Dad.

“Are you…” he started. I whimpered again, closing further into a ball.

This time he simply came and pulled me close, slipping a hand on my forehead to take my temperature. “It’s gonna be okay, sweetie. You’re strong, you’re gonna be okay.”

Actually, the pain receded as soon as he said that and put his hand on me. I blinked the tears out of my eyes, looking up to him, trying to reassure him.
He was glowing.

NO! I screamed inside. NO, NO, NO!

I did a mental count. Thief. Shadow. Area. Tinker. And the new one, Oni Lee’s, which I could now feel much more easily. Copy or clone, maybe.

What about Othala’s? I said to myself. But I already knew.

I’d just given my father, without knowing, Othala’s Gift spark.

I’d just made Danny Hebert a cape.
I stared blankly at my now glowing father. I didn’t know what to say, what to do. I thought about taking back the power I’d just given him, but realized the headaches would just start all over again. I needed to give out a power, sooner or later.

And I had to agree it could be worse. My father pretty much topped the list of people I trusted, which was a very small list indeed. And while Othala’s power wasn’t the one I’d preferred getting rid of, it was the one I felt was safest to give away.

“Taylor, you all right?” Dad said, visibly shaken. “Talk to me, sweetie.”

I tried speaking up, explaining what had happened, what I had done, but the words just got stuck in my throat.

I… can’t. I can’t tell him about my power, I realized. It was too much of an escape from my normal life that I couldn’t risk it.

“I’m fine, Dad,” I said instead. “It passed.”

“You sure, kiddo?” he replied. “It sounded horrible, what you were going through.”

“It was just a headache,” I answered, telling a partial truth. “Took me by surprise, you know?” I continued, trying to make light of my circumstances.

He smiled. “Did the same for me, Taylor. That’s for sure,” he said, then put his hand back on my forehead. He had this weird look for a moment, and he removed his hand.

“Well, your temperature isn’t anything worrying, and your color is getting better. Can you dress? I know a clinic that’s still open.”

Going to a doctor wasn’t part of my plan. “No need for a doctor, Dad. It’s gone,” I yawned. “Sleep’s the only thing I need right now.”

“You sure?” I nodded. “You’ll tell me if it comes back?” A second nod, along with another yawn. “Want me to bring you a glass of water?”

I shook my head negatively. “No. I feel like I could drop dead tired any moment. Sleep is all I want.”

My father nodded and tucked me into bed. “Rest well.”

“Sorry for that, Dad,” I said as he was about to leave.
“No worries, kiddo. Just glad you’re fine,” he replied, closing the door.

I tried staying awake after that, but my system just crashed. The bed was comfy and the crisis was done, so my eyes dropped near-instantly. I was completely asleep before the minute was done.

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“Whoa! This suit is finished,” I said, pulling my Slenderman costume up for better see the damage. There were small holes everywhere, a good part of it was burnt off, and it smelled of chemicals and smoke.

I was better off building a new one.

It was now 2 PM, and I was only up for the latest hour. I’d forgotten my alarm last night, and my father decided (with good reason) not to wake me up before leaving. I felt much better now physically, at the very least.

I was still stuck with the issue of my father. I didn’t want him involved with this part of my life, relishing the freedom I had here. This meant I had to take his power back.

The issue with that, is that I needed to drop one of my other powers first, if I didn’t want the horrible headaches I had this morning. Sure, a power nullification zone could help, but I couldn’t live all my days in one.

The problem was how to do so.

I wasn’t going to poke a random person and give him powers. I didn’t want to be responsible for someone becoming another villain, or killing by mistake.

I knew which power I wanted the least and would most like to give away. Thief. Only issue was, it would be just as dangerous for someone else than it was with me. Worse, since it would be their only power, they’d be even more tempted to use it.

Last night, I’d used Thief to make someone kill himself. It wasn’t on purpose, wasn’t planned and was in self-defense, but I could still remember Oni Lee bleeding out at my feet, glaring at me with his eyes. Just the memory of it made me feel like a horrible person. I’d stolen his powers and left him dead behind me.

I was the worst kind of thief.

An idea came from my tinker spark and I started working on it, just to distract me from my gloomy thoughts. Anyway, I needed a new costume. I wasn’t going to go out as Slenderman, not until I fixed the costume and solved the five powers issue, so I needed another one, probably a power suit of some kind, if I wanted to continue trying to help the city.

I drew a power boosting zone and started working right then.

I tinkered the whole day without coming to any solution. My tinker spark was silent on anything related to the storage of powers, and no other answer came up in my brainstorming. I ended up going home to my dad with the same number of ideas as I had when I left.

None.
It was the next day when Lisa contacted me for a meeting with her and Brian. I was still deep in tinkering, for lack of anything better to do, so I invited her to my base for lunch. I made sure to bring pizza for four.

Yes, four. I’d tested Oni Lee’s Copy spark yesterday night, and found that, like him, it allowed for creating a copy of myself. It had restrictions compared to how the Asian used it, but was longer lasting, at least.

The two Undersiders were present outside when I arrived, so I slipped under the door and invited them in. They were silent until the door closed behind them, and I respected that with my own silence.

“So, hello you two,” I said, waving. “What brings you to my place?”

Lisa simply went and hugged me while Brian stood stoically back. “Just making sure you’re all right,” Lisa said, her arms around me. “The news broke out this morning about Oni Lee getting into a fight with Slenderman, and it looked brutal.”

“Pretty much,” Brian added from where he was. He noticed my blank face. “Haven’t seen today’s newspaper yet, I see.”

Lisa ended her hug and withdrew said newspaper from her purse. The cape section was on top, and the headline there was quite revealing.

‘Slenderman strikes down ABB lieutenant’, it said.

What followed was half fact and half guesswork. I already knew most of it, but was surprised to learn that Oni Lee had indicated who he fought in writing, along with another character that hadn’t been complete and as such, was not yet deciphered. There wasn’t a picture of this message, so I couldn’t even start to guess what it was.

There were, however, pictures of the warehouse we fought in.

I had to admit I now understood why the two of them were there. I’d not noticed during the battle, being focused on Oni Lee and all that, but the place was damaged beyond belief. Whole sections of the floor were shattered, walls bent and twisted. The article even indicated that the building would be taken down for public safety once the investigation was done.

I then realized I was ignoring my guests. “Sorry,” I said, handing back the paper.

Lisa had her grin on and Brian, his boyish smile. “No worries.” He replied. “I do the same for the articles about the Undersiders every morning.”

“So, how about this pizza of yours?” Lisa asked.

I nodded and led them to a table that was clean of tinker stuff. I pulled out four plates along with glasses, and called out “T, dinner!” to the surprised faces of my guests.

Lisa was about to ask something something when a “Coming!” came from deeper in the building.
T, as I called her after the name I’d given Lisa, strolled out of a side room where she’d been doing some welding. Apart from the necessary protective equipment, we were wearing different clothes, though they were easily recognizable as mine.

Looking at yourself like that needed some getting used to, I can tell you that.

Lisa, of course, was the first who understood. “Oni Lee’s power, right?” She looked from left to right. “Which one is the real one?”

“I suppose I am,” I said. “I think, at least.”

“You think?” Brian said, visibly not understanding how one couldn’t be sure.

“She was the one with the clothes when I appeared,” T answered before I could.

Brian made a face, then hid it beneath his hands, while Lisa started laughing. “Sorry,” he said, voice muffled.

I took the laughter in good grace. T had done the same when she first appeared. It seemed my face had been something special to look at.

The laughter was short lived as we went back to our food. “So, that makes six, right?” Lisa asked after a bite.

T and I looked at each other for a moment. “No, still five. I… was forced to drop a power.”

Lisa became serious. “Some form of limit, correct?” she said.

I nodded. “More than five brings horrible migraines, like you wouldn’t believe,” I explained.

Her smile was understanding. “Believe me, I know. You’re not the only one who gets them,” Lisa replied. “I have the same when I overuse my own ability.” She thought for an instant. “It’s clear you don’t have those migraines right now. So, where did you drop your extra power? Oni Lee? Just nowhere? Which one did you drop?”

While I trusted the two of them, I didn’t trust them that much. Also, I wanted to separate my home life from my cape life as much as possible. “Not telling who, but I dropped Othala’s.” The rest of her words hit me then. “Wait a minute…”

I hadn’t tried simply pushing a power nowhere. It should have been the first thing I tried. As such, I closed my eyes, focused on Thief inside my head, and tried pushing it away in the void.

Nothing. Thief wouldn’t budge, and neither did the others. It seemed like I needed to give them to someone, and not simply make them vanish.

Opening my eyes back, I found T, Lisa and Brian all staring at me. “Sorry,” I said, blushing a little. “Just trying something.”

“Just sending a spark away, right?” my copy replied, to which I nodded. “I can feel it didn’t work, though.”
“No, it didn’t,” I confirmed, looking at both Undersiders. “Which is a pity.”

“There’s one of your powers you want removed?” Brian asked.


Lisa reached out from her chair to give me a one-handed hug. “You said caused, so I suppose it’s not a directly offensive power. What does it do?” she asked, her arm still around me.

“My version of Thief steals… Energy? Will to live? Regardless of what it takes, in the end it made Oni Lee kill himself,” I explained. “He took a grenade and withdrew the pin, then simply held it until it exploded.” I covered my face as the memory came back, barely seeing T lower her own face. “It was… It was…” I tried saying.

Brain’s tone was serious. “Where you trying to kill him?”

“Of course not!” I nearly yelled.

“Was he trying to kill you?” he continued. “From the start?”

“…Yes.”

“Did he try escaping? Did you put him in a corner, until he had no choice but to escalate?”

I thought for a while. “No.” I finally said. I hadn’t realized, but he’d not tried anything but kill me. With the amount of explosives he had on himself, he could have easily made himself a way out, and once outside his power would have made his escape easy.

I wondered why he didn’t? I asked myself.

“Then you have nothing to blame yourself for,” he exclaimed. “Those are the risks of us capes. You never know how two capes fighting will go, and sometimes someone pays for it. Oni Lee was a murderer dozens of times over, and I can’t say he’ll be missed. He could have tried escaping, could have tried something else, but he fought until he fell. That was his choice.”

“I’m the one who started the fight!”

“That changes nothing,” Brian replied. “And even then, you attacked because of his strikes into Empire territory, right?” I nodded. “So, in a way, he started the fight, with those battles.”

“You wouldn’t be the first who, using a power she knows barely anything about, ends up doing more damage than she expected,” he added. He then looked the at Lisa, and a silent message passed between the two.

“Here,” Lisa said, and I found a slice of pizza handed to me. I started nibbling on it, my appetite gone. “Let’s switch to lighter subjects,” she asked and looked back and forth from T to me. “What have the two of you been working on?”
The four of us discussed tinker tech while polishing off the remains of the pizza. The two Undersiders had dealt with two tinkers, Armsmaster and Kid Win, and had plenty of details and stories they could bring up.

Once the food was done, T left to go back to her welding, saying goodbye to the two villains with a wave. I returned to the desk I was using, which was full of notes, only to be followed by Brian and Lisa.

“So, what are you doing here?” Brian asked.

“Planning,” I answered. “I need to do something about my powers, and quickly with that. I have a few plans that might work, but nothing really concrete.” Most of these were morally ambiguous, also. I wanted a better solution before I did anything.

“Want to bounce ideas off us?” Lisa added. “We might point out things you haven’t thought of.”

“Like what?” I said.

“What do you know about your power managing ability?” Brian asked.

“Not much,” I said. “Works by touch. Can both steal and give. Maximum of five powers.” I counted on my hands. “Gives me some idea of what the powers I have do.” I was silent for a second. “That’s pretty much it.”

“Giving away a power seems your priority, so let’s focus on that. Are you restricted to capes and former capes? How about normal humans? Have you tested giving one a power?” Brian asked.

Not exactly, but close enough. “Yes for non-capes. It works.”

“How about animals?” Lisa added.

“Tested. Doesn’t work,” I said. “I’d done the test this very morning, trying to push my tinker power to a neighbourhood dog. Nothing. An alley cat succeeded no better a little later.

“So, restricted to humans,” Brian said out loud. He was then silent for an instant. “How about multiples?” he asked.

“Multiples?” I repeated.

“Pushing more than one power on a person.” He explained. “You have six in total, if we count your
original one. Maybe that number is just a part of your power, and maybe everyone can have more than one, and just don’t have in general.”

“It would explain some of the more powerful capes, like Eidolon.” Lisa added.

*And explain Sveta,* I said to myself. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of the possibility, especially after visiting the asylum. Worse, I had had the perfect moment to test this, with Skidmark and Squealer, and blew it. “Never tried it,” I finally said.

Brian extended his hand. “How about now?” he said with a smile.

My eyes went wide. “You do know I have no clue what could happen, right?”

“It will either work, or not,” the leader of the Undersiders replied. “And you can just take back your power if anything happens, can’t you?”

*True,* I said to myself, still not convinced. “Are you sure?”

He nodded.

I put my hand on his. I wasn’t going to try with Thief, since I had no clue what power it would give him. I ended up after a moment selecting my Tinker spark for this trial, since it was the one whose effects were the most noticeable while still being unlikely to have a bad reaction. I grabbed hold of it in my mind and pushed.

As I expected, it didn’t go according to plan. While the power I’d selected went away, I fished Grue’s spark at the same time.

It wasn’t fog or mist like I suspected, but more like weaken or reduce, with some elements of draining also involved. *Impair* was the word I found that resonated the most with it.

Two voices rang out at the exact moment I was done.

“Whoa!” Brian said, his eyes wandering with a glazed look. I knew the feeling, remembering when I first withdrew that power from Squealer.

“Hey!” came T’s voice from deeper in the factory. She made her way to the rest of the group purposely. “No playing with the powers I’m working with,” she said, hands on her hips. “I’ll have to start over for the part I’m working on, now.”

“Sorry,” I answered. I’d forgotten T was tinkering deeper in the building. I hadn’t gotten used to her yet.

“The two of you share your powers?” Lisa asked.

I nodded. “She’s like an extension of me.” I said. “The restrictions are still the same, which means only a single zone between the two of us, and only one clone out at the time, but outside of that we both have the same powers.”

As an example, T crumbled into shadow for a second before rising back from the floor.

“Not that I mind,” Brian said, eyes closed. “But could I have my power back instead of this one? All
the details coming up are distracting.”

I nodded to T. “Go ahead. Just push his power out to him.” She reached out to Brian’s arm, and I felt the switch in my mind, Impair vanishing and my Tinker spark returning.

Brian exhaled. “Good.” He sighed. “That was… special.” He turned to his fellow villain. “I might have a good idea what you’re going through, now. There was a lot of information in very little time.”

“Mind trying out your power?” I asked.

A globe of shadowy mist appeared in Grue’s hand. “Done.” He looked from it to me. “Why?”

“Just wanting to make sure your power hasn’t changed,” I explained. “I don’t get the same powers as the source has, so I wanted to make sure it hadn’t changed during the transfer.” That was one of the possibilities I’d been afraid of. A result like Sveta had been the other.

Brian turned to Lisa, globe still in hand. “Still the same,” Lisa confirmed.

“Mind if I try something else?” I asked.

He handed me his hand again. “Go ahead.”

I wasn’t ready to give up on the possibility of two powers of a single person. I made sense, from my experiences.

But maybe I couldn’t add one to someone who already had one.

I drew out Grue’s power. The little bit of headache that appeared I ignored, and tried pushing both Tinker and Impair down to Brian at the same time.

Nothing.

Maybe another power? I told myself. Impair and Shadow also failed, and felt even less like they could work together. But Grue’s power somehow clicked with Skidmark’s, and I was able to send the both of them down to Grue without issue.

Grue noticed instantly, eyes going wide. “What did you do?” He asked, his eyes boring into me.

I breathed out as the head pain slowly vanished. “Two powers this time, yours and Skidmark’s,” I explained. “Not all powers work well together, it seems.”

He opened his hand like he did before, only no darkness appeared. “How does it work?” he finally asked, somewhat irritated.

“No clue,” I said, shrugging. “I have the figure out the uses and limitations of whatever new ability I get through experimentation.”

“Can you take it back?” he replied.

“Sure.” I did so, pulling only Zone back. I could recognize it, but I was pretty sure that was because I had given it in the first place. Grue didn’t wait a moment before generating a bit of his mist. “Much better.”
“Might have been more useful to test out the new power.” Lisa pointed out.

“Some other time, maybe,” Brian said, now visibly calmer. “I think it’s enough testing for today, anyway,” he continued, looking directly at me this time.

“Ok.” I answered.

“Good.” T added. “If you’re done, I’m going to go back to tinkering. I mean…” She started, then froze. She then proceeded to fall apart, turning into grey ash as her clothes hit the ground.

“Oni Lee’s power all right,” Lisa said. I caught her meaning instantly. She was right; No one knowing capes in Brockton Bay would mistake that for anybody else’s power.

I quickly looked to my watch. 2:48 PM, nearly twelve hours. “About half a day,” I spoke out loud, anticipating the question Lisa was about to ask.

“Are you going to remake her?” Brain asked.

“A little later, once I’m in private,” I said, gathering the clothes from the pile of ash and shaking them vigorously.

“Ok,” he said, then thought for an instant. “I’m gonna hit the road, then. Lisa, you coming?”

“Nope,” said girl answered. “Gonna talk a little more with Taylor here.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, turning toward the exit. “See you later, then.” He opened the door leading into the alley outside, then stopped in the archway. “Hey Taylor!” he said out loud.

“Yes?”

“If you want it, there’s a place in the Undersiders for you,” he said, smiling. “Just letting you know. Have a good day!” He then closed the door behind him.

Those words hit me like a ton of bricks. Sure, Lisa had told me about the offer he’d nearly made before I attacked Othala and Victor, but I’d mostly put it out of mind.

I’d never been particularly popular. Emma had been my only friend for a good while, and even that had turned bad. The previous year had been me and me alone, against a world that seemed to take perverse delight in hammering me down.

But now I had a pair of people I considered friends, and they wanted to make it official. Being a real part of their gang and working with them seemed pretty good. The days the three of us worked together were amongst my best days.

But they were thieves.

I turned to Lisa. “Did you know…” I started.

“He was going to ask?” she finished for me. “No, I didn’t. He didn’t have any noticeable tell about it, at least,” she explained. “I’m not actually disagreeing with him.”
“Why would he ask?” I continued. “Is it... about that power of mine?”

“Not that I know of,” she answered. “Actually, you pretty much have the opposite type of power we need. The one thing our team lacks is a heavy hitter. An Alexandria package would be the best case. We make due with Bitch’s dogs, but...”

A heavy hitter I wasn’t. “Then why?”

“He likes the way you think,” Lisa finally said. “You don’t take this, the cape business, like a game of some sort. There’s a lot of capes out there who don’t take this business seriously. He does, and you do. That’s one thing the two of you have in common.”

“Not to mention that we could do with some backup.” She continued. “Your shadow power is actually the most directly useful of the ones you have. We don’t really have any movers on the team, and you have to admit it’s perfect for gaining entry or for infiltration.”

I couldn’t contradict that, having used it for such purposes before. “What about what you said before, about your boss?”

“That hasn’t changed, but I didn’t like learning you might be seriously wounded or dying from a newspaper.” She countered. “You’re drawing attention anyway with what you do. I’d feel better knowing I could help if anything came up.”

I didn’t know what to answer to that, and the silence stretched for a minute. “Let’s change the subject, then, since you probably have to think about this alone,” Lisa finally said. “I’m gonna shoot some ideas in the air. Correct me if I’m wrong. Is that okay?”

I nodded.

“You didn’t drop a power, you were forced to drop one.” Nod. “The reason why you’re such in a hurry to drop one of your current powers is that you want to grab that power you dropped before the person notices.” Nod.

“It’s your dad, right?” It wasn’t really a question.

I dropped my head in shame.

“And you didn’t tell him, too,” she realized. “Ouch.”

“I...” I started “I just couldn’t...”

“I don’t blame you, girl,” Lisa quickly replied. “I don’t think I would have done any better if it had happened to me.” There was a couple of seconds of silence. “How long ago?”

“Nearly two days.”

“Double ouch.” She exclaimed. “Worse, Othala’s power tends to work by touch.” She looked at me in the eyes. “What was that plan you had, the one you didn’t like?”

“Giving Thief to someone who’s dying, or someone in a coma.” I said, face still down.

The face Lisa made said it all. “I have to agree with you, that would be morally touchy as hell.” She
thought for a few moments before seemingly having an idea. “How about giving it back to Victor?”

My face rose to look directly at her. *I hadn’t thought of that,* I admitted to myself.

“How about giving it back to Victor?” She said, her fox-like smile returning to her face. “It’s not like it would enable him to escape from prison, not anymore than he can now. It would even be misdirection about your powers as Slenderman.”

“The issue about that is where?” I replied. “I have no clue where he is.”

She withdrew her phone and looked at the time. “Give me a few hours,” she finally said, putting her cell back in a pocket. “I can find out. Call me over after ten, and we’ll discuss what I found.” She turned and walked out. “’Til tonight.”

“Later!” I answered as the door to my base closed.

Then I smiled. Things were looking up, finally.

I went and remade T, and the both of us worked on tinkering until my alarm rang. It was easier than expected, since it seemed like I remembered working on it myself. Still, we didn’t advance much, the both of us more focused on tonight then on the present.

In the end, I left early, leaving T to work. It would give me time to shower before cooking supper, since it was my turn.

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What I didn’t expect, however, was to find my father waiting for me at the kitchen table when I got in.

*I’ve got a bad feeling about this,* I said to myself.

“Take a seat,” Danny Hebert said, pointing to the chair opposite his. I said nothing and did as he asked.

I saw him take a deep breath. “Taylor, it seems I’m a cape. I have powers,” he said, his voice level, and looked into my eyes. “And I know you also do.”

*Busted.*
Human Resources Interlude: The Meeting

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Dynamesmouse, Harry Kiri, Leon89 & Robo Jesus. The lot of them gain:

287 Experience points
2 Courage points
4 Tenderness points
4 Happy Smile points
2 Exam score points
3 Ambition points
3 Love points
All redeemable in very specific games.

[Emily Piggot]

These are the times I hate my job the most, I said to myself, waiting for the elevator to finish descending. I understood how necessary it was, for our current society, but that didn’t stop me from disliking it.

We never should have tried rehabilitating that sociopath, I added to myself.

The door finally opened, and I stepped out. I instantly recognized John Mason, having worked with the man on a few other cases. So that meant the other man was Danny Hebert, his client. He visibly wasn’t at ease in this environment, though he was trying not to let it show. He didn’t fool my eyes, though.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Hebert, Mr. Mason. A meeting simply ran long,” I said as I took a seat directly opposite Mr. Hebert at the table. “Emily Piggot, Director of Brockton Bay PRT.” My two colleagues took a place on either side of me, Armstown in front of Mr. Mason. “I suppose I don’t have to introduce Armstown, the local protectorate leader, and his second-in-command Miss Militia?” The both of them weren’t really necessary here, but were present for the ‘shock and awe’ factor. Every little bit helped.

Mr. Hebert shook his head, while Mr. Mason simply replied “No”.

“I’m sure you’re not here for pleasantries, so let’s get to business,” I said, looking straight at Danny. He was the one I really had to convince here. “As Mr. Mason must know, the PRT is informed about any court case that affects, either directly or indirectly, capes, be them villains, heroes or rogues.”

“Correct,” the lawyer confirmed.

“As such, it is my duty to inform you that your case against Winslow High endangers the identity of members of the Brockton Bay Wards,” I continued, still looking straight at Mr. Hebert.

“What?” he replied. “I mean…” he said, then took a breath to catch himself. “Winslow is a Ward
school? I thought…”

“Indeed,” I cut him off. “It is not something we publicize, preferring to to leave the illusion that every Ward goes to Arcadia.”

“Makes it safer for the kids,” Miss Militia added.

The man looked like I’d just punched him in the guts. “What… What happens now?”

I winced mentally. That wasn’t the reaction I was looking for. “That is why I want to settle your issue here, inside this conference room.”

I had a dossier on the man before. Single with one child, wife dead in an automobile accident. One of the men working to rebuild the fallen docks. No criminal dossier, not even a speeding ticket. Someone who always works inside the law.

If Mr. Hebert had been a different type of person, someone trying to profit from others’ misfortune, we wouldn’t have been trying this way. The PRT has access to a dozen Thinkers who specialize in law; any of them could have buried this case in injunctions, discrediting witnesses and the like.

But, in this case, it was better to work with the people instead.

“We aren’t trying to shut you up or bribe you off, Mr. Hebert. The opposite,” Armsgmaster replied. “We want to solve issues outside of the court system, if possible.” I could hear the irritation in his voice, though I doubted either of the men before me noticed it. He didn’t like what we were doing any more than I did.

“The PRT has quite a bit of pull on Wards schools, amongst other things,” I added. “Let’s see if we can all come to an agreement.”

Mr. Hebert turned to his lawyer.

“Personally, I would see what they can offer,” John Mason said. “A court case, even one as solid as this, can drag for months at the time, if not worse. You lose nothing in seeing what they’re offering.”

Mr. Hebert thought for a moment, then nodded. “Tell me what you have in mind, then.”

I smiled. “First, let us go through the usual. The PRT will be paying for investigation fees, lawyer fees, court fees and all such related costs. Along with that, your family will be given a lump sum for damages and interests, enough to cover for missed opportunities and such.”

“What will happen to Winslow? The bullying?” Mr. Hebert asked.

“The PRT is against any form of bullying…” I said, keeping the ‘especially by capes’ silent. “As such, you can be sure that we will do our best to eradicate this problem. Winslow may be removed as an appropriate Ward school, along with all the funds allocated to such schools.”

“Could I…” he started. “Have that in writing? The school director had promised something similar, but…” He let the phrase speak for itself.

I turned to Armsgmaster who nodded, brought out a laptop and started typing. “Anything else?” I asked.
He was silent for a moment. “Not really, I don’t…” he said, then something visibly came to his mind. “Arcadia!”

“What about Arcadia?” Miss Militia asked.

“My daughter, she hasn’t been to school in the past few weeks,” he explained. “After the… incident, she wanted to be moved to Arcadia to get away from the problems at Winslow. It didn't happen.” He stopped for a second. “I’d feel safer if she could transfer to Arcadia. It’s not that I don’t trust you, but…”

“Once burned, twice shy. I understand.” It wasn’t an issue. Arcadia was a Ward school, and as such the PRT had quite a bit of control over admissions. “Consider it done. Anything else?”

“No,” he replied, this time more sure of himself.

The following hour was spent going over legalese and finalizing the exact document to be signed. Armsmaster, Mr. Mason and I went over the whole thing together while Miss Militia and Mr. Hebert watched. We finally agreed on a version everybody was okay with, and everyone signed.

“Thank you, Mr. Hebert, Mr. Mason,” I said, rising. I shook his hand and that of Mr. Mason. “Pleasure doing business with you.” It hadn’t really been, but I could admit this could have gone much worse. “Have a good day.”

Armsmaster and Miss Militia shook Mr. Hebert’s hand next, and I could see something akin to surprise on his face. Probably expecting a more powerful grip out of a cape, I said to myself. I grabbed my cane and started making my way back to my desk.

As soon as all three of us were behind closed elevator doors, I turned to Miss Militia. “Hannah, thank you for your help. Colin…” I turned to him. “My office with me.”

There were still things to be done.

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[Emily Piggot]

It felt good to be back in my custom-made chair, but I had to ignore comfort for the moment. “Colin, what’s happening with Shadow Stalker?” I asked as soon as Armsmaster was in his chair.

“Nothing,” he replied. “Her power hasn’t returned, and we can’t find the cause anywhere in her body. We went through every test we could think off, and nothing returns any valid result. Panacea is coming tomorrow to see if she can do anything, but outside of that option, we have nothing.”

“She’s no longer necessary, then?” I said. “There isn’t any more use we can get out of her?”

“Unless Panacea can do something to give her back her power, no.”

“Then, in that case, I want her in a juvenile detention center as soon as Panacea is done with her,” I exclaimed. “She’s been a disaster from start to finish, and I want her out of my hands pronto.”

“Yes, director,” he replied, standing straight. He knew this wasn’t a moment to argue with me.
“And I want you to keep a closer eye on your Wards. I don’t want a second case like this,” I said. “We were lucky enough that they agreed to keep this under the table this time. There will be no repeat, am I clear?”

“Crystal, director,” he instantly replied.

“Good, now get back to your post. I’ll have the papers for her removal from the Wards done before the end of the day.”

He said nothing, simply nodding and leaving the office.

I took a deep breath as soon as he was gone. Hopefully this whole Shadow Stalker thing wouldn’t come bite us in the ass once more.

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[Danny Hebert]

Since today was Saturday, I found myself alone at home, waiting for Taylor to arrive. I hadn’t found her in the library on my way here, so I expected she was with that friend of hers, Lisa. Good for her to have made a new friend, even out of school.

I also hoped she wasn’t going to be too angry at my news. I knew she didn’t want to talk about the bullying or anything related to it but, as a father, I needed to do something about it.

And finding her a place at Arcadia, like she’d wanted, was worth whatever anger she would have at me.

But that wasn’t what I was thinking of.

I was looking down at my hand, staring at it.

Ever since Taylor got sick two nights ago, I’d been having strange feelings whenever I touched my daughter. Something like putting my hand on something distantly warm, or like the sensation of restrained power in a generator.

And, before today, it only happened with her.

But when I shook Arm Master’s hand, the feeling was there. Weaker, true, or more distant, but still present. And Miss Militia was the same, with a similar feeling as her fellow protectorate member.

I barely talked to M. Mason as we left, being stuck on that feeling. I thought on the whole way home, and finally found what the three of them might have in common.

Capes. My daughter was a cape.

It explained a good number of things. Taylor had changed, in the past weeks. She was happier, more sure of herself, more talkative. More confident in general. I had taken the changes as consequences of her leaving school, but now I wasn’t so sure.

And I supposed I was one too, somehow. A cape able to detect other capes. A very underwhelming power, true, but I didn’t mind. I didn’t see myself as someone chasing after villains in costume, or being chased after. More like someone outside the heroes/villains system.
A rogue. Yeah, that’s how they called them, I remembered.

I was wondering how long did Taylor have powers when the front door opened. *Speak of the devil,* I thought.

“Take a seat,” I said. She did so, visibly surprised by my presence. She was early, I had to admit.

I took a deep breath. *Let’s go with the powers first…* I told myself. *That will probably go more easily.* “Taylor, it seems I’m a cape. I have powers,” I said, trying to keep my voice level and looking straight into her eyes. “And I know you also do.”
My first instinct was to deny everything immediately. I squashed it ruthlessly. It wouldn’t help in this case, I felt.

This wasn’t an accusation my father would do easily, without any form of proof. *Have I been spotted?* I said in my mind. *Did someone catch me using my powers?* “How… did you find out?” I finally asked.

He raised his left hand somewhat. “Like I said, I have powers too. My own, it detects capes by touch.”

I resisted the urge to slap my own head. I hadn’t expected this of the power I’d given him, even though my own power has a similar ability, except by sight.

“I wasn’t sure of what I’d been feeling at first, but after Armsmaster and Miss Militia, it became clear,” he continued.

*Armsmaster? Miss Militia? How did he…?* I wondered. I couldn’t think of a way his work might bring him in contact with them. “Where did you meet them?” I asked.

He was visibly taken by surprise, as if he just realized he’d said something he hadn’t been planning to. “Oh, hum…” He stuttered. “I met them in the PRT offices.”

That made even less sense. “Why were you there?” I continued.

He lowered his head. “I was meeting them and the PRT director about my court case against Winslow.”

“What?!” I yelled before I could even think about what he’d just said. He knew I didn’t want anything like that. “You… You…”

“I wasn’t going to involve you! I even said so to Mr. Mason, my lawyer,” he quickly added.

“Yes, as if checking into my school wasn’t going to involve me,” I said, cynically. “How long has this been going on?”

“I went to the law offices the day you left school for good,” he said. “The school, they’d told me they would clean up the bullying, and you came home wounded after only two days back. I couldn’t let it stand. Not if I wanted to live with myself afterwards.”

I was about to argue some more, then I remembered something Lisa had said the day I first met her,
about my original powers. “Best thing would be to never use that power of yours…” she’d said. “Be only Shadow Girl and nothing else, but I know you wouldn’t take it. I wouldn’t, myself.”

That’s why I went and struck at Skidmark, at the gangs. I could do something, so I did. Not doing so would have killed me inside.

But that didn’t require powers. My father had seen he could do something, so he did.

I was definitely my father’s daughter.

I took a deep breath to center myself before responding. “Ok,” I said. I still wasn’t happy about what he’d done, but I could understand it at least. “What’s done is done, so let’s not argue about it,” I replied, and I saw my father sigh in relief. “So, tell me about this court case against Winslow.”

For the next thirty minutes, he went over what he’d done. He brought out a document, a report from a private investigator he’d hired, and explained what was in it. I went through it quickly, and there was quite a bit I hadn’t known in there. I wasn’t surprised about the other bullies, not with the example Emma’s group made, but I hadn’t noticed the three that were after me also had other targets.

“That doesn’t explain what you were doing in the PRT offices, Dad,” I pointed out.

“Turns out Winslow is a Ward school, and any case affecting capes has to go through them,” he explained, and I had a bad feeling. “My case was putting the identity of some wards at risk, so…”

“What?!” I yelled out for the second time today. At my reaction, my father brought out a contract before me. The great lines were, in exchange for certain concessions, my father was to drop the case against Winslow.

“Those fuckers!” I screamed, ignoring my father saying “Language!”. “They knew, and they’re covering their asses, the bastards.” I wasn’t someone who swore, but I could make an exception, this time.

My dad’s face went from angry at my swear to curious. “Taylor, what are you saying?” he asked, looking staright at me.

I grabbed back the report from the PI, flipped through it, then pointed to a specific name. “Recognize this name,” I said, my finger indicating the name Sophia Hess.

“Well, not in person of course, but sure…” He went a little deeper in the document. “It says here she’s the one who pushed you inside.” He left the rest unsaid.

“That’s Shadow Stalker,” I intoned gravely.

“Isn’t that…” he said, then his eyes went wide. “That’s a member of the Wards.” He realized. “That can’t… I mean, the PRT couldn’t have known,” he replied.

“Then why go through all this?” I asked.

“I thought a ward was amongst those bullied,” he answered, eyes still wide.

I smiled a cynical little smile. “Nope. It was a Ward doing the bullying.”
“The authorities couldn’t have known,” he replied. “They would have done something, at least.”

“It was pretty clear from how she acted in the wards,” I said, remembering my infiltration of the place. Insults, physical violence, all those little digs she did. “Only way they could have missed it was if they forced themselves not to look.”

“That can’t be true…” he replied. “I mean…” he started, then something visibly clicked in his mind. “Taylor, how do you know how she acts in the wards?”

_Oops_. I realized. That might not have been the best thing to say. I had a decision to make, now. I knew my father; he wasn’t going to let this go, not now. I could pretend my shadow power was my only power, but that had issues. My Tinker spark would have been a better choice if I said I only had a single power, as I sometimes found myself tinkering without noticing, but it wouldn’t explain my words just now.

But I didn’t want to lie to my father.

“Dad, can I trust you?” I asked.

The face my father made at those was sad, sadder than any since my mom had died. “Sweetie, I’m your father, of course you can trust me.”

“That means I can trust you not to do or say anything about my powers without my approval, right?” I continued.

That, I could see, offended him. “Taylor, I’m an adult. I’ve been through enough to be able to tell when to do something or not.”

I shook my head. “Not in this,” I replied. “You know nothing about the world of capes, not really. I didn’t, either, and I nearly paid the price. I can’t risk my power coming out, it’s too dangerous.” I looked at him straight in the eyes. “Can I trust you? Can you swear you won’t do anything relating to my power without my approval?”

I hated putting my father on the spot like this, but it was necessary. Him going to the PRT about my having powers could lead directly to my imprisonment or death. And my father trusted the system, which made it worse.

It took a minute before he said or did anything. “You’re my daughter, so I’m on your side,” he said with a sad little smile. “I swear I won’t say or do anything about your power without your prior approval. Now, can I know what you were talking about?”

I smiled. “Thanks, dad. And I’m sorry to have involved you in this.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

I took a deep breath. “You didn’t get powers. I gave you one, by mistake.”

“You can give powers,” he said, his eyes going wide. He thought for an instant. “I can see what some people would do for that.”

“It’s worse than that. I don’t only give them, I can also take them,” I said, then explained what my original power was and how he got his power. “You’re not mad at me, are you?” I asked, in an
“About my power? No, not really,” he answered. “A little warning might have been good, but it’s all water under the bridge now.” He was silent for a second. “Who knows about all this… I mean, your powers and the like.”

“Two of my friends, Lisa and Brian.” I said, then added. “I didn’t even tell Lisa, she just figured it out. She’s the one that taught me most of what I know about capes.”

“She’s a cape herself, I suppose,” he replied. I simply nodded.

There was silence for a moment. “You still haven’t told me how you know about Shadow Stalker in the wards,” he pointed out.

I smiled and rose. “I’ll show you. Look down,” I said, and turned into my shadow state. I did a few turns around the kitchen table, then turned back. “That’s how I did it.”

My father stepped back into his chair. “Yeah…” he said, sounding somewhat overwhelmed. “That’s special.”

I smiled. “At the time, I thought she was simply hiding who she was from the Wards, being only a bully at school. I snuck in, planning on revealing her act before her boss in the Wards, only she wasn’t acting. She was insulting and violent even in the Wards, no different than at school.” I explained. “The only way they hadn’t known is because they made sure to look the other way.”

He took the contract he’d signed and went over it. “Disgusting,” he said angrily, pushing the document away. “I thought I was helping.”

“You couldn’t have known, Dad,” I said, trying to calm him down. His anger was useless at best, right now. “At least you got something out of it, right?” I said with a smile. “It’s better than nothing.”

At least Sophia was still powerless. That counted for something.

My father looked at the kitchen clock. “I’m not in the mood for cooking, right now. How about we eat out?”

“I don’t mind,” I answered, then something came to mind. “Actually, I know this great French restaurant just off the Boardwalk…”
“That was you?” my father said, surprised. He had before him the paper write-up of my battle with Oni Lee.

The both of us were in the exact same booth Lisa and I had gotten, more than a month ago. The food had already come and gone, and that under lighter conversation.

I was the one who brought back the conversation to cape matters. I had still a few details to pass. Crucial amongst those was my identity as Slenderman. My father had enough information to guess, so it was better to reveal all I could now before something could come back and bite me. As Lisa had said a few hours earlier, one did not like hearing from a newspaper that someone he or she cared for had been in deadly combat.

“Yes, it was.” I replied. “I had an opportunity to remove him from the board and I took it. I won’t say it went as planned…” I let the words hang for a moment. “But things could have been much worse.”

“Could have been much worse?!” he said, then looked down to the newspaper as if to confirm something. “Taylor, this place looks like it was used for artillery testing! You’re not hurt anywhere, are you?”

I spread my arms wide. “Dad, does it look like I’m wounded anywhere?” Thank whoever gave me my power for tinker medicine, I added inside. My dad didn’t need to know I’d been hurt.

He did take a good look for about a minute before saying. “No, it doesn’t.”

“Physical stuff doesn’t hurt a shadow, Dad.” I explained. “Those grenades of his couldn’t hurt me.” That wasn’t completely true. If an explosive emitted light, it also caused me some pain in my other state, but it was of short duration and I could fight through it.

The flashbangs were another matter entirely, but he didn’t need to know that either.

He went and reread the article. He then fixed me with a serious stare. “It says here you killed him. Is that true, Taylor?”

I gulped. “Not… exactly,” I answered. “I found him on his first night doing raids, and started planning on taking his power. No battle, just in, out.”

“The only thing was that the man was paranoid, never sleeping in the same place twice. By the third
day it was clear that I couldn’t choose where to hit him, and with the casualties mounting I decided to strike that night,” I explained, my father silent all the while. “I interrupted the lights in his place, then snuck in. Only he must have seen or heard me coming, because he dodged at the last second and started throwing those bombs of his everywhere.”

“We fought for a while without anybody getting a clear advantage. He couldn’t hurt me, but he was too fast for me to strike. I ended up activating one of my newest powers, one I didn’t know what it did.” I shrunk on myself. “Turns out it saps willpower, but I didn’t know that then. He started slowing down, and I thought he was getting tired.” A vision of Oni Lee pulling the pin on his fragmentation grenade came back to mind, and I couldn’t push it back. Tears started coming to my eyes. “He… he grabbed a grenade and… and he simply held it there, in his hand. And I couldn’t…”

I stopped there as my father got out of his chair and gathered me in his arms. “There, there…” he said as I cried into his shirt. “It’s gonna be OK. I know you didn’t do it on purpose. Everything will be all right,” he repeated, over and over, until I finally cried myself out.

I had needed to hear that. Brian’s words had helped, true, but I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if my father hated me. Outside of him and my two friends, the rest of the world could hang.

I just needed to know it wouldn’t change things between us.

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“I must say, the power will take some getting used to,” my father said, taking back his chair. He was clearly trying to change the subject. I was more or less back in control, though surprised no one had come looking.

“What do you mean?” I had to admit I was curious. I was pretty sure he didn’t only have the power to feel capes, though exactly what he had was still unknown.

“It’s like… power, somewhat distantly,” he explained after a moment’s thinking. “You feel… closer? Stronger? More visible?” He was searching for the right words to use. “Well, generally more accessible than the two others I felt. They felt pretty much the same compared to you.”

I was surprised. While Miss Militia wasn’t generally ranked amongst the powerful capes, Armsmaster was among the top five tinkers in the world. His specialty affected everything, which was more than I could say of my own tinker spark.

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“Maybe he’s feeling all my powers in one big bunch. I surmised. That didn’t explain Armsmaster and Miss Militia being the same level, however.

“I’m pretty sure that there’s more to your power, Dad,” I said.

“Why do you think that?” He replied.

I took a moment to order my thoughts in my mind. “I had your power for a while, Dad. I call it ‘Gift’, and that’s what it does. It gives,” I explained. “The two previous times, it gave powers. It probably does the same thing in your case.” I thought for a second. “Maybe it only works on capes, and that’s why you can feel them.”

I handed him my hand. “Want to try?”
He put his hand on mine. “What do I do?” he asked. “You’re the specialist here.”

“Focus on the sensation you feel.” I said. “Try stuff. Mentally pushing or pulling or… Whoa! Yeah, that.”

“Taylor, you OK?” My father said, withdrawing his hand. “What happened?”

I raised my hand in the universal sign for stop. “Everything’s fine,” I replied. “Just surprised.”

My father could, by touch, enhance a cape’s connection to his spark. This unlocked secondary abilities or lowered restrictions on usage. It was a temporary thing, affected both by the time since the last use of this power, and distance from it’s user.

I could tell, because that was the effect it had on me. It increased my ability to identify capes. Looking at my father’s glow had made the information jump right to my brain, in a way I supposed similar to Tattletale’s ability.

“You boost capes, Dad.” I finally said, once I’d gotten used to the new knowledge in my head. “Add secondary powers or remove limits.”

“Nothing offensive?” he asked.

“Unless you use it on someone with offensive powers, no.” My father might be prone to anger, but he wasn’t a violent man.

“Good.” He was silent for a moment. “I could use some dessert right now. How about you?”

“Dessert would be great.” I answered.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

We were just getting home when Tattletale’s phone indicated a text message.

“Taylor, is that from you?” My father asked as we were getting out of his car.

I nodded, bringing out the cellular. “It belongs to Lisa,” I nearly said Tattletale. When it came to parahuman stuff, it was her cape name that came up naturally. “She lent it to me in case I needed to reach her in an emergency.”

Meet @ corner Johnson & Mntnwlk, 30 min. News about V & O

Corner of Johnson and Mountainwalk in thirty minutes, I translated mentally. I wonder what news she has that she doesn’t want to discuss by phone?

I put back the phone in my pocket and turned toward the street, only for my father to interrupt. “Cape stuff, right?” he said, his tone a little sad.

I simply nodded.

“You’re going, I suppose.” I nodded again, not wanting to interrupt his train of thought.

He sighed. “You’re not planning on going after another villain, are you?”
“No,” I replied. “I’m not. I can’t really at the moment, I have too many powers to do that.”

“Good,” he replied and sighed again. “I can’t really stop you, but I’d like to put down a few rules, if only for my peace of mind.” He stepped before me. “I want to know when you’re going out. No sneaking out. Leave a message on the fridge or on the phone if necessary.” I nodded.

“I want you to keep that phone with you at all times.” I was surprised; My dad, telling me to make sure I had a cellphone? “I don’t like it, but I’ll feel better knowing I can call you if necessary. Don’t hesitate to call me, if you need anything. Even late at night.”

“Make sure to keep your studies up, and be safe, promise?”

“I promise.” All in all, those weren’t really restrictive rules; I could live with them. I didn’t want my dad dying of a stress aneurysm. “See you tomorrow Dad. Sleep well.”

“Go,” he said, waving. I stepped behind the car, out of sight from the street, and became a shadow the next instant.

Then I was gone.
I was surprised to see Lisa in costume in the alley closest to the meeting point. I’d expected her dressed in civilian clothes. Nonetheless, I joined her in the alley before returning to solid state.

“Good, you’re early,” she said as soon as I left the ground. She then got a good look at my face. “You OK?”

“Yeah,” I answered, nodding. I wasn’t surprised she’d noticed. “It’s just been a busy day.” That was one way of describing the emotional roller-coaster I’d been on.

“Right,” she said. “Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we’ll have to think of another option about that Thief of yours.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Victor, and Othala actually, are no longer in jail,” she replied.

I stepped back in surprise. “What?”

“E88 broke them out of jail last Tuesday. Rumor is Kaiser was personally there to spring them. The PRT is covering it up for the moment, but the news will break out sooner or later.”

“Damn!” I cried, punching the alley wall for good measure. “Can’t they actually do something right for once?” I continued. Othala escaping wasn’t a danger, but Victor was an efficient fighter regardless of his powers. He could still take the right cape on, once back in the streets.

Then I remembered what else the PRT had done today, and my anger surged again.

“Sorry about that,” Lisa said, even though it wasn’t her fault. “We’ll discuss this at length later. I have to go, the rest of the Undersiders are waiting for me.”

“Another heist?” I said, trying to control my anger.

“Nope,” she replied. “The boss has us hitting ABB workplaces, trying to capitalize on the disappearance of Oni Lee.”

“Want help?” Taking the fight to the ABB felt like just what the doctor ordered to clear my mood.

Lisa raised an eyebrow. “You sure? You might start being associated with the Undersiders if you do stuff like that.”
“Right now, I don’t care,” I said. I really needed to do something with myself, and hitting a few
ABB safehouses could only help me unwind. It had been a while since I hit either them or the
Empire, as they had gotten wise to my methods. All the places I’d found were now guarded by at
least four guards all night long, and I wasn’t going to strike a place like that until I had efficient body
armour.

If I were alone, that is.

I waited while Tattletale rang Grue and talked it over with him. It wasn’t long before she turned to
me. “Grue’s fine with it,” she finally said, closing her phone. “You aren’t coming as Slenderman, are
you?”

“No. I’ll have another costume.” I'll need to rebuilt my Slenderman costume, actually, I made a
mental note. I then thought for an instant. “The other two Undersiders don’t know my powers,
right?” She nodded. “I’ll go as shadow girl, then.” I said.

Lisa smiled. “Try to find a better name than that, if you can. It’s been taken for the past ten years at
least.” She started walking. “Meet us at the southern entrance of the Docks as soon as you can. I’ll
try my best to have them wait there.” She waved. “Later!”

I did the same, then turned back into my shadow state. I even beat my speed record, getting to my
base.

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“Hey, Taylor.”

“Hi T.” I looked around. “How is it going?”

“Helmet’s done,” she said, pointing to the piece standing on a table. “Working on the left glove.
Making boron alloys is really time consuming,” she explained.

“Where’s the other glove?” I asked. The gloves T and I were building were basically improved
versions of the ones I’d lost when I was shot. These had an taser integrated, perfect for going after
Asian Bad Boyz thugs.

“On the desk over there. Why? Planning something?” she asked, turning from the bunch of circuits
she was working on to face me.

“I’m going with the Undersiders to mess up some ABB property,” I said, grabbing both the glove
and the helmet.

“OK…” She said. “Need anything?”

“No. Continue doing as you were,” I said, then flashed into shadow state for a second to remove my
clothes. “Actually, got a good idea for a cape name based on my shadow powers?” I added while I
went and donned one of the synthetic spider silk suits I had prepared. I had three, one for each of us
and one spare. My battle with Oni Lee had at least taught me that I needed a backup costume just in
case.

“Let’s see…” She said. “Ghost, Haunt, Abyss…” She turned back to her work. “Shade, Ghoul,
Apparition, Specter, Void…”
“Apparition will do just fine, actually.” It fit perfectly with how I seemed to appear and disappear in darkness. I finished putting on everything. “How do I look?”

She turned to me. “Pretty good. Let me just fix one last detail, and no one will recognize you.” She came close and fiddled with my helmet for a second. I felt something fall on my back. “Perfect,” she said. “Now nobody would think Taylor Hebert while looking at you.”

I reached out to my back and pulled whatever was there in sight. “Blond hair? Where did you get this?”

“It’s synthetic. Looks and feels like the real thing,” she explained. “You’d need chemical or DNA testing to notice the difference.” She grabbed a mirror off her desk. “Look.”

I had to admit she had a point. Nobody would link Taylor Hebert to the young blond woman in a skintight suit that was facing me in the glass. The helmet was similar to that of Grue, only less wide and with ear-like extensions at the top.

Best of all, outside the leotard-like suit, I looked nothing like my previous costume. Work was planned on a breastplate, but for the moment my current outfit would have to be enough.

Lisa hadn’t said how long I had, so as soon as I was sure everything was in place, I said my goodbye to T and left the base.

Direction: the Docks.

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I was worried for nothing; I actually beat the rest of the Undersiders there. The four of them were riding a pair of those giant dogs, two on each animal. They touched down right at entrance and I waited no time to return to physical form.

“Shadow Girl! Glad to have you,” Grue said, not moving from his place on the dog. I could hear the smile in his voice. “Have you finally decided on a name?”

“Apparition will do for now,” I responded.

He turned to the rest of his group. “Good. Team, this is Apparition, who’ll be working with us today. She’s a shadow mover.” He turned to me. “You know Tattletale, so the other girl, the one in the dog mask, is Bitch, and the man in the mask and coronet is Regent.” Bitch gave me a straight look, saying nothing, while Regent did a mock bow.

Grue then discussed the target. I knew of the place, having scouted it multiple times in the past month. Drug packing plant, but one with enough guards inside to give me pause.

“Last thing,” He finally finished. “We see Lung, we scram. We’re not here to take out the ABB leadership, we’re here to mess with their business. So, anyone sees him, we warn the rest and we’re gone. No picking a fight we don’t need.” He looked directly at the dog mistress. “That goes double for you, Bitch.”

The woman nearly growled, as did her dog, before looking aside at me. “I’m not giving her a lift,” she said, teeth showing.
I was tempted to reply something sarcastic, but held my tongue. “I’ll beat the four of you there, regardless,” I finally responded. I was formless a second later, and dashing toward our target.

I did beat the rest of the gang there, even managing to scout the place again before they arrived. They landed in an alley and I appeared to make my report. “Two exits, front and back. Two guards in the front, one in the back. Everything that’s happening is in the basement, other floors are clear.”

“Good work. Take Tattletale and hit the guard behind the building, Regent and I will take the front. Bitch, shrink your dogs until they can fit through a door; We might need to enter in force.”

I dropped the lonely guard with my taser before Lisa even arrived in the back; A professional this guy wasn’t. She had tie-wraps to bind him, and I made note to carry some too. The whole thing was done in silence, which I found surprising with her usual loquacity.

The Undersiders and I met back in front, looking into the basement from the only window giving us a vantage point.

“Door’s guarded,” Regent pointed out. “Two guards with machine guns.”

“I can cover the room in darkness when we go in,” Grue answered.

“They might spray the door anyway, dick,” He pointed out.

Grue didn’t rise to the insult. “You have a better plan?”

“I might,” I said. “Can you cover the ceiling, and only the ceiling, with that shadow of yours, and maintain it? Said ceiling had bright neons all over the place. Going there in shadow state would be irritating at best, and easily visible.

“Sure.” He turned to me. “What have you got?”

“If you do like I asked, I’ll sneak in down there and cause chaos; Drop the people with guns, the ones calling for help and all. I’m sure, after a minute or so everyone down there will be rushing out. The rest of will just have to intercept them at the doors.”

He clearly thought for an instant. “Perfect,” he answered. “We’ll go with that. Regent, Bitch, take the back. Tattletale, with me. We go in two.” He clapped his hands. “Places everyone.”

With the lights out, I easily took out the two armed guards. One got a few bullets off, but hit nothing but air. By the time I dropped a third, one who had reached for a cell phone, it was mass panic in the room and everyone was rushing out. I didn’t catch the other parts of the battle, but judging by the state of everyone once the building was clean, it had been as easy for them as it had for me. The whole thing had taken maybe fifteen minutes, top. It wasn’t even a challenge.

The group was going over the loot when I approached Grue. “How much are you making off attacking this place?”

“Five thousand, plus whatever we find.” He answered. “Don’t worry, I’ll have your cut before you leave.”

Bitch scowled at me at that moment.
“Is it this building in particular, or any ABB business?” I asked. I didn’t care much about the money; I had more than I could easily buy stuff with.

“Five thousand per ABB place we hit,” he confirmed. “Why?”

I smiled behind my helmet. “I can help you make at least twenty thousand more tonight,” I answered.

He was silent for a moment. “You know four more ABB places,” he said, voice serious.

I nodded. “Four spots I wasn’t able to hit alone, yes.”

He turned to the rest of his gang. Tattletale had her usual smile, and Regent a smug smirk. Bitch’s grin was right past predatory.

“I think everyone here is in agreement.” He said, and I could hear his lips curl in his voice. “Lead on.”

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I was surprised to hear my father was up as I went to bed. “Everything all right, Taylor?”

“I’m fine, dad,” I answered. “You can go back to sleep.”

There was silence for a moment. “Anything special happened?” he finally asked.

“Nothing special,” I said with a teasing tone. “Just helped take out three drug packing plants and two arms depots.”

Another moment of silence.

“What?!” my father cried out.

I had to wait another hour before finally being able to go to bed.
I will admit one thing at least: when the PRT decides to cover up something, they don’t mess around. It was only four days before my father received the transfer papers to Arcadia, the receipt from the law firm, all expenses paid, and a deposit of half a million dollars for damages.

He wasn’t happy with the money, but since there wasn’t anything we could do about it at this point he had no choice but to take it. It did mean the rest of the mortgage on the house was a thing of the past, though.

I started at Arcadia ten days after taking down Oni Lee. The principal had somehow been informed of my issues at Winslow and was very sympathetic and understanding, something I didn’t trust in the least.

The school itself was very different from Winslow. Everything was brightly lit and looked new (including the lockers, which were smaller than those at my previous school, something which was a relief). The teachers seemed decent and qualified. There were a few cliques, but nothing that affected me.

Compared to Arcadia, Winslow seemed dirty, old and somewhat out-of-date. The cliques in my old school were powerful, and always jockeying for more. And the teachers there weren’t anything to write home about.

Arcadia seemed like a breath of fresh air.

The only issue was that it seemed there were capes everywhere.

My ability to see capes wasn’t an advantage here. I had to force myself not to react when a glowing person passed me, or worse, was a member of my classes. This happened twice: A brown-haired boy in my math class, and a redheaded male in my English class.

Members of the Wards, I supposed. I doubted the gangs would send their children with powers here, though I supposed it was possible.

I suppose I could have gone through video archives and identified them, but I had nothing against the Wards. I actually felt a little respect for them, being fellow sufferers of the attentions of Shadow Stalker. I wanted my own status as a cape to remain a secret, so keeping mum about secret identities was par for the course.

I suffered through being the new student for a while, though it tapered off as the other students realized I wasn’t much for socializing. No one was insulting about it, though, so I took that as a win.
And by the second week, I was sending T in my place.

*_*-_*-_*-_*-_*-*

“The ABB is falling back everywhere. Lung’s barely been seen, something which doesn’t inspire my confidence at all. He’s planning something, that’s for sure,” Lisa said from her place at the table. We were having Chinese today.

“That’s good,” I replied.

“Not really,” Brian added, then took a bite of his General Tao. “Whatever territory they’re losing, others are taking. The Empire is the one gaining the most, but even Coil has thrown his hat in the ring. His mercenaries have been pushing everyone out of the Broadwalk, and some of them have even been seen during the day.”

“And the Protectorate has done nothing?” I asked.

“They try, but the E88’s the main threat, and they can’t go toe to toe with all of the Empire's capes. And they know it,” Lisa explained. “Coil’s a different issue. Most if not all of his people aren’t capes, so their hands are tied. Coil would be fair game, but nobody sees him.”

The three of us were silent for a moment as I digested that information. Then Brian swallowed and spoke. “I don’t think you called me here for dinner and a discussion,” He said with a smile. “What is it?”

“I discussed things with Lisa here, and I had something I wanted to try with your power, if you don’t mind?” I asked, blushing a little.

He didn’t seem to notice. “You can put everything back where it was, right?” I nodded. “Go ahead then.” He held out his hand.

One of the things I had been experimenting on was how powers mixed with each other. Problem was, only two of the ones I currently possessed could be combined:

Area and Thief.

The result wasn't anything I liked. It was mostly adding the concept of Area to Thief than any combination of the two. While it did open up a slot in my mind, I liked my version of Area too much to discard it. Also, I disliked the ability Thief gave me, and this didn’t really get rid of it.

Since both Area could combine with both Thief and Grue’s Impair, Lisa suggested trying to fit the two together. I wasn’t sure I wanted Grue to have Thief, but I had to admit he was one of the persons I trusted the most. I’d hunted the ABB with the Undersiders three times, and he’d never been more violent than necessary.

And I really wanted Thief gone.

I grabbed Impair and tried merging it with each of my sparks in turn (Save Clone; I didn’t want T to disappear in the middle of class).

Surprise, surprise, Lisa had been right. I could fit Thief and Impair together without any issues. I sent the combined spark back to Grue instantly.
“So, how does it feel?” I asked.

Like he’d done before, he materialized a blob of shadowy mist above his hand. He looked at it for a moment. “Similar, but there’s something different about it nonetheless.” He inclined his head to the side. “It feels a little more difficult to work with somehow.”

“Hit me with it for a minute?” I asked.

He did so, engulfing me in a column of the stuff. I couldn’t feel a difference from before; it still impaired the same senses. I tried moving, feeling the usual bizarre resistance it had. Nothing different.

Then I yawned.

The column vanished and the the Undersiders present looked at me. I had to resist yawning again, and reached for a caffeinated soda.

“Energy drain, right?” Brian said to Lisa.

She nodded. “Yup. Steals energy. Much less dangerous than the original Thief or many of its variations, for sure.” Lisa knew that well. I’d done some testing with her, especially the combined Area and Thief.

“Nice,” Brian said with a smirk. He then threw a curtain of the stuff over an empty part of the place. “I’ll have to change the way I use it, though. Mind if I keep it for a while?”

I understood why he said that. Since his shadow didn’t harm, he often threw it over his teammates. That wouldn’t be such a good idea anymore. “Be my guest. It’s yours if you want it.” While it had offensive use, it wasn’t deadly like the version I had. He could keep it.

He had the smile of a kid with a new toy. “Does it bother you if I…” he said, pointing toward the exit.

I didn’t mind. “No, go ahead,” I replied. “And thank you.”

He rose from his chair. “No, thank you,” he said, putting emphasis on the last word. “And again for the help with the ABB.” He waved, then walked out.

“Well, that’s one problem solved.” Lisa pointed out as the door closed behind Grue. “Feel better?”

“Much,” I answered. I supposed that how people felt when they got rid of a smoking gun. “Good to know I can focus on other stuff now.”

“Anything in particular?” She asked.

“My suits come first.” I was done with Apparition’s suit, as it were. I was now working on a second tinker suit, a full body one, in case T was needed in combat. I was also working on and off on my new Slenderman outfit. “Some research, as well.” I added.

“What kind of research?” Lisa asked. “You do know that you’re talking to a specialist, here.” She was smirking.
“Capes with regeneration powers,” I explained. “As I told you, I went to see one of the requests, and she…” I paused. “She’ll probably need a regenerative power once I’m done. She’s… no longer human, at all.”

“And I suppose you want to limit yourself to villains, right?” She thought for a second. “Lung, possibly.” I scowled. That wasn’t a target I believed I could hit. “The only other one I can think about is Crawler, but you don’t want to be anywhere near the Slaughterhouse Nine.” I nodded fervently. “There aren’t any others I can think of, off the top of my head. I’ll check it out, though.”

She was silent for a moment, so I grabbed a bite. “What’s happening with the Undersiders now?”

“Not much,” Lisa answered after taking a drink. “With the ABB in hiding, our boss stopped having us hunt them. We’re flush with money, so it isn’t much of an issue, but hopefully he’ll have a few more jobs for us in the coming weeks. The rest of the team gets agitated if we don’t do anything,” she explained. “You scored a number of points with the rest of them, actually. More money always makes Regent happy, and Bitch likes fighting gangs, so you did good there.”

“I noticed, at least for Bitch,” I replied. “She wasn’t growling at me anymore, in the end.”

“She’s difficult to please, I’ll give you that,” she said. “She’s very pack-oriented. She needs people to prove themselves, which it seems you did. I’m 90% sure she wouldn’t even mind teaming up with you again.”

“Let’s hope that’s not necessary,” I said. “With the ABB out of the picture, hopefully things will be calm for a while. The city could use a break.”

The smile fell off Lisa’s face. “I don’t think that’s gonna happen, Taylor,” she replied. “It feels like the other shoe is waiting to drop.”

I rose and starting walking toward my workshop, with Lisa following. “Let’s make sure we’re ready for it, then.”

“Let’s.” She repeated, nodding.
Expansion 5.2

Chapter Notes

Special Thanks to hance1986, Logos, LordsFire & Robo Jesus. As their patron God, I grant each of them an extra Fourth-level spell of their choice.

By now, travelling from home to base in the sewers was second nature. I knew the path by heart, since I used it every morning and afternoon. The only other path I knew as well was from the base to Arcadia, and for pretty much the same reason.

I went to base every morning mainly to recreate T, who powered down every morning a little after seven. I had finally gotten to testing Clone within an empowering zone, hoping that it might allow me to create a second copy. No such luck, though it doubled T’s life expectancy. Going from a half-day to a full one made scheduling quite a bit easier.

“Morning Taylor,” T said as I walked out of the washroom.

“How is it going with the tinkering?”

“The grenade and the jammer you wanted are done. Started working on the armor of the second suit, though it won’t be as solid as we wanted,” she explained. “Getting enough Osmium or Iridium would take us months. Better work with lesser metals which will get us results earlier, and replace what we need in the future.”

That was the main issue of tinkering, resources. It wasn’t like T or I could walk in an hardware store and order a couple of kilos of rare metals to work with. Boron was one of the best elements we had access to, and even then we had to waste time refining it out of household solvents. Rarer minerals than that were almost impossible to get in large enough quantities. Trying through the official channels was basically the equivalent of outing yourself as a tinker.

“Outside of that, Lucifer is about halfway done. We could probably finish it today if we put in enough effort,” she added.

“Must you call it that?” I asked.

“Well, it needed a name and…” T was interrupted by the ringing of an alarm. “One minute warning.” She said, smiling. “See you soon.”

“See you.” I said and waited. Before long, T fell into dust on the ground.

Focusing, I reviewed her day’s work that I could now remember. Nothing special at school and what little homework she had was done. Most of what work was left on Lucifer was wiring, programing and the like: long and tedious, but not necessarily difficult.

*Perfect for my plans*, I noted mentally.
I waited until the alarm rang again to recreate T to match my schedule, then waited some more until she was dressed out of politeness. By now, I’d gotten used to the fact that T appeared nude.

“So, school, right?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yes, unless you think there’s a reason I should be the one going,” I asked. T tended to remember the things she’d done more easily than I did, for some reason.

“Nope, not really,” she replied.

“Good, then I’ll be preparing for tonight.” I went to a desk and grabbed her bag that was standing there. “Need anything else?”

“No.” She put the bag on her back. “See you at five, Taylor,” she said, and turned into shadow.

“Have a good day,” I replied as the shadow slipped into the sewers. She’d come out in an alley two streets away from school. It was the closest out of sight sewer access to the place.

I sat at the desk T had been using earlier and booted up the computer there. I wasn’t ready to give up on my regenerator idea.

Lisa had mailed me a list of the active villains with regeneration powers. It was unfortunately a short one, with no good candidates. To give a good idea, the closest villain target I felt I could take was an African warlord based out of Congo. It seemed like villain regenerators didn’t tend to last very long before either getting in a fight against something that could kill them, or getting sent to jail. A quick review of the ones in the birdcage would have put two dozens valid candidates, had they been free.

Regardless, I spent a few hours on research without much to show for it. Even crossing over to heroic capes, regenerators were limited. It seemed Endbringers had the tendency to eliminate them very reliably.

After that waste of time, I focused on what equipment I had left to fabricate for tonight’s excursion. I needed that mission to go without issue.

I might not get another opportunity for a long time.

*__*__*__*__*__*__*__*__*

Berrybrook Parahuman Isolation Center wasn’t any more inviting the second time around. I quickly slithered inside, bypassing the few spots where light could be found, going straight for my target.

Garotte.

Lisa’s comment about the current situation being only the eye of the storm had made me realize that, if I wanted to focus on Garotte’s issue, I might not have another chance for long, if ever.

I’d noted, on my first visit here, that Garotte’s aura didn’t fit with what I knew; It seemed she had two. That contradicted my own experiments on powers, where two powers didn’t mean two auras. Twice I had given Grue a combined power, and at no time did I see a second aura on him.

So I needed more data.
That was the goal of this incursion. I had with me a gas grenade full of the most powerful non-lethal incapacitating agent I could produce, a gas mask to protect myself from said grenade and an ECM device powerful enough to jam every camera in that room.

I was also in my new Slenderman costume, though it wasn’t finished. It was lacking most of the armour of the previous version, though this time I’d built the exterior suit out of synthetic spider silk. Hopefully, it would be stronger that way.

Once in Sveta’s room, however, I had to wait. She was currently occupying the corner that was out of sight of the cameras, and I needed that corner free to start. Once the jammer was in place I would be free to move, but that would be useless if I was spotted on tape before I could place it.

It was the guard who ended up moving Sveta. I could hear him making his round, and whatever intelligence was behind those tentacles while she was asleep reacted by hanging right above the door.

*It has some knowledge of tactics.* I noted.

I waited until the guard’s light had passed, and dove.

That was the right term, diving. I appeared on the ceiling, sticking the jammer there and activating it with a press, then pushed off. Garotte reacted, of course, but she didn’t have time to do anything before I turned to shadow upon hitting the ground.

And taking only the pin with me while leaving the grenade behind, of course.

Whatever brain the tentacles had wasn’t so intelligent. An appendage struck the grenade clean through, ripping it apart. This of course only released the gas faster, and it took only another minute until Sveta collapsed to the ground.

Only then did I appear again.

There was no reaction this time. Still, I advanced carefully, and pushed a tentacle aside with a foot as a test.

No reaction. I went for her pulse at what I supposed counted for her neck and found a slow but steady one. I drew a zone around her and put it to negation. Her pulse didn’t change.

Perfect. I put the zone back to normal level.

I released a sigh and got to work. I placed myself on the side with only a single tentacle, removed my left glove, and made contact.

*One, two, three… four powers?* I counted in my head.

Indeed, Sveta somehow had four powers. And not like Grue, who currently had two, but a combined pair along with two more that weren’t matched.

Okay, I start with what? I asked myself. I had previously thought that the extra aura might be something else than her powers, but it seemed pretty conclusive that it was caused by the extra powers there.
After a moment of thinking, I decided to go on regardless. I wanted to at least know which powers I was dealing with. I could always put the powers back if necessary. Let’s start with those two unattached. I said to myself.

I pulled the first, verifying that Sveta’s pulse didn’t change without that power. No change.

Focusing on the new power in my head, I was surprised to see what I could feel about it.

*Human? That... That makes no sense.* I said inside. It would actually be the last power I could associate with Garotte here.

I thought about things for a moment, then decided to simply get the data I could. I pushed back Human to get another one, only for it to switch with another of hers. The combined shard in her mind jumped to mine, and stood there.

*OK, that’s new.* I exclaimed inside. It seemed I couldn’t push back a power to someone who had one, even if they had more than one before.

I ignored the repercussions of that for an instant and focused on my new spark. A combined one, as I’d felt before. I had to split it before I could get a fix on its components, but when I did they explained quite a bit.

The names my mind was putting on them was ‘Tentacle’ and ‘Force’.

They were clearly explaining both her current state and that of her room. It was, like the first time I’d been here, filled with traces of damage.

I combined them again and reached for the tentacle I was using as point of contact, only to find that said tentacle had moved.

*What?* I screamed inside. I turned to shadow instinctively and jumped to the opposite wall as a reaction, then took a good look at the scene.

Her tentacles were folding back into her body.

Actually, when I looked from above, it seemed like she was slowly turning back to human form, somehow.

*Okay, Human explains that, sure.* I said in my head. *But why now?*

I couldn’t control my zone while in Shadow form, so I returned to the ground at my previous place then turned back to a human.

I noticed instantly that the white aura she had was gone, leaving only the faded bronze. I pushed that aside and pushed my zone to the maximum empowerment. It did, as I thought, increase the speed at which her body pulled itself together.

Getting back in contact, I realize that her two other powers had somehow combined when I pushed Human back. I thought about it while she took back human form, then decided to push it to later, when I had more time.

I was still curious about what her last power was.
I didn’t push back the combined Tentacle/Force, simply pulling her last power once I was sure she was back to being a human.

Her last power, once split was the concept of Danger. I didn’t leave it split for a long moment, simply enough to identify it. It went quicker than expected, actually. There wasn’t the pain I’d associated with reaching over my limits, either.

I wondered why for a second, before realizing I was in the power-affecting zone I’d built around Sveta.

It seemed Skidmark’s former spark affected even my original power. Allowed me to have more powers, at least while in the zone. Somewhat useful, but being stuck in place made it quite situational.

I even split both powers without any negative consequence, something which put me at eight powers. Some of them felt like they had a smaller metaphorical size than the others (Human was, what?, a fifth of the size of my main powers, while Force and Danger were only twice Human’s size. Only Tentacle matched my other sparks.), which might explain the ease I had.

One thing was sure, I wasn’t going to keep them all. I needed to find a way of mixing them that let me drop as many as possible on Sveta.

I passed the next few minutes trying various mixes. In the end, it was the biggest spark, Tentacle, that was the issue. The other three mixed properly together, but Human and Tentacle had no way of mixing, regardless of what I added to them beforehand.

Tentacle, however, did mix with Shadow properly. I didn’t keep them together, since I needed Shadow working the way I expected if I wanted out of here. I pushed the trio down to Sveta and was relieved to see it went away properly.

Then my alarm rang.

It was my ECM device. It wasn’t very long lasting, so I’d made sure it warned me two minutes before failing. I went, grabbed it, and was reaching for the two halves of the grenade only to see Sveta rise behind me. Her eyes went wide.

I reacted instinctively, grabbing the last half of the grenade while making the universal symbol for silence with the other hand.

She then looked down and realized she had hands, and I used that instant to vanish.

I was a mile away from the place two minutes later.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

I found upon waking up the next morning that Tattletale had sent me a message earlier.

   Good work!

Outside an attached link, that was all it said. I clicked it and found myself on a webpage I recognized, the Parahuman Wiki forums. It linked directly to a single post.
Thank you.
Glad to help, I said to myself, and smiled.
Expansion Interlude: Escape

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to hance1986, Leon89, LordsFire, Robo Jesus & Walker Of The Yellow Path. As deity ruling over writing charms, I grant them access to the Way of Resplendent Correction Charm.

[Dragon]

My systems warned me of a camera failure in the Berrybrook Parahuman Isolation Center, room 552.

Connected as I was to everything, I took note the event and, after quickly checking through my other priorities, tasked a part of my processing power to analyze the issue.

I knew all of the inmates at the Center, even if I had at no point talked with any of them. We were, in a way, kindred spirits, limited as they were by things out their control. Some I favored more than others.

The occupant of room 552 was one of them. Even with the irony of Sveta's name.

A quick diagnostic of the failed camera revealed nothing, but a deeper scan of the system indicated something was awry. Not only had the camera failed, but so had the wall-mounted computer and the air conditioning unit. All of the failures had the same exact timestamp, which removed casual damage or mechanical failure.

Going back to the camera footage, I analyzed the video frame by frame. Visually, there was nothing incriminating, but my analysis program detected a slight sound just as the camera stopped. Something very close to the camera, on the ceiling.

*Jamming device,* I concluded.

Still, I wasn’t to contact authorities until I had proof of an escape attempt. I kept watch, devoting part of my processing power to monitor the cameras in adjacent rooms, waiting for something to change.

Instead, the systems came back online. Camera, computer, everything.

There was only one person in the room. Female, brown hair, early to mid-teens. Naked.

No sight of Sveta.

I focused on the sounds coming from the room, hoping to detect Garotte before something unfortunate happened. Then the girl faced the camera for a second.

The symbol on her cheek quickly indicated who she was. Still, I ran her face through my own personal face-recognition programs, just to be sure. Result: 96.01769825382% match.
This young woman was Sveta.

She looked at her hands and at her body for long moments, then started dancing all over the room, touching everything.

The motions were as genuine as I could tell, and match the personality analysis I had of the girl.

I did a quick check of the birdcage and of the S-class threats being monitored, then returned to Sveta’s situation.

This was big. Huge even.

While I didn’t know as much as I wanted to about the reclusive group going under the name of Cauldron, I was still one of the people who knew the most about them. I knew they were connected to what the PRT were calling the Case 53’s, I had files on their most common enforcers and on individuals I believed were linked to them, and I had drives full of data, correlations and hypotheses.

I knew they somehow sold powers.

But I was, unfortunately, forbidden by the PRT to investigate them. That didn’t stop me from going over the data I had to model their reactions.

This was the first time a Case 53 somehow managed to return to human form. As soon as Cauldron would find out about this, Sveta would vanish and never be seen again. I knew Cauldron was linked to certain disappearances, more than one infact.

*Not if I can help it,* I swore to myself.

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[Sveta]

I don’t know how long I danced, spun and moved all over the room. In the end, I simply stopped, out of breath. I had a smile on my face and felt like it would last forever. I ignored the itch in the back of my head and looked at my fingers.

*Hands! I have hands! And feet!* I screamed in joy inside. *And…* I looked down.

I had been an ardent user of the Internet and, as such, was no stranger to images of nude women. My own body was in line with what I’d seen, though it seemed young. I could deal with that.

Thinking of the net made me realize that I hadn’t even thanked my savior for what he’d done. That seemed much too rude.

Still smiling, I went to the computer in the wall and started it since it seemed to have shut down. I went directly to the Parahumans Online forum and replied with my thanks in the Slenderman thread.

Then I noticed a PM arrive, right there.

*At this hour?* I said to myself. A quick look at the clock indicated 3:19 AM.

**Morris_Elk:** I know what happened, Sveta. You need to escape. You’re in danger.
The moment I read danger, the feeling in the back of my head jumped, and I knew what it was. I turned around, looking over the room itself. Low, pervasive danger everywhere. A reddish twinge to the air. I could feel it growing, a little more every second. It was still distant, but it was getting closer every moment.

Turning back to the screen, I went back to the Slenderman visit thread. My post was the last, and clear, as were the past ten requests.

Then one was tinted red. I didn’t have to guess, I knew. That very address, somewhere in New York, was dangerous. Deadly, I would even say.

I went back to the PM. It was clear, no real danger. A moment of thinking gave me a good idea what this user was talking about. If I didn’t escape, I could guess I would be subjected to dozens of medical tests, interrogations and the like. They would try to find out how it happened.

I remembered Slenderman asking me for silence.

I made my mind.

**GstringGirl:** I see what you mean.

*-*-*-*-*-*-*

[Dragon]

I released a metaphorical breath and processed my options. I was limited in what I could do, being forced to respect American law by the limitations my father had put on me. I couldn’t go and free her, couldn’t open the doors, couldn’t shut down the cameras.

Not directly, at least.

**Morris_Elk:** I can’t do much to help you.

**Morris_Elk:** Just this.

**Morris_Elk:** [Image Link]

**Morris_Elk:** Don’t press the second link until you're ready to leave.

**Morris_Elk:** [Webpage Link]

**Morris_Elk:** Good luck.

Because I was forced to follow the law, I couldn’t do many things. For example, I couldn’t reveal the plans of any public building that wasn’t already open to everyone. I was also forbidden to infect American computers with viruses.

That didn’t mean I couldn’t show someone an image I drew, that was somehow similar to the mentioned building plans, or that I couldn’t link someone to a webpage I knew was infected with viruses. Powerful, fast-acting ones.

Respecting the letter of the law, while ignoring the spirit. It wasn’t the first time I did so, and probably wouldn’t be the last.

Hopefully it would be enough.
I memorized the first image as well as I could. Of great interest was the laundry room, since escaping naked wasn’t the best idea, and the cafeteria since my stomach was growling for food. I suspected this was due to my transformation back to a human.

I would take starving to being a tentacled beast any day.

I looked around the room, trying to find an exit. This would be difficult, since I knew the room had been built with my former strength in mind. And I didn’t know if I still had it.

A quick look revealed nothing usable. There was some damage on the wall, all superficial.

*Come on!* I said to myself. *No time to waste!*

As I thought that, my view of the room changed. Everything was now tinted red, dangerous.

It took me a second to understand what I had done. It seemed I could refine my power to show specific dangers such as, in this case, wasting time.

With that in mind, I went and examined the entire room once more. I quickly found only a single spot that wasn’t fully red. It was the very spot with the camera, which simply shone a light pink.

I turned back to the computer and typed.

**GstringGirl:** Thank you.

Then I pressed the second link. Instantly, one, then two, then four windows opened on the screen, after which the machine itself crashed.

“Thank you.” I replied out loud.

I turned back to the corner and quickly noticed the power light had gone off on the camera.

**Time to get to work.** I told myself.

Even knowing where to start, it still took me more than an hour by my estimation before I could escape the room. Luckily, the strength of my previous form hadn’t fully fled me; I was able to rip the camera off easily. Widening the hole was an issue, but making some form of ladder out of my former bed helped.

By that time, I was able to slip in the space between floors. Next stop: Laundry room.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

[Jessica Yamada]

“I’m sorry, Doctor Yamada,” The guard said, visibly apologetic. “We have an escaped inmate. Orders are to let no one in.” He lowered his head somewhat.

It wasn’t the first time regulations interfered with my work. “Can I at least know who’s missing? It might be one of my patients,” I asked. I didn’t see anyone of them escaping, not willingly at least.
The guard looked from side to side as if to make sure nobody would notice him. “Room 552,” He finally whispered.

I had to admit I scowled at that. Sveta was one of my patients, and I had to agree quite unlikely to escape willingly. Her control over her body was limited, and she might even have been asleep while she snuck out. Her body never slept, even if she did.

“Thank you,” I said, and walked back to my car. I was on the phone a second later, trying to switch appointments around, trying to fill my work day.

I could probably kiss my next Sunday goodbye, though.

Luckily, I managed to advance next week’s appointments in Brockton Bay for later today. It was close enough to here that I wouldn’t lose most of the day driving around, either.

I was barely a mile away from the asylum when a girl stepped out in the road. Bizarre, since there wasn’t anything within kilometers of here.

Outside the asylum, at least.

She made the universal symbol of asking for a ride, and I decided to take her in. She was, what, fourteen?, and there was very little traffic here, so I didn’t feel like leaving her on the curb.

I stopped on the side, opened my window and asked “I’m going in direction of Brockton Bay. Want a ride?”

“Mrs. Yamada?” the girl asked.

The voice was familiar, but I couldn’t put a name on it. Those eyes also reminded me of something, but I couldn’t tell what.

“Right,” She said. “We had an appointment today, didn’t we?”

There was only a single girl I was supposed to meet today. “Sveta?!!”

She smiled and nodded. I suddenly realized I had never seen her smile that brightly. “Yes, Brockton Bay will be perfect.”

I went and opened the other door, and she stepped in. I was amazed; she now had a perfectly normal body. I also noticed the symbol on her cheek had vanished.

I shook my head to put my thoughts in order. “So, anything you want to talk about?” I was curious, I admitted.

She gave me a focused look like she had never before. “Can I trust you, Mrs. Yamada?” she asked.

I met her eyes directly. “You are still one of my patients, last I heard. So, unless it harms anybody, I won’t say anything.”

She looked at me for a few seconds more, as if she was seeing something I wasn’t, then turned to look out at the road. “Well, I don’t know if you’ve heard, but there’s this new cape called
Slenderman…”

Listening, I accelerated again and left the side of the road. Inside, I smiled. It was always good to see a patient turning the corner.

*-*-*-*-*-*-*

[Doctor Mother]

“Doctor, I have something for you to see,” Alexandria said as she stepped into Cauldron’s headquarters.

I turned in my chair. “Show me, then.”

The hero brought out a laptop and opened it. Seconds later, a video started showing. Barely ten seconds of footage, actually.

“And what is your reason for showing me a dancing naked girl?” I asked, glaring a little. “If this is a joke, I must inform you that my preferences do not turn in that direction.”

“This is the previous video of this person, taken around an hour earlier,” the cape in black said.

This time, I recognized the person on the screen. “Show me the second video again.”

The quality of the footage wasn’t good, but I could see the Cauldron symbol on her cheek. I looked in my memories for a second. “1616, right?”


“What happened to her?” I asked.

“Escaped as of yesterday.” The super replied. “We are lucky to even have this footage. If the system hadn’t been backing data on tape at the exact moment the virus hit, we wouldn't have anything.”

“That means enemy action.” I turned to the cape beside me. “Contessa, please bring this person to us.” I said, turning the laptop where Sveta was dancing toward my enforcer.

She nodded and was about to call out something when she stopped. She did the same thing three times more before she turned to me. “It… It doesn’t work,” she finally said. “The moment I start something, the path changes.”

“That’s worrying.” I turned to Alexandria. “Put some people on it. Find her, watch her. As soon as we have enough data to properly simulate her behavior, I’ll send Contessa and Number Man after her. High priority.”

Alexandria nodded and called for a portal. A second later, she was gone.

I went back to my plan. If the thousands of Cases 53 we had in Headquarters could be made normal again, we would have an even greater tool for our plans. People would work much better with other humans than with the inhuman monstrosities that we currently had.

We would have to run this by Accord again.
Expansion Interlude: Meetings

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Aduro, Dynamesmouse, Harry Kiri, id319 & Unlucky Bibliophile for using the Celestial Beta Acknowledgement Technique. They gain 1 kg of pure, concentrated sunshine. Comes prepackaged in cans.

[Sveta]

Mrs. Yamada and I got out of her car in the PRT parking lot. “Are you sure you’re going to be alright, Sveta?”

I nodded. I had enough of my previous strength left that I didn’t fear being randomly mugged, and my danger sense would help me find a place to stay. “I’ll manage. Compared to before, this is heaven.” Of course, I knew enough from the Parahuman Online Wiki that Brockton Bay wasn’t anywhere close to paradise, but it was better than staying at the Center.

And it was, quite probably, the home of my savior, Slenderman.

My former therapist did a sad little smile. “Here,” she said, handing me twenty dollars. “Use it. Get yourself something to eat.” She checked her watch. “I have to go. You have my email, right?” I nodded. “Send me one if there’s anything you need, or even if you simply want to talk. I’m not in Brockton Bay often, but I can probably arrange something.”

“Thanks a lot, Mrs. Yamada,” I replied.

“You’re not in the Center anymore, so you can call me Jessica.” She smiled more happily this time. “Good luck,” she said.

The both of us then walked in opposite directions.

I went deeper in the city. After a passage in a supermarket, my first priority was finding myself a good place to spend the night.

The day was full of new experiences. I could barely remember the times preceding my arrival at the asylum, so the mass of people, the buildings, the roads, everything was new. I enjoyed the fact that I could simply look around, moving freely from place to place without anything restraining me.

It was intoxicating.

Still, I followed my danger sense. I dodged the few streets I saw that were in red, walked a good distance from anyone wreathed in crimson and was careful about everything I did. I did learn a few things about my power, though. While I could refine my perception toward specific dangers, it wasn’t always helpful. My danger sense relied on my sight, so if there wasn’t anything that fit the criteria I put forth in the range of my eyes, I simply saw everything red.
It wasn’t really useful.

It was a little before sundown when I finally had a breakthrough. Using ‘Being in danger inside’ alternatively with ‘Not being alone’ as filters, I finally found myself a place to sleep. An abandoned apartment building, from what I could see. Most of the rooms inside were either damaged or occupied, but there was an empty loft of the last floor. There was even an old mattress there that I could use. I had to remove it from the bed, which my perception was saying would crumble at any time. I gathered a few scraps of cloth to use as a blanket, an old cushion as a pillow, and pushed my head down to rest.

With the day I had, I was fully asleep before sundown came.

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[Sveta]

I continued my explorations the next day, snacking on meal bars I’d bought with Mrs. Yamada’s money. They wouldn’t last long, so I needed to find myself either a source of food or one of money.

It wasn’t going well.

My power might be useful for danger, but it wasn’t for finding money. Filtering for ‘being poor’ made everything red, outside what change could be found on the ground.

It wasn’t enough to live on.

Then I passed a building called Brockton Bay Library.

I remembered from the various shows and movies I’d seen on the computer at the Center that public libraries had Internet connectivity, something that was perfect for me right now. I might not know how to find much in the city, but I’d spent most of my time at the institute on a computer surfing the net. I knew how to search on the net infinitely better than I did outside of it.

Lunch hour had just finished when I entered, so there was a few free spots. I sat down at the one farthest from everything and started searching for free food in Brockton Bay.

I spent the next hour on the machine.

I did at least find something; Brockton Bay had a soup kitchen open every weekday. I’d missed the open hours today, but tomorrow being Friday I still had a chance before the weekend. I noted everything I could about the place on a piece of scrap paper, along with directions from the library. I didn’t know my current address, but I would remedy that later.

Then I logged into the Parahuman Online Forums.

I spent most of my days before on the forum, and I had a contact that was in Brockton Bay. XxVoid_CowboyXxX might not be able to help, but I wasn’t risking anything by talking to him. He could tell me more about the place, too.

He wasn’t online.

I check on a few of the threads about Brockton Bay, then checked again.
Still not there.

But I realized Morris_Elk was, and he deserved at least a head’s up for the help he’d given me.

GstringGirl: Hello!
GstringGirl: Thanks again for yesterday.

I went on a few of my favorite threads while I was waiting for an answer. I didn’t have to wait long.

Morris_Elk: Good to hear from you.
Morris_Elk: Glad to see you’re fine.
Morris_Elk: I don’t recommend using that account, though.
Morris_Elk: Someone might track you with that.

I had to admit that I hadn’t thought about that. I’d been relying a lot of my danger sense since I escaped, but I didn’t know all its limits yet. Maybe the information I’m posting now could be used to track me a week or a month later, and that my danger sense doesn’t reach that far.

GstringGirl: You’re right.
GstringGirl: Any recommendations?

He was clear, no red, so I wasn’t afraid of asking him for help. I wouldn’t have escaped as easily from the Center if it wasn’t for him, also.

Morris_Elk: UN: Wyrmidon.
Morris_Elk: PW: oHyb#455!
Morris_Elk: One of my old accounts I barely use anymore.
Morris_Elk: No one would link it to you.

I noted the username and password, logged out and logged back in under the new name.

Wyrmidon: Thanks.

I had to agree with what Morris_Elk said; this account was old. There were only three posts in the past two years, and before that every single post was about the Leviathan attack on Newfoundland. There wasn’t much else.

Morris_Elk: Want me to wipe your old account?
Morris_Elk: I can purge it from the databases.

My eyes went wide. I filtered my perception for ‘lying’ for a second, and still no red.

Wyrmidon: You can do that?
Morris_Elk: I know a few things.
Morris_Elk: It isn’t a problem.
Wyrmidon: You sure?
Morris_Elk: Yes.
Wyrmidon: Go ahead then.
Morris_Elk: Wait a few minutes.
I did, going back to the message I’d posted yesterday. There were dozens of messages since then, mostly guesses about what my post was about. One user had it guessed correctly, but most were still unbelieving.

Good. My message was for one person, and one person only. The rest weren’t important.

**Morris_Elk:** Done.
**Morris_Elk:** I have to go back to other things now.
**Morris_Elk:** Be seeing you.
**Wyrmnidon:** You too.

I did a quick check. I didn’t try logging in with my old name, but I went to see my old profile page only to find it gone.

*He really is good.* I said inside my head. Parahuman Online was well known to be almost impossible to hack. *He must be a master hacker.* I added.

I went back to the threads. There were new posts in a few of those I followed, and I didn’t have anything better to do.

It was a good way to waste some time.

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[Lisa Wilbourn]

I was checking on some background info on E88 capes when a notice popped up on my screen.

**GstringGirl** is now online.

I had added the girl in my contact list after the last message she’d left on the Slenderman visit thread. I didn’t expect much, but there might be a few nuggets of information there. Taylor would like knowing more about what happened to her.

*Good, now let's see what I can find out...* I said to myself.

Then my power started pulling information based on what she was looking at.

**She’s in Brockton Bay?** I realized, eyes widening.

- Not in Asylum: Escaped.
- In Brockton Bay, Escaped: In a public place.
- In Brockton Bay, In a public place, inside school hours, Internet connection: Brockton Bay Library.

I didn’t waste time. I picked up my phone, jumped out of my chair and dashed toward the exit.

“Going out. Won’t be back for supper!” I yelled.

Regent didn’t look away from his game. “Bring back some beer. We’re out,” he replied.

“Do it yourself!” I yelled in answer as I went down the stairs. I was opening my phone at the same time, surfing back to the Parahuman Online Forums. It would warn me at least of when she stopped watching threads.
I was barely a few meters outside when GstringGirl profile got deleted.

That’s a first, I thought. I didn’t need my power to tell me this was related with her escape. One thing was for certain; she wasn’t the one who’d done it. I wasn’t even sure if I could, and my power made hacking a breeze normally.

She has someone talented on her side, I said to myself.

Luckily, the Library wasn’t that far away from base. Since we were within school hours, most of the computers were free. There were only two women present on the machine, and it was evident which one was GstringGirl.

Still, I waited and focused my power on her.

Dusty, dirty: Lives in abandoned building.
Lives in abandoned building, licking her lips: Limited food and drink.
Numerous typing mistakes, slow typing speed, unsure of body: Not used to body.
Looks straight at screen, pays no attention to sound: Unafraid of danger.
Unafraid of danger, Parahuman: Danger Sense.

I stopped there. Danger sense, eh… I thought. I wondered how she would react to me. One thing was sure: I wasn’t going to make any offensive moves. I didn’t want to see how her powers would react.

I took the place beside her and turned to face her. “Hello, GstringGirl.”

She hadn’t heard me coming, focused as she was on her screen. “How… How did you…”

“Know?” I smiled my fox smile. “Let’s say we have a mutual friend.” She clearly didn’t understand what I meant. “Tall, dark, in a suit?” I continued. “Gets his hands on you and everything changes?”

Her eyes went wide. “Oh! Him,” she said.

I smiled again at the masculine pronoun. Seems Taylor does a good job selling her persona, I noted mentally.

“Do you…” She started, suddenly shy. “Think I could meet him. I… I…” she stuttered.

I could tell what she wanted, even without my abilities. “I’m sure he’ll be delighted to see you again,” I replied, bringing out my phone. I sent a quick text to Taylor, inviting her to a meal. “How about supper? I looks like you could use it.” She started saying something, but I interrupted her. “My treat.”

She straightened herself and looked at me bizarrely. I withstood her eyes for a moment before she nodded. “Okay.” She finally said.

I smirked.

I wonder what face Taylor will make.
I must admit, Sveta’s forum post added a little spring to my step. Doing good felt good, and right now there was a young woman who could look forward to life because of what I did.

I didn’t, however, let that stop me from my work. While reviewing T’s memories after her time was out, I tested combining my new Tentacle spark with my other ones. This was the best moment for it, as it was the only time in the day where I had no power in use.

I’d already tested it with both Shadow and Tinker last night, and I wasn’t surprised to find it couldn’t be matched with Clone or Area either. In the end, only Shadow among those I possessed could be fused with Tentacle.

It would have to test it both independently and combined, but that had to wait. I remade T and sent her on her way, turning toward tinkering at the same time. I wasn’t going to test anything until T might be in that state, and I wasn’t looking to find out.

It was past dinner when I finally broke from my tinkering bench. By that time, I’d finished what was left of the coding on Lucifer. Only testing and adjusting were left. I went for a quick snack, then turned to my new power.

Tentacle hadn’t activated automatically, as I’d been afraid, but stayed silent in the back of my mind, and didn’t react to the various prods I gave it.

It was going to be like Area, it seemed.

Let’s start with the arms, then. I decided.

I focused on my left arm and tried poking Tentacle into activation. This time it stuck, and I was rewarded with seeing my arm split itself at the finger level into nearly a dozen long, tentacle-like limbs.

“That’s… creepy.” I noted out loud.

Luckily, deactivating that spark made the effect run in reverse, with the tentacles reforming into my arm. It hadn’t lost any mobility or flexibility, and seemed to have returned exactly to what it was.

Further experiments revealed more. I could use Tentacle on any of both arms and legs, either individually or all at once, and could control each separate tentacle as well as I could my own natural limbs. Each tentacle also had similar strength to the limb it came from.
This... This has potential. I thought.

It took a little getting used to, but it was of great help tinkering. It allowed me to hold a dozen tools at once, and to do simple tasks while I focused on something else.

Then I combined that spark with Shadow and started the tests all over.

The first thing I was happy to note is that I could still turn into shadow state with the combined spark. It seemed a little slower, though that came with one advantage: I could now feel textures.

Focusing on that sense of touch, I found I could reach out and affect objects even while in my breaker state: shadowy tentacles would reach out of the darkness and be under my bidding. This was, of course, limited by light; in full darkness I could reach out around an arm’s length, while greater light limited my range accordingly.

Best part was, this wasn’t limited to my shadow form.

As I found out when returning to normal, it gave the same properties to my real shadow. My sense of touch now somehow extended behind me and I could feel the tools I had on the table there as if they were on my skin. Reaching out like I did before had the same result as before. Turning around to have my shadow in front of me, I found a black limb reaching out of the darkness, a wrench in its hands.

Problem was, feeling as if I was touching everything my shadow did take some getting accustomed to. I kept the sparks combined for the rest of the day and went back to tinkering.

Unfortunately, I’d once again forgotten about T, and she let me know in no uncertain words how much this could have been a bad idea when she got back. It hadn’t, she’d simply gotten some bizarre looks, but it could have been much worse.

Seems I would have to limit power training to nights, in the future.

*_*-*_*_*_*-*_*-

I was surprised to receive an invitation to supper by text from Lisa the next day.

Petit Bistro @ 4. Got something 4U

It was all that it said.

I was surprised mainly because, the last few times we’d eaten together, it was here, at the base. Outside that one time with my father, it had been weeks since I’d dined out at that French restaurant.

I’ll be there.

There was still some time before four, so I used a pair of my tentacles to set my alarm for three-twenty while I went and returned to Lucifer. I’d found a bug earlier today in the control mechanism, and I wanted it fixed before I left.

*_*-*_*_*_*-*_*-

I was a little late to the meal, having underestimated how much time it would take me to run up to the
Boardwalk. Lisa was already inside, having texted me so. At our usual place, too.

I went in and walked to the very bottom of the restaurant. I did note that I couldn’t hear anything coming from the booths. The only sound I could hear was the music the restaurant used, which covered every whisper without being too loud.

Nice acoustics. I noted mentally.

Arriving in sight of the table, I noticed that Lisa wasn’t alone. She had a blond teen with her, younger and shorter than me. The two of them were discussing things amiably, that until Lisa realized I was there.

She waved my way inside the booth. “Come in! Come in!” She said. “A good friend of yours decided to pass by our city, and I knew you’d want to meet her.”

I turned to the other girl at the table. Caucasian, dirty blond hair, blue eyes. Not someone I recognized.

I went back to Lisa. “Who is she?” I asked.

Lisa gave a quick look at the other seated person, then turned to me. “I see now why you don’t recognize her.” She explained. “She has a minor changer talent that affects her appearance.”

“I suppose you must be another of those he visited.” The girl said. She then rose from her chair and extended her hand. “My name is Sveta. You are?”

I recoiled for a second. “Sveta?!” I cried out. I then turned to Lisa, who had that smirk of hers on her face.

I sighed. “A little warning might have been good, you know?” I said. Lisa’s smile only became larger.

Sveta, her hand still extended, looked at each of us in turn. “I don’t get it.”

“Want me to tell her?” Lisa asked.

I trusted Lisa. If she thought Sveta could be told, I didn’t mind. Anyway, I doubted I had to fear anything from the former asylum member. “Go ahead.” I answered. “I know you like being the one to tell everything.”

Her only answer was her smile. She turned to Sveta. “Sveta, allow me to introduce you the bane of all capes, the dreaded Slenderman.” She paused for a second. “Who, yes, happens not to be a man.”

Sveta’s face cycled through various emotions on her face so quickly I wasn’t even able to pick out a single one. She then jumped from her place and hugged me. “Thank you, thank you, thank you…” She cried out, repeating those words over and over again.

One thing is sure… I noted mentally. She’s strong. I couldn’t move at all. She wasn’t causing me any pain, but I didn’t have any leeway either. I hugged her back and waited her hug out. Lisa had a wistful smile all the while, I noticed.

“How are you here?” I asked after a minute. It took some more time before she released me and took
back her seat, but she did and started explaining. I took a chair between the two people at the table and listened.

As was usual, Lisa added her own comments and details as the story came out. “See, that’s why I called you.” She said as Sveta finished. “Girl here doesn’t have anywhere to stay and not even money for food. I thought you might be able to offer her a good place to live and a job of some kind.” She explained. “Keep her out of the streets, as it were.”

I didn’t have to be told twice, especially with the puppy dog eyes the formerly monstrous parahuman was making. *I sure didn’t save her to leave her to die on the streets.* I said inside. Anyway, money wasn’t an issue at the moment, and I was pretty sure I could find something for her to do. “Consider it done.” I replied with a smile.

I was then the recipient of another hug from Sveta, one as solid as the first. I didn’t let it last as long this time, prodding her back toward her seat.

We were in a restaurant, after all, and none of us had ordered anything yet. We could continue discussing this before a meal.

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[T]

*Finally! School’s done.* I thought to myself. Arcadia might be much better than Winslow ever was, but that didn’t mean I enjoyed it. I wasn’t a social person, so that aspect of school was wasted on me, I wasn’t into sports and what we studied wasn’t as interesting as either tinkering or the cape business.

I gathered my stuff and walked out. I was surprised however to be intercepted by someone, coming out of the class. It was the brown-haired cape that was in my math class.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?” He asked.

I couldn’t help but hear warning bells in my mind. “I’m kinda busy.” I answered. I didn’t want to be talking to someone who probably was a member of the Wards.

“I have something you dropped. Looked important.” He said. That might be dangerous. I thought. I couldn’t help but plan stuff during the most boring parts of my classes. I didn’t use any names or anything I thought could be incriminating, but someone might be able to infer something I hadn’t wanted known. “Okay.” I said, and followed him.

He brought the both of us in an empty classroom. There he withdrew a sheet of paper from his bag and handed it to me. “Here, your tinkering notes.”

“That might be dangerous.” I thought. I couldn’t help but plan stuff during the most boring parts of my classes. I didn’t use any names or anything I thought could be incriminating, but someone might be able to infer something I hadn’t wanted known. “Okay.” I said, and followed him.

He brought the both of us in an empty classroom. There he withdrew a sheet of paper from his bag and handed it to me. “Here, your tinkering notes.”

“Thank you.” I said, grabbing the sheet. That was much less bad; outside another tinker, people couldn’t decipher the scrawls a tinker made.

Then I realized what he’d actually said. My face went blank.

“So, another tinker.” The boy said with a smile. “Kid Win, glad to meet you.” He put his hand forward.

With how much I was sweating, I didn’t shake. “Me, a tinker?” I tried sound derisory. “Come on!”
“You can’t fool me.” He added. “I’ve seen how you work. The little notepad on the side, full of diagrams? The few times you start dismantling something, only to stop?” He pointed out. “Clear indicators of a tinker. I know, ‘cause I do the same.”

“What do you want?” I said, a little growl in my voice.

“Hey, hey. No worries.” He replied. “Just wanted to talk shop with someone. It isn’t everyday that I meet another tinker, especially a woman.” He pointed to the sheet in my hand. “Part of a powersuit, right? What alloy are you using for armour?”

At this point, with what he already knew, my identity was known whether I left or not. And I had to say, talking tinkering with someone was something I’d like. Talking to Taylor wasn’t fun, since we were the same person, and most of what I said about tinker science passed over even Lisa.

“A boron alloy.” I ended up answering.

“Which one?” he asked.

That was the start of a two hour discussion about metals, power sources and superconductors. It touched the Wards, but only tangentially. It only stopped when Kid Win received a text message.

“Shoot.” He said. “I’m way late.” He looked up from his phone. “I got to go, Wards calling. Tell me if you want an introduction, ok?” He rushed out. “Talk to you again!” he said as he crossed the classroom doors.

I stayed in that classroom a few minutes more, thinking. Getting an invitation to the Wards hadn’t been in my plans at all. I had a good thing going on with the Undersiders, and I didn’t want to risk that, but Kid Win had pointed out a few advantages I hadn’t thought about. Access to other tinkers’ stuff and to resources was big, especially with the number of plans I had to dump because I was missing components.

But I remembered how Sophia had been within that group, and how their leaders hadn’t done anything about it.

In the end, I went back to base without a solution. I’d have to talk to Taylor before anything was decided, anyway.
By unvoiced agreement, the three of us decided to let the rest of the discussion about Slenderman and powers wait until we were out of the restaurant. Most of the meal was actually passed teaching Sveta how to eat politely, since she’d never had hands to use cutlery with. I am happy to say she caught on quickly enough.

Entering my base, I was surprised to see T at a table and not tinkering. She usually went right to the workbench upon coming back from school. I opened the door for Lisa and Sveta, then went and joined T at the table.

“What’s up?” I asked my clone as the other two joined us.

“Kid Win noticed me tinkering today at school.” T said, grave.

“How?” Lisa asked from her seat.

“He knows the indicators, since he’s also a tinker.” T replied.

“Compulsive note-making, the flashes of insight at random moments, the tendency to disassemble stuff…” I added, explaining.

“He also asked if we wanted an invitation to the the Wards.” T continued.

“No.” I replied instantly. “Not happening.”

“Why?” Sveta asked. “They’re the good guys!”

“Not really.” I replied. “You don’t know what they did.” I took a deep breath, then went over what had soured me from the Wards. The locker, Shadow Stalker, the PRT buying off my father, everything. Both Sveta and Lisa listened attentively; I hadn’t broached everything even with the latter.

“Ouch.” Lisa said once I finished my tale. “I knew something was up when you joined us hunting the ABB, but I didn’t know it was that bad…”

“Yeah.” T said. “It was.”

“Thing is, it’s not the Wards that are the issue.” Lisa explained. “It’s mostly at the top, at the PRT. Since they aren’t capes, they tend not to understand the superhero business as much as they should. There’s also a ‘for the greater good’ mentality that’s prevalent at the top level. That’s probably how
Shadow Stalker happened; better a Ward than a villain, after all.”

“That’s… so wrong.” Sveta said. “It’s a person's actions that make him a hero or a villain, not his membership on a team of some sort.”

“How do you know all that?” I asked Lisa.

She smiled her usual grin. “In my spare time, I watch the PRT’s cameras.” She answered. “Their passwords are no protection from me, and there’s a lot you can learn by the comings and goings of people. It’s better than any sitcom, anyway.”

“Right.” I replied, then turned to my clone. “No Wards. Why would you even think it would be a good idea?”

“You know all the projects we had to scrap because we couldn’t find good tools or the right material?” I nodded. “They have access to those. All the tinkering you can do, with all the resources needed free of charge. You know how much time I spend refining materials each night, right?”

“Yes.” I answered. I had to agree it was getting to be an issue; more and more the both of us wasted time not having the right raw materials on hand.

“There are other points to consider, actually.” Lisa added.

“YOU want me to be part of the Wards?” I asked, turning toward her.

“Not really, but it’s your choice.” She replied. “First, it would help hide your Slenderman persona. You can’t be Slenderman if you were visibly at the PRT during Slenderman’s lastest attack.”

“That could work with any video, actually.” T pointed out.

“It would work best with the PRT’s own cameras, as they trust them the most.” Lisa countered. “Second is, you need backup.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You, girl, have the tendency to try tackling things alone. Outside the time where you got shot, how many places did you hit alone?” Lisa replied.

I thought for a second. “More than thirty, at least.” I didn’t have a concrete number.

“And if you couldn’t have reached me, who would you have called?” She asked.

I didn’t need to answer that; she knew the answer. There hadn’t been anybody else I could call upon. Now, there was my father, but even then I didn’t want him to see me wounded. Things were going well for now; I didn’t want to bring another issue up.

“That’s actually one of the reasons I brought Sveta: she needs help, and you need help.” The Undersider pointed out. “And I don’t think you mind helping, do you Sveta?”

She shook her head. “Of course not.” She replied firmly.

“There has to be a better way, though.” I said. “Striking out as an independent, maybe?”
“As a tinker, that’s dangerous.” Lisa explained. “Tinkers might not tend to be powerhouses in combat, but they are among the most wanted of capes, along with good Thinkers. There are dozens of groups watching and waiting, ready to nab them whenever they can. It’s the main reason why they aren’t seen outside of teams, or the Toybox.”

“Toybox?” Sveta asked.

“Basically Tinker paradise.” Lisa replied. “Built by one who's talented in extra-dimensional spaces, I forget who. You pay a percentage of what money you make, and you can live and work there. It’s the biggest gathering of Tinkers anywhere. It’s generally cut off from the world, though.”

I was silent for a moment.

“You won’t see Kid Win before Monday, right?” She continued. I nodded. “So you have time to think about it. I’ll see what I can find on my side, too.” Lisa said. “Just reflect on it, right? It’s better to have another persona ready, in case you ever need one.”

I nodded again.

The Undersider smiled. “Change of subject then: powers.” She started. “What have you learnt with Sveta here? Any new powers?” She looked from Sveta to me a few times while I stayed silent. “Come on! Don’t make me beg for it.” She said with a pout.

I had to smile at that. It was Lisa all right. “Well…” I started.

“What do you mean by new powers?” Sveta asked, interrupting me.

“What did you think I was?” T replied.

“Her twin sister, maybe?” The former Case 53 answered, pointing toward me. “I don't know…”

“Nope, clone.” Lisa grinned. “You see, Taylor here doesn’t remove powers. She steals them and can give them back. Manages them, in her words. T here...” She pointed to my doppelganger, who waved. “is a copy generated by a power she took from a villain.” She turned back to me. “So, how did you bring little Sveta here back to human shape?”

Said girl leaned forward. “I have to say I want to know too.” She added.

“She had more than one spark, and that’s what was causing her issue.” I explained.

“Spark?” Sveta asked.

“What gives people powers, from her point of view.” Lisa said. “So she had two that interfered with each other, right? What did you do, combine them properly?”

“You’re wrong on the number.” I replied. “She had four.”

“Four!” Lisa exclaimed. “That’s… enormous.” She then turned to me. “Have you felt other people with that many?”

“No, she’s the first that had more than one.” I pointed out. “Most of her sparks are different. Smaller
than normal.”

I could see gears running inside Lisa’s head. “Tell me how.”

I did one better and wrote it down for all to see. I used the smallest, Human, as a measuring stick, and wrote the others in proportion.

“How about the other sparks you know… could you add them to this list?” Lisa asked.

I did, though it was quite a bit redundant. All of them were fives on this chart. “Better?”

The Undersider grabbed the sheet, and wrote other numbers. Percentages, with a regular spark as a one hundred percent. She then circled the three sparks Sveta currently had. All of them together made a perfect 100%.

“That can’t be a coincidence. Round, even numbers like that.” She pointed one item on the list; Human. “I suppose that’s the one who ended up turning her back?”

I nodded.

Lisa continued on. “You’ve never felt Human anywhere else, right?” I shook my head. “Then someone’s doing this on purpose. Whoever they are, they noticed that what they use can make people into beasts, so they put a little of this one to try to balance stuff out.”

I had to agree it made sense. “Only when they tried on her, they didn’t know she already had a spark, and a stronger one too. And that’s what screwed up everything.” I added.

“Do you…” Sveta asked. “Know what this is?” She was pointing to her cheek.

There was nothing there. I said so.

“Your changer ability is hiding what you’re trying to show.” Lisa pointed out. “Focus on your normal shape. That might help.”

Slowly, her hair color faded back into brown, and a symbol appeared on said cheek. A ‘u’ in a stylistic font, or maybe a ‘c’ on the side.

“You see it now?” Sveta said after a moment. Both of us nodded.

“The PRT, they call us Case 53s. Nearly all of us have this tattoo somewhere on our bodies.” She explained.

“It isn’t the first time I’ve seen this symbol.” Lisa said. “I saw it once on Gregor, one of Faultline’s capes.”

“Is he… like I was?” Sveta asked.

“He’s obese, bald, covered in shell-like growth and partly transparent. So yeah, I’d put him as one of those Case 53.” The villain replied. “He works with Newter, who’s orange and lizard-like, so he might not even be the only one in that group.”

“I’ll have to meet them.” Sveta said.
There was a moment of silence before Lisa continued. “So, how did you end up fixing her?”

“When she had only the Human spark, she turned back to the form she’s in now. I tried mixing and matching her four sparks, and the best I could give her without issue was everything but Tentacle.” I turned to the former Case 53. “You don’t mind, do you?”

She shook her head vehemently. “You could have taken everything and I wouldn’t have minded. Anything but what I was.”

“So you still have Tentacle, right?” I nodded. “Show me.”

I used Tentacle on both my arms. Sveta ‘eeped’, jumping back out of her chair, and even Lisa increased the distance. “That is creepy.” The latter finally replied as she pushed herself forward.

“They’re…” Sveta's eyes went wide as she noticed something. “They aren’t dangerous, somehow.”

“They’re not like your old ones.” I said. “I have full control over them.”

Lisa was curious for a second. “Can you use them to grab powers?”

I had to say I didn’t know. I pushed a tentacle toward each of the two. Lisa took it without issue, but Sveta was more reluctant.

And I could feel their powers in my head as they touched. Three lines going to Sveta and one to Tattletale.

“Works.” I replied, folding the appendages back into my arms.

“That’ll be useful.” Lisa said with a smile. “Especially considering the mythos.”

“Not only that.” I added. “It combines effectively with Shadow to do this.” I combined the two sparks in my head, lifted my hand to put my shadow on Lisa’s forehead and generated a limb there.

Sveta reacted much less this time, but still backed a little. I waved the appendage in Lisa’s field of view.


I kept the sparks combined to get used to them. “It needs some acclimation, since it extends my sense of touch over my shadow. Doesn’t work to grab powers, though.”

“Still, a net plus.” Lisa said, then looked at her watch. “I have to go. Tell me about that meeting with the other Case 53 one day, ok?” She asked as she left her chair.

“You can come if you want.” Sveta added.

“I’d better not; Faultline and me don’t get along.” The villain then waved. “See you another day, girls. Taylor, think about it, ok? We’ll talk another day.” She was out the door the next second.

Everything wound down after that. Sveta started yawning, so I showed her the hammock T normally
used with my clone’s approval. She’d use the bean bag when she stopped tinkering.

I’d have to get her something better tomorrow.

I went home with my head full of thoughts. I needed to do something about Kid Win having found out my identity, but the Wards were right out. I needed a better solution.

Those thoughts kept me awake until late at night, and I slept badly as a result.

I really needed to fix this, and soon.
Expansion 5.5

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to hance1986, Logos, RCa, Unlucky Bibliophile, wkz, Dynamesmouse, Klaelman, LordsFire & Robo Jesus. As a reward, I give each of them an evoker. Note: Do not place next to a loaded gun.

I ended up not having much time to think about things on Saturday. The full day was taken with shopping, originally for Sveta, but eventually for everyone involved. Lisa accompanied Sveta and I simply for the pleasure of shopping. That's not to say she wasn't useful; she had an eye for colors and sizes that I lacked.

It took the whole day because the former Case 53 needed everything: clothes, furniture, toiletries, the works. And a computer, of course. I hadn't noticed before and Lisa hadn't pointed it out, but Sveta had no underwear or socks. She'd been going commando since escaping the Center. Having to explain the use of a bra and panties to someone wasn't something I expected to do this early in life.

Lisa took advantage of the trip to make recommendations for my wardrobe. She tended toward clothes that were more attention-getting than what I preferred, but I had to say she had a better hang of fashion than I did. I bought much more than expected, in the end.

At least T wouldn't be lacking clothes now.

I woke up early on Sunday intent on thinking, only to have my plans fall apart right before breakfast. I needed to be up at six-thirty even on weekends, since I had to restore T every morning after seven to keep my schedule. I was surprised to see my father at the kitchen table this early. He tended to sleep in on Saturday and Sunday.

“Morning kiddo,” he said as I entered the kitchen.

“Morning, Dad,” I replied, then went to make myself a bowl of cereal. “I usually don’t see you awake this early. Any special occasion?”

“Does it need to be?” he said, then sipped his coffee.

I gave him the evil eye. “You’re not fooling anyone, Dad.”

He stayed silent for a second, then relented. “I just wanted to talk to you a little, Taylor,” He finally answered, putting his cup down. “I only see you half an hour in the morning, and at supper each night. The weekends, not even that.”

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I replied. I hadn’t noticed it had been affecting him that much.

“Don’t be,” he said. “I understand that you have a lot going on, with school along with cape stuff. I just wanted to know what was going on.”
I looked at the clock on the wall. Nearly seven. “I can’t right now, Dad. I have to go soon.” I said, face down. “How about later today?”

“At that place of yours?” he asked, face hopeful.

I nearly said no instinctively, then thought about it. There really wasn’t any reason for me to hide where I was working from my Dad. It might even be useful, in case of an emergency, since I might not be able to give directions in that situation.

T might like to see Danny, too.

“I don’t see why not,” I answered, and he smiled. “When can I expect you?”

“Early afternoon, I suppose?” he said, then thought. “Yeah, around one. I’ll do the groceries this morning, so we’ll have all the time we need.”

I nodded, then gave him a rendezvous point. Not exactly where I was, of course, but close enough that we could easily walk to base. I didn’t want to bring too much attention to where I was operating from.

“See you later then, Dad,” I said, waving.

“Have a good morning,” he replied.

I transformed into shadow the next second, and made my way to base through the sewers, like every other morning. T’s alarm rang just as I reached the base, and I barely had time for a dozen words before she shut down. I had to query my new memories to find out how work had gone last night.

*She finally fixed the Lucifer bug, good, I thought. Did good work on the Slenderman costume too.*

I recreated her at the moment I was supposed to, then informed her of my father’s visit, just to be sure. I did the same to Sveta when she came down.

T and I couldn’t help but try cleaning up as much as we could before he arrived, and Sveta helped us. Old cartons of Chinese food and boxes of pizza were shadow-transported to the nearest dumpster, joined by empty bottles of soda and other leftovers.

Dad ended up being at the meeting point right on the hour. I gathered food from a nearby diner, then led him inside through the alleyways.

“Welcome to Casa Taylor,” I said as we entered, like I had done before. I then went to a table and dropped the food. “T, Sveta, dinner!”

“Coming!” two voices answered, one identical to mine.

No, I hadn’t told my dad about T.

He looked at her coming out of a side room, then back to me. He did this maneuver three times before he managed to get something out. “But… What… How?” He stuttered.

I directed him to a chair and ensured he sat down. “Meet T. She’s a clone of me,” I explained. “Generated through the power I took from Oni Lee.”
“The ABB lieutenant, right?” he asked. I nodded.

“Do you... control her somehow?” he said, looking at me.

“No, she doesn’t,” T replied. “I’m basically her,” she pointed to me. “Her mind and her memories. Allows the pair of us to do more work, you see.” She didn’t tell about her going to school, though. I’d made sure she wouldn’t. That wasn’t something I wanted my father to know about.

He turned to the third woman at the table. “And who might you be?” he asked.

“I’m Sveta, sir. Nice to meet you,” she said with a smile.

Danny looked at her carefully. “And how did you meet Taylor?” he asked. “You seem pretty young to be in her classes.”

“That’s not what happened at all,” Sveta replied. “You see…” she said, then went over what had happened to her. I knew a good part of it, both from her records and from what she’d already told me, but not everything. She talked about Madison, the first place she really remembered, and what had happened with her body. She went over everything while we ate, and got to my part in the story as we were finishing.

It took a moment for my father to digest all this information, but he did, and a look of pride appeared on his face. He reached on both sides of his chair and mussed both mine and T’s hair. “Good job, kiddos.” He said, looking from one to the other.

I have to admit I’ll treasure that moment for a long time.

The conversation fell into a lull after that, until my father raised his voice again. “So, what other surprises do you have for your dear old Dad?”

“A few,” I said, thinking of my tentacle power. “Want to…” I started, but was interrupted by a sound coming from my phone. I brought it out and read the text message there.

On our way. B & I. Job offer

“Lisa?” T asked.

“And Brian,” I replied. “I’ll…”

“Actually, I’d like to meet them,” My father said, glass in hand. He turned to me and T. “You don’t mind showing your Dad to your friends, do you?”

I was torn between yes and no. Lisa and Brian were good people, and I didn’t want to stress my father. He’d feel safer if he knew who I was dealing with, which was why he asked.

But the two of them were still thieves, and I didn’t know how my father would react.

In the end, choice was taken from me. I’d taken too long to think about it. The phone indicated another text message.

@ door
I wasn’t going to leave them outside. I went and invited the pair of them in, and introduced them to my father.

“Danny Hebert,” he said, extending his hand. “Pleased to meet the both of you.”

Only Brian shook, though Lisa waved. “Glad to finally meet you, sir,” she said, pulling up a chair. Brian did the same.

“Danny, please,” he answered. “Any friend of Taylor can do the same. I already get too much ‘sir’ at work.”

The next few minutes we spent in idle conversation. Brian asked my father about his work; Lisa talked to Sveta about her new acquisitions.

“Can I ask the both of you a question?” my father said to the two newest arrivals. They both nodded. “I’m pretty good at judging people, and the pair of you seem like good people. My daughter certainly thinks so,” he started. “So why are you two, as nice as you are, part of a group of villains like the Undersiders?”

“You knew?” I said, surprised.

“Taylor, I’m not an idiot,” he said with a slight smile. “You say you’re with your friends, attacking drug depots, and the next day the news tell of gang warfare between the ABB and the Undersiders?” he explained. “Credit me with a little perceptiveness, at least,” He turned back to the two villains. “So?”

Lisa said nothing, but Brian looked at Danny straight in the eyes. “You would do anything for your daughter, right?” he asked.

“Of course!”

“I have a sister,” Brian explained. “My parents are separated. She’s currently with my father.” He took a deep breath. “My father’s a hard man, Mr. Hebert. The sum total of bonding we had, him and me, was a grown adult fighting his son in a boxing ring. He doesn’t know what to do with a daughter, especially not one in her rebellious phase.”

“I work at the docks,” my father interrupted. “I know the type.”

“My mother’s no better; she’s a drug addict, with a string of boyfriends no different from her.” Brian continued. “I made it clear to my parents that, as soon as I turn eighteen, I’ll try for custody of my sister. My father won’t fight it, but my mother made it clear she will. I suppose you know what that means, Mr. Hebert.”

My father’s face made it clear he understood. “Lawyers at the very least. Maybe even more.”

“All of that costs money, more than someone my age can expect to have,” Brian said. “You might not agree with what I do, but I can’t do otherwise. Not if I want to live with myself afterwards.”

My father said nothing to that. He looked somewhat overwhelmed.

“All of us Undersiders have stories like that. Some of us have nowhere to go, some of us have no one to turn to. So we do what we can, what we’re good at.” The leader of the Undersiders
concluded.

Everyone was silent for at least a minute while they digested what had been said. After a moment, Danny rose out of his chair. “Well, I’m pretty sure you didn’t come here to meet me. I’ll leave the lot of you alone, now,” he said. “Brian, Lisa, good to have met you. Just make sure Taylor’s ok, will you?”

“Don’t worry, sir,” Brian said. “We take care of our own.”

My father gave a sad smile and waved. “See you tonight, Taylor,” he said. Then he left.

“That... That was rough,” Lisa said as soon as the door closed. “Your father's intense, Taylor.”

“I know,” I replied, nodding. Then I decided to change the subject. “So, what did you want to discuss?”
**Expansion 5.6**

Chapter Notes

Special Thanks to Chunq, Dynamesmouse, Night_stalker, Selonianth, BeaconHill, Endymion, RCa, Stratagemini & Suryn. By my powers as a Dark God, I grant each access to a Dungeon Heart. Now go, and claim the land that is rightfully yours!

We took a small break after my father left. T used the opportunity to return to her crafting, while Lisa introduced and explained who Sveta was. I used the time to clean up a little, and to center myself.

“The Undersiders have a new job offer. A big one, the biggest to date,” Grue said once I was back at the table. “I’d like to have you there as Apparition, if possible.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“You won’t like it,” Lisa added in a sing-song voice.

“We’re hitting Bay Central on Thursday, middle of the day,” he voiced, his face serious. “Could I count on you to be there?”

I almost said no instantaneously, but managed to hold back. I knew something like this would happen at some point, I just didn’t expect it to happen so soon.

The issue was, my friendship with the Undersiders was one of the high points of my life. They were friendly, helpful, and had proven that I could trust them. Now they were asking for my help.

“Not saying yes or no yet,” I prefaced. “What would that entail?”

Lisa took out a sheet of paper detailing the bank and explained her plan. She was well informed as usual and the Undersiders had the entry to the vault nailed. Brian would use his shadow to painlessly take out everyone in the hall, Lisa would get access to the vault with her power and they’d load the money on some of Bitch’s dogs.

“Are you planning on mugging the people you knocked out in the front of the bank?” I asked, pointing to the relevant place on the map.

“No,” Brian replied while shaking his head. “I don’t like hitting people for money and, in the end, it’s not worth it. There should be more than enough cash in the vault for all of us. Everyone in the building should walk away without a scratch.”

That was one less thing to worry about. “And what happens when all these people lose their savings?” I questioned.

“Nothing,” Lisa answered. “All banks in the US are insured by the government, the people won’t lose a cent. The bank’s reputation might take a hit, but that’s pretty much all.”
I nodded and looked back at the plan. “I don’t see why you need me there.” I finally said. I didn’t really want to tell them no, but taking part in a robbery wasn’t something I’d do, either.

“The problem isn’t getting in, it’s getting out,” Brian said, grave. “I’m betting that the alarm will be triggered no matter what we do. That means we’ll have a fight, trying to get out of the bank.”

“That’s the reason for this specific time,” Lisa explained. “I have it on good authority that the Protectorate will not be in Brockton Bay at the time. Hitting that specific bank, right next to Arcadia, means that we’ll have to deal with the Wards and not New Wave. In the middle of the day, they probably won’t come in force, so three or four capes, at most.”

“Us Undersiders can deal with most of them, but there’s still one that could cause us issues: Vista,” Brian said. “You know about her?”

“By name, sure, but not the details,” I replied. “I mainly focused on the villains around here in my studies.”

“Vista’s a shaker, and a powerful one. She manipulates space,” Lisa explained. “And she can do a lot with it. Taking her out of the fight is a priority, since she might be able to shrink the doors and windows of the bank, leave us stuck inside until backup arrives. Even if we’re out of the bank, she might makes distances four, five times as long, keep us from escaping.”

“I don’t see how I can help,” I pointed out. “Midday is pretty much the worst time for me in shadow state. I won’t be able to do much.”

“That’s my job,” Brian replied. “I can easily give you a lane to travel in, like I did against the ABB. Enough to get close to her. One hit with your taser, and she goes down.”

I had to admit the point. “How about the other people there? And the other effects of your shadowy mist?”

“Most of the others we can take care of easily enough, one on one,” Brian explained. “And I can shut off the draining effect of my shadow on specific people.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said, somewhat surprised.

“I only found that recently,” Brian replied, smiling. “I’ve been training to get used to how you changed my power, the past few days.”

“It isn’t so surprising,” Lisa added. “I doubt that Victor would have been so respected by the E88 if he affected his allies. You might have been able to do the same, Taylor.”

I hadn’t trained much in the usage of Thief, true.

“There’s even an advantage for you there,” she continued. “With T in class, you have a solid alibi along with a good cover for Apparition. With the both of you active at the same time, no one will be able to link the pair of you together.” Another point for her. “And, should the worst happen, I’m pretty sure you can manage to escape somewhat easily.”

The table was silent for a minute. “So, can we count on you?” Brian asked.

“You’ll still be going forward even if I don’t come, right?” He and Lisa nodded.
So in the end, my presence wouldn’t change anything; the robbery would happen, regardless of my choice. What could I do about it?

Going to the Protectorate wasn’t even a choice; I wasn’t going to have my friends put in prison. And I didn’t think I could convince them of not going with their plan. So the only two choices whether to be present or not.

If I wasn’t there, I wouldn’t be able to limit combat or casualties. Sure, I’d keep my hands clean, but was that worth the possibility of this robbery going horribly wrong without my presence?

I didn’t want to read about wounds, deaths and prison terms in the next day's news. And even if everything went as planned without me there, I didn’t want my refusal to join harming the trust we’d built with each other.

“I’ll be there.” I finally said. I just hoped I wasn’t damning myself. Lisa's eyes went wide.

Brian smiled a nice, boyish grin. “Is that an official agreement to a position in the Undersiders, or a one time thing?” he asked.

I quickly got his point. Currently, Apparition was only a rumour of a new member to the Undersiders. Nothing more, nothing less. After the bank run, though, everyone would know. My cape identity would be officially noted and attached to the Undersiders, whatever I did. I could still say that I’d been a mercenary, that this had only been a job, but I’d be a villain nonetheless.

If I was going to be a villain anyway, I’d rather be one of the Undersiders than anything else.

*In for a penny, in for a pound,* I thought. “You can consider it as such,” I answered Brian.

He whooped, while Lisa got out of her chair to give me a hug. Said hug and the cheering felt good, actually.

“Is there a place for me in your group?” Sveta asked from her place at the table. I’d forgotten she was still there, intent on Brian and Lisa.

“T’m sorry… Sveta, right?” he asked. She nodded. “I don’t know much about you. Lisa's explanation was very limited earlier. You have powers, correct?”

“She’s a changer.” Lisa said. “Changes her physical traits in limited ways. She's got some form of danger sense along with that, too.”

“You're missing a part.” she countered. “I have a danger sense along with augmented strength. The changer thing isn’t something I control, actually.”

My eyes went wide. I’d thought that she’d slipped out under another appearance, and by looking at Lisa I could see that she had thought the same. Sveta hadn’t specified how she’d escaped the center when she told her story earlier.

“Nice…” he replied with a smirk. “Very nice. And you want to join our group?”

“Lisa’s fun, you seem like a good person, and I owe Taylor everything. That’s more than half your group I can get along with,” she answered.
“You don’t need to become a villain because of me, Sveta,” I replied. I didn’t save her for her to become a villain.

“Taylor,” Lisa started. “She’s already technically a villain,” She pointed out. “Her crimes when she wasn’t human are still in her file, and escaping the asylum isn’t in any way legal. And regardless of all that, she has no papers, no proof of education, nothing. She wouldn’t be able to find a job unless it was under the table. And you know what kind of work a woman can expect there.” As always, Lisa had a good point.

Grue had said earlier that the Undersiders had nowhere or no one to go to. I hadn’t realized this also applied to Sveta. I could lodge and pay for her, but she might not want to depend on me like that.

“Where you go, I follow,” Sveta said, and her face made it clear this discussion was closed. She then turned to Brian. “So, is there a place for me in the group?” she asked.

He turned to me. “Can you get her a costume before Thursday, Taylor?” I nodded.

He extended his hand to Sveta. “Welcome to the Undersiders. Glad to have you,” he replied.

The meeting wound down after that. Brian and Lisa left around fifteen minutes later, ostensibly to inform the rest of the team about the new members. Lisa did, however, leave me a folder of documents to review. She said that this was the best she could find in regards with building a tinker persona for me.

Sveta had gone back her computer, so I withdrew the top sheet of the document.

*Form 121J: Rogue Cape PRT Affiliation Request*
“I have a question,” I said to Lisa on Monday at my place, when we were going over both the plan and PRT rogue request form while Sveta was busy with T. “Why a bank? I mean, there’s quite a few places we could hit that would net us more cash, at least.” I didn’t have to say more than that, the meaning was clear. The Undersiders and I combined had made more than two hundred thousand dollars just looting the cash off the ABB drug depots.

“There’s a lot of reasons…” Lisa explained. “First, this? It’s what the boss wants. The bank is actually not his first option. He wanted us to hit the PRT building first. I said no. Even with you and Sveta, that would be a little too dangerous for my tastes. Then came suggestions of various police stations and the like, all during the day. I was actually the one who suggested the bank.”

I had to agree that, compared to hitting the PRT building, the bank was much less dangerous. “Why offer that?”

“There’s two advantages for the Undersiders at the bank,” she answered. “First, money. Especially with what the boss offers, we make at minimum three thousand a head, and that's with six people. And we stand to make a lot more.”

“Second is reputation,” she continued. “Hitting a bank is a big thing, it’s front page news. Right now, the Undersiders aren’t much. Just a small gang trying for a piece of the Bay. The bank shows that we’re ready for the big leagues. It’s a point of pride, too.”

I could see that. A well-reasoned argument, as usual. Then a question came to mind.

“Why do you do this?” I asked. “I mean, with your abilities, there has to be a safer way of making money… Casinos, stocks, business analysis… I mean, your power has wide applications. There has to be a less risky and more legal way for you to live your life?”

Her usual smile fell of her face, and she was silent for a minute. Then she looked all around as if to confirm we were all alone, and leaned close.

She didn’t have to stress. Both T and Sveta were in the workshop, going over the latter’s costume, and had been that way since my clone had returned from school.

“There’s some issues with that,” she explained. “First, I’m not yet an adult, not for another few years. I can’t work legally yet. Second, while my power’s all good, it isn’t worth much on the streets. I’m no stronger than the normal girl my age, and sometimes all the brains in the world can’t fix a situation. And all that's without mentioning the migraines I get when I overuse it.”
“Lastly, I wasn’t really given a choice,” she finished.

I was surprised when I connected the dots. “You mean, being part of the Undersiders?” I asked her. Lisa had always seemed at home with the rest of the group, so I found that bizarre. It didn’t fit.

“I’m technically the first of the Undersiders,” she explained, her face showing disgust. “The boss, he… bought was the term he used… the fucker bought me while he had people pointing guns at my chest.”

Surprised was too little a term for how I felt. “That’s… But… Why?” I finally asked. “Why are you working for him?”

Lisa’s reply was flat. “Because of his power,” she said.

Anger bubbled instantly in me. Lisa was the one I was closest to in the group, and I owed her a lot. She’d guided me, educated me, made me successful as a cape. No way was anyone going to manipulate her, control her.

*Not happening.*

“Tell me who he is.” I said, voice cool. I could feel my hands crisping into fists. “Tell me. No one gets away with that!”

“No, no, no…” she replied, putting her hands on my shoulders. “Don’t. Especially don’t. His power… It’s too dangerous for you to go.”

I inclined my head. “Explain.”

“I don’t know exactly what his power is, you see,” she said, voice grave. “I just know the impact it has.” She paused. “He doesn’t fail, ever.”

“Come again?” I said. *That can’t be,* I thought. *He’d rule everything already if that was the case.*

“I don’t know if it’s prediction, destiny, reality alteration, time travel or alternate universes,” She continued. “I just know that I’ve never seen or even heard of him failing. That’s why I don’t want you to go. He might actually succeed in killing you, or…”

She didn’t continue, and didn’t need to. Worse, he might find a way to break me or control me. I could see now why she’d said before that she’d prefer me as an enemy than as his…

With me on his side, he might become unstoppable.

“That’s why I take the jobs he gives; I’m trying to figure how it works, his power, what the limitations are,” she kept on her explanation. “Slowly, I’m building a better picture of how it works. I know this time, the reason he wants us to do this job, is because he needs the Wards occupied for another of his schemes. What scheme, I have no clue.”

“Tell me who he is,” I said after a moment’s thinking.

“You’re not…” Lisa started.
“No,” I interrupted her. “I’m not going to go after him.” I took a deep breath. “I understand your reticence. I just want to keep an eye on whoever he is, find out what I can on my side.” I had a few tools in my belt. If I knew who he was, I might even be able to get a read on his power, if I could get my father to help.

Lisa was silent some more, then nodded. She withdrew her phone, worked on it for a moment, then looked to me. My own cell vibrated, and I opened it.

She’d sent me an email with a link.

“Look at it later, okay?” she said. “I never told you anything, right?”

“Right.” I now saw why she did it. It was nearly paranoid, true, but some of the possibilities for the boss’ power were frankly frightening.

“Changing the subject,” she said, stopping to take a breath. “Can I ask why you said yes to Brian’s offer?”

“Sure, why?” I asked.

“I had you pegged as saying no, even during the conversation. I said the very same to Brian, even before we arrived at your place. He came anyway.” She looked at me straight in the eyes. “So, what changed your mind?”

I took a deep breath. I didn’t feel like talking about this, but she deserved an answer. “Lisa, you’re my friend, right?” I asked her.

“Of course!” she said, looking at me like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“What could I say? I wasn’t going to be able to stop you, not after the speech Brian made, and I certainly wasn’t going to rat on you, so my two options were either letting you go alone or going with you.” I explained.

"I'm not happy with it. I'm not happy with it at all. Robbing a bank in broad daylight isn’t the kind of thing I want to be known for. I can understand now why you would want to strike there instead of the alternatives, why Brian would go with this, but while I'm willing to tag along, it's very close to the line I don't want to cross."

Lisa nodded solemnly at that statement.

“You’re not the only one who doesn’t want to read about her friends being hurt in a newspaper, you know,” I continued. “And if I do this, I can influence the situation, make sure all of us at least try to do it right. No hurting civilians, no unnecessary fighting. In, out, as best we can."


“Best of all,” I said with a mischievous smirk. “You’ll owe me one, which I intend to collect on right now. You’re better at talking than I am, so you’ll be the one who explains all of this to my father.” I said. “That way I don’t have to.”

Lisa laughed a little at that. “Ha, if I was gonna have to explain it all to your father, why didn’t you bring that up earlier?”
“I…” I started, then stopped. Why hadn’t I?

I hadn’t thought of that.

*Why hadn’t I thought of that?* I said inside my head.

“I…” I said. “It just hadn’t crossed my mind.”

Lisa’s eyes turned serious. “You hadn’t thought of him, when he was there less than an hour ago?”

“No,” I said. “I… I can’t understand why.” I finally said.

“Go over what you thought, yesterday, step by step. From the moment Brian asked if we could count on you.” Her eyes didn’t leave mine. “Let’s see if I can’t pick up something.”

I closed my eyes to focus on that conversation. “First, I asked if my not going would change anything.” Lisa nodded. “Then I went over the things I said earlier,” I added. “I also thought about limiting casualties and danger, and about what would happen even if everything went well, how it could harm your trust.”

“Then I said yes.” I finished.

“There wasn’t anything else?” my fellow Undersider asked.

“Nothing I can think of,” I replied. A minute more didn’t bring any new memories up. “Nothing important, at the very least. I was mainly focused on what could happen to you guys, and to innocent bystanders.”

“Nothing important,” Lisa said, clearly thinking out loud. “And your father is important to you, clearly.”

“Of course!” I replied. Now that I realized, I was imagining all kinds of horrible scenarios. How would he react?

“So you should have thought of him, but you didn’t,” she continued. “Importance of thoughts, abnormal behavior, memory lapse…” she pointed out to herself.

“You’re being manipulated.” Lisa said as she finished. She then realized what she said. “Fuck!” she exclaimed. “It’s him, It has to be.” She didn’t have to say who he was, it was clear from context. “Fuck!”

“Everything fine?” Sveta asked, coming to the table. There was some anxiety in her voice. “I heard someone swearing.”

I turned to her. “You’re done?”

“For the moment,” She said. “I’ll have to go back in an hour or so, but right now T’s back to tinkering, and I can’t follow.” She turned to the other person seated. “You okay, Lisa?”

“No,” she said. “Taylor’s being manipulated.”
Sveta’s eyes went wide. She turned to me and looked at me with piercing eyes. “Not right now, no.”

“How do you know?” Both Lisa and I asked.

“Manipulation is naturally dangerous.” Sveta pointed out. “I can tell, with my power.”

“More than the typical danger sense, then,” Lisa then continued on her earlier comment. “Yesterday,” she explained. “When Brian came with the offer.”

Sveta kept her glare up for a moment more. “Yes.” She finally said. She then turned to Lisa and did the same treatment on her. “It could be you,” the asylum escapee said. “Did you?”

“No.” Lisa said. “I actually thought she would refuse. That’s why I asked and how we found out, actually.”

“And you’re not lying, good.” Sveta replied, then looked at the both of us in turn. “There’s… something in your brains that’s red,” Sveta said after another minute of looking. She moved and placed a finger from each hand on the side of my head. “What’s right there, in the middle?”

I looked at Sveta. “I don’t know, actually.” Biology isn’t my strong point.

“The Corona… something. What gives us our powers, somehow.” She looked to the sky. “Damn! He’s using our very powers to manipulate us.”

I nearly said I could remove her powers, but I realized I probably didn’t remove that part of the brain, just shut it down. That might not mean the manipulations would end.

And I couldn’t remove my own powers anyhow.

“How about me?” Lisa asked, turning to Sveta. “Was I manipulated in the past few days?”

It didn’t take long for Sveta to nod.

“Fuck.” Lisa swore. “It has to be him. It couldn’t be anybody else.”

“Shouldn’t we can’t cancel this job, with that?” I asked.

“Especially not,” she said. “That would just show him that we know what he’s doing. Worse, finding out might be even more manipulation, just to make us stress more. Or a test of some kind. Everything could be.”

“We can’t start second guessing everything,” I said. “We’ll go insane before long if we do that. Trust me, I know the feeling.”

“No,” She replied and looked Sveta in the eyes. “Sveta, can I trust you to check us for manipulation, a few times every day? Maybe we can find what he’s trying to do with enough data.”

“You can count on me,” The escapee said.

“So we still hit the bank on Thursday, right?” I asked.

“No choice, we can’t let him know what we found out.” Lisa sighed. “So yes.”
I nodded. “Then we go as prepared as we can. The best is we get clean away, no fighting, nobody getting hurt.”

“We need to get the Wards’ attention, though,” She pointed out.

“That doesn’t mean anything about fighting, just that they get there,” I replied. “You still have yesterday’s maps?”

She brought out the very sheet of paper she’d used the previous day. I went over them quickly, finding what I’d hoped.

I smiled. “I have a plan.”

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

I didn’t look at the email Lisa had sent me before she left, just to make sure. I even waited for an hour after she was gone.

When clicked, the link lead me to a page of the Parahuman Online Forums, to a single word reply, dated a few months in the past.

*Coil.*
“So, let me get this straight,” my father said from his place at the table inside my base. It was Tuesday, two days before the scheduled Undersider mission. “You, along with your friends, are going to rob a bank later this week.” I nodded. “Because another villain will use that as a distraction to do some other crime, and you want to watch him in the act.” I nodded again. “Because you need to figure out what his power is and how it works,” he continued. “And all of that because he’s been threatening members of your group, correct?”

“That’s pretty much it, yeah.” Beside me, Lisa nodded.

He lowered his face in the palm of his hand. “Never go into politics, Taylor. Never. You’ll be eaten alive,” he replied. “This is worse than your explanation that time you burned one of my shirts with the iron. And I didn’t even believe that possible.”

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t true,” Lisa said.

“ Couldn’t you just…” He looked for his words for a moment. “Use your power on him?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Only thing is I would need to get close enough to touch him.”

“And that’s the problem,” Lisa further explained. “He doesn’t tend to show his face, and his power seems to allow him to evade situations like that, somehow. That’s why we need more information.”

Danny sighed. “Yeah, but, attacking a bank?”

“It is the least dangerous target we could find that filled the other criteria, Mr. Hebert,” Lisa said.

“The original plan was hitting the PRT building. This is much safer.”

His eyes went wide. “I can see that,” he said. “Does… Does Taylor really need to be there? And Sveta, too?”

I took a deep breath. “I prefer being there in case something happens. I have a plan, one in which there should be no combat and no danger, but I prefer to be there in case something goes wrong. I’m the one in the group with the most varied powers, so I’m the one who can fix most situations.”

“And if Taylor’s going, I’m going,” Sveta added from her spot at the table. “I want to help, and my danger sense will help make sure everything goes according to plan.”

“Danger sense?” he asked.
“I can tell if something or someone is dangerous simply by looking,” Sveta answered. “If there's a trap or someone under a disguise planning something, I'll know.”

“I... I see you're pretty set on doing this,” he finally said, and I could see the sadness in his frame. “Do you need... muscle? I know a few guys that can be trusted and could use some more work, and one of my ex-employees is a flunky for Uber and Leet, so...”

“No need, Mr. Hebert,” Lisa interrupted. “We have this under control.”

There was a tense silence for a few moments.

“Now for the other reason I wanted you here,” I said, changing the subject. “Sveta’s new to her powers, and I wanted you to use your own ability on me, so I could find out the specifics and help her with them.”

He nodded. “Sure.” He then extended his hand toward me.

“That’s Gift he’s using, right?” Lisa asked as I took his hand. “What does it do, give Thinker abilities?”

“No, it either removes restrictions or adds secondary abilities, but only to capes. On me it expands on my ability to see parahumans, giving me details on their powers.” I said as I turned to the former asylum inmate. “Basically, all your powers are connected to your danger sense, Sveta,” I explained. “You have a force multiplication ability based off the level of danger, an uncontrolled appearance transformation that tries to protect you from danger, and automatic reflexes against direct attacks. You can also specify what your danger sense reacts to, filtering and refining for specific dangers.”

“That’s more than I knew,” Sveta said. “Thank you, Taylor, Danny.”

“My pleasure.” Danny said, smiling a little. I simply grinned and gave Sveta a thumbs-up.

Lisa had inclined her head as she did when thinking about something. “Removes restrictions, adds abilities...” Her eyes went wide. “You can cause second triggers!” she exclaimed. “They are temporary, right?”

I just nodded. “Affected by both time and distance,” I added.

“Being broken is a family thing, I see,” Lisa said.

“What do you mean?” my father asked. “That’s not a very powerful power.”

“Sure, it’s not to the level of your daughter,” Lisa answered. “But it’s still very powerful. Capes that boost other capes are rare, with maybe a dozen in the entire world. And that, without any side effects...” Lisa looked at me for confirmation, and I nodded. “is even rarer. And you have two in the same family.”

“Two?” he asked.

“One of my powers allows me to create a zone where powers are stronger or weaker,” I explained. “Not like you, though. Mine is more quantity over quality.”
“What about second triggers, what are those?” Danny asked. Both Sveta and I leaned forward also, interested in the answer.

“The trigger event is the moment where you get your powers, the moment where you’re pushed beyond your limits by events and something answers,” Lisa said. “The second trigger is said to be the same, only for people who already have powers. It does basically as you do, Mr. Hebert, adding secondary abilities or removing limits. It’s also so rare that it isn’t much more than a rumor. Narwhal, the leader of the Guild, is pretty much the only well known example.”

My father looked down at his hand. “That’s what makes this power of mine valuable, right?”

“Indeed,” Lisa answered. “There are capes that have been trying for years to achieve such a breakthrough, and you can just give it at will.” All of us were silent for a moment. “Now, can I ask you something, Mr. Hebert?”

“Of course,” he replied. “And Danny, please.”

“Can you use your power on me, if you don’t mind?” she asked. “I have to admit being curious about the results.”

He extended his hand. “Go ahead.”

She put her hand on his, then stretched her eyes wide to look around. “So much…” she said, a smile on her face.

“So, what does it do?” I asked. My power was still enhanced, but I couldn’t see the results with it. I could only get her usual power, increased perception of details along with improved inference.

“More details. Especially for reading body language,” she replied. “I’m actually getting a lot of details about your relationships just by looking at you all and how you stand.” She inclined her head. “Less headaches too, I think.”

My father extended his other hand toward Sveta. “How about you? Do you want to try?” he asked.

Sveta did as Lisa had done and put her hand in his.

“So?” Lisa said after a moment.

“Like you, more details,” she replied after looking around. “I can somehow tell what the dangers are, now…” She pointed toward an old, broken lamp in the ceiling. “Be careful about that one, it’s going to fall soon.”

“Good to know,” I said, making a note in my mind to take it down as soon as possible. There was then silence for a minute. “So, everything is going to be okay, Dad?” I finally asked.

He sighed. “I won’t say I’m happy about it, since I’d be lying,” he started. “But there isn’t much I can do about it that wouldn’t hurt you more. Just be sure to remember to keep things in perspective. Don’t do anything you can’t get out of. You too, Sveta.” He smiled a sad little smile. “Remember your mother’s story, ok?”

That was like a punch in the gut. “Yes, Dad.” I nodded feebly. I’d not made the link before now.
My father ended up leaving not long after, and my power went back to normal less than two minutes after he left. I supposed it was the same for the others.

“What did he mean by your mother’s story?” Sveta asked.

I didn’t feel like talking much about that. “Do you know Lustrum?” I asked.

Sveta indicated no with her head, and Lisa explained. “A former villain. A female manipulator with power over women. Built a women’s liberation group, and slowly turned it into an hyper-sexist misandric hate group. She then pushed them to attack and humiliate men everywhere. She didn’t last long after that, and ended up in the Birdcage.” She then turned to me and nodded, indicating she’d gotten the message my father wanted to pass.

I took a deep breath. “Let’s just say my mother made some mistakes about who she was hanging with, when she was around my age,” I explained. “It’s another way of saying not to get too deep.”

“No worries,” Lisa said, flashing her usual smile. “I have no desire to make you a career criminal. I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t end well for any of us here.” She was silent for a moment. “Did you find out what you wanted, scouting the bank?”

“Yes.” I’d done a visit to the bank with a few scanning tools in my pocket, just to verify some aspects of my plan. Since Bay Central was my own bank, and had been for the past five years, I doubted it would attract any specific attention. “The plan is doable. Are you sure of the information on your side?”

“Certain,” she replied.

“And how is it going with your costume, Sveta?” I said, turning to her.

“Last fittings should be sometime tomorrow. The suit itself and the helm are done, just waiting on the rest. The equipment you wanted is done, too,” she replied.

I smiled. “Perfect. Should we have the meeting with everyone here tomorrow, or is there a place the rest of you usually meet?”

“We’ll have the meeting at our place, if you don’t mind,” Lisa replied.

“Fine by me. You?” I looked at Sveta. She nodded.

Lisa grinned. “We’ve all set then. On Thursday, we’re robbing a bank.”
Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to Blackmane, hance1986, landcollector, Robo Jesus, wkz, Logos, Lunaryon & Stratagemini. As a reward, I offer each of them a copy of Pandora's Box. Note: May or may not contain a backstabbing demon named Yomi.

[T, Thursday April 14th 2011]

For once, I didn’t mind being at school. I understood why I needed to be here normally, if only as an alibi. But after my experiences, I couldn’t see school as anything positive.

The one good thing as of yet were the rare times Kid Win and I managed to find some time to discuss tinkering. It only happened twice since I started school, but it was something I looked forward to.

Today, however, I was on a mission.

Taylor might be the one hitting the bank, but I had a role.

I was a lookout.

Specifically, I was a lookout for Vista, whoever she was. As the only girl remaining in the Wards, she shouldn’t be so difficult to spot.

I did a cursory scan before going to school, but found no one save a single cape I didn’t know. A boy, so probably another one of the Wards.

Then I went to class. I didn’t have Kid Win with me in the courses I had today, or the other cape. As such, time went painfully slowly as I listened to the teachers. I nearly counted the seconds until the lunch bell.

I was the first out of the classroom. I waited near the lockers, trying to pick out capes.

*Is it just me, or are there less people around than usual?* I said to myself. The halls were oddly absent of shining people.

It sure seemed that way. Once classes were over, I turned and went to the cafeteria. Perhaps I had simply missed them, maybe they skipped the lockers today.

They hadn’t. There were barely three parahumans in the lunch area. Out of those, only one was a girl.

Young and thin. The age was right for Vista, at least, as was the size, though the hair was off.

*Her hair in costume is probably a wig, I realized.*
I sat at a table to her left, in such a way that my shadow reached out to her seat. It was too bright here for me to be able to manipulate anything, but my new tactile sense was unaffected. Only then did I take out my phone and text Taylor, the school’s signal jamming being offline during lunch hour.

Many C missing. Eyes on girl C, looks like V. GL

There were still about ten minutes before the scheduled time for the robbery, so I went and took out my lunch. I was close enough that I’d realize if or when she was called.

I was halfway through my food when a man came next to the girl behind me. I was a little surprised. Based on Kid Win last week, I’d have thought a phone call or a text message.

The man was standing in my shadow, so I felt him reach inside his coat and withdraw a cellphone. And there was something else there.

Was that? I wondered in my head. I wasn’t sure, so I decided to pay more attention to my senses.

The girl spoke on the phone for only a minute or so, before handing the phone back and packing her stuff. I paid more attention to the man though, and this time felt what I’d thought for sure was inside his coat.

A gun, I thought. He has a gun inside his coat. I’d handled enough guns after all the arms depots to be sure.

I turned a little, just enough to have him in my peripheral vision. He didn’t look like a PRT member either. More like a teacher of some sort.

I have a bad feeling about this.

I gathered my own stuff and ran out the door, passing the pair, and ducked in a bathroom on their path. There, I didn’t wait for a second, shutting off the lights and falling into shadow. I then swept outside as fast as I could, hiding under a water fountain.

Then I dashed into the girl’s shadow as she passed.

I wasn’t going to make the same mistake I’d done with Grue, though. As soon as she was under enough darkness, I switched positions, crawling onto her back. It wasn’t the best place for seeing things, but it was enough to hide properly.

My ride was quickly guided to a car and, once the man who’d handed her the phone spoke a few words, climbed into the back seat with only minimal hesitation. He called her ‘Miss Alcott’, so I at least had a family name. He then sat beside her and the driver merged into traffic.

Between the sky being overcast and the lack of light in the vehicle, I could see much better once I stuck out of Miss Alcott’s clothes. She was the only kid in the car, which seemed bizarre if she was one of the Wards. I’d have expected at least one or two other teens would be present.

The three other people in the automobile were men. Not wanting to be taken by surprise, I waited until we went through an underpass to do a quick passage inside their coats.

All of them were armed. The one in front on the passenger side even had a pair of uzis inside a
heavy coat, something which I was sure wasn’t normal equipment for PRT members. A quick look at what I could see of the streets revealed our ride was going nowhere near the Protectorate base or Bay Central Bank.

*I’m liking this less and less.*

As soon as there was enough shadow to move freely, I shifted back onto Miss Alcott. Whatever was happening, she was the target; I’d likely find out more by sticking with her.

The car finally stopped inside an underground parking area, where the girl starting saying something. She didn’t get far, as I heard the man beside her reach out and cover her mouth with something. She struggled for a few moments, then went limp.

I nearly went out right there to subdue these people for kidnapping a young girl, but I stopped when one reached for an handheld transceiver. “Target acquired,” he said.

“Acknowledged. Return to base,” the voice on the device answered.

That little conversation meant there was more to this, and as such I decided to stay hidden and follow the men.

Two of the three switched cars, but not before putting the girl on a tarp on the back seat. The last went back to the original vehicle and drove off, and I suspected he was going to get rid of the car.

I was still inside Miss Alcott’s clothes, so I didn’t pick up much. The two men were silent for the whole ride. I did sneak out of her clothes to get a better look, but it was useless as by then the car was underground.

The pair of them carried both the teenager and I inside.

“Perfect. This is Dinah Alcott all right.” A male voice said once we stopped. “Follow me.”

We ended up in a room that looked like an infirmary. This was perfect as it left me enough shadow to slide under a bed and watch the proceedings from there.

One would be surprised at how much someone could tell by looking at their shoes. Two pairs of military boots, straight laced, which I associated with the two men who’d kidnapped Dinah. The polished Doc Martins with the ends of a lab coat were probably from a doctor or something similar.

And the black skintight suit ending in solid boots, along with a white snake motif, could be only one person. I’d made sure to study that picture extensively once Tattletale had pointed him out to me.

*Coil*, I snarled inside.

*-*-_*-_*-_*-_*-_*-*

[Coil]

I was smiling under my suit. Everything had gone according to plan. The Undersiders had done a perfect job playing decoy. Only thing left was making sure they didn’t get caught on the way out. Another ten or twenty minutes, and I’d know for sure.

“Wake her,” I said to Mr. Pitter.
The nurse brought out smelling salts and waved them under Dinah’s nose. She woke up nearly-
instantly, eyes darting everywhere as if looking for an exit.

“Good afternoon, Miss Alcott,” I said, and she turned straight to me. “I’m sorry about the rough
treatment you suffered at the hands of my men, but unfortunately I couldn’t reach out to help you in
public.” I did a little bow. “I read the posts about your issues, and wanted to help you with them.”

“Are you… Slenderman?” she asked. I shook my head negatively.

“No, unfortunately. But I have other means to assist.” Thank god whomever Slenderman was, he
hadn’t reached out to this girl. Losing someone as potentially useful as her would have been an
enormous setback.

“Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but your power forces you to answer questions, correct?” She
nodded. “So, if I were to ask: how likely am I to die in the next day or so?”

“Two point three seven seven eight four six zero five…” she started rattling out numbers.

“Good, good, that’s enough. Chances the Undersiders succeed in their mission?” I asked.

“I don’t know… Who are they?” she answered.

Some form of limitation there, I noted. I questioned her a little more, until she started complaining of
headaches. “It hurts,” she finally said.

“Mr. Pitter, a light dose please.” I turned to Dinah. “This medicine should help you with your
headaches. Take it and rest a little,” I replied.

I left of the infirmary with the two soldiers following. “Guard this door. Make sure no one gets in or
out except Mr. Pitter.” The both of them nodded.

I then returned to my office, intent on finding out how the robbery had gone with the Undersiders.
Once that was done I could keep this reality and discard the one I’d kept as backup. I took out my
phone as soon as I was in the room with the door closed behind me and called my contact in the
Undersiders.

The phone had only rung twice when the light turned off behind me, plunging the room into near-
total darkness. Only the screensaver on my monitor shone some light in the room, barely enough to
see anything beyond a foot from the machine. Being a meter away, I was standing in full dark.

I opened my mouth to say something, only to find my eyes covered and long, thin limbs shoving
themselves down my throat. I tried to reach for my weapon, if only to make some form of sound, but
I found it slipping out of the sheath on my chest, falling to the ground. Something tripped me, and I
found myself in the air, falling back first toward the floor.

I was already blacking out, so I did the only thing I could think of.

I ended the reality I was in.

My other self was seated at my desk, looking at footage from the bank while going over other
information. The Undersiders were clearly no longer on the premises, so I closed that window and
split reality once again.

In the first, I called my contact at the school. The Wards were still busy, so I might still have a chance to acquire Dinah. In the other I messaged my captains, calling for a lockdown of the entire building. The attack on me might have been unrelated to my acquisition of Dinah, after all.

The call went directly to a message telling me the phone was out of range, so I figured that classes had restarted in Arcadia, and that the signal jamming was reactivated.

Missed my chance.

I cancelled that reality once again, and thought while soldiers went and secured the place. The plan had worked perfectly, only it had attracted some form of attention.

I noted every fact I could: the questions Dinah did and did not answer, the events leading to the attack and the attack itself.

*Time to plan for the second try.*

I withdrew my phone and called one of my employees. One who could be trusted. “Mr. Bernard, my office please. I need to make changes to the lighting system…”
Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to hance1986, LordsFire, Robo Jesus, Suryn, Essex & torisuke. In acknowledgement for services rendered, I ordain them them as Beta Inquisitors, in order '!', '@', ',', ';', ':', '?' & '?'.

[Thursday, April 14th, 2011]

The six of us Undersiders were inside the bank, courtesy of Tattletale’s password guessing abilities. I’d barely gotten the message that T had eyes on Vista two minutes ago, just before we’d gotten to the door.

Brian’s darkness was doing a good job of clearing the cubicles on our side of the bank. It was clear he’d been training, as he could tell the instant someone within his energy-draining field fell unconscious. He pointed them out to us as they went down, so we tied them up and left them locked in a storage closet.

The main lobby was pretty much the same thing. Grue filled it with darkness while we waited outside for him to give us the all-clear. It took longer than with the cubicles, for some reason.

“Clear,” he finally said, dropping his mist-like shadow from the center of the room. He kept the windows and doors covered, though, along with the cameras.

“That took, what, a minute more than the others?” Tattletale asked. “Any reason why?”

Grue pointed to a girl lying near the front counter. “This one,” he said. “She wasn’t going down for some reason.”

Sveta looked at said girl. “She’s dangerous, I can tell you that,” she explained, then did a wide glance of the room. “She’s the most dangerous person in here, actually.”

At those words, Tattletale turned. “Really?” She went for a closer look, and I could see her eyes going wide. “Shit, that’s Panacea.”

“The healer?” I asked. “I don’t see why that’s dangerous. Should we tie her up?”

“No,” Tattletale replied. “Her power’s biology control by touch, so no taking the risk of her waking up suddenly with someone in close range.”

“Alarm, keep her in sight while we take care of the vault,” Grue said to Sveta. “Call me if she wakes up. Tattletale, the vault, please.” He pointed behind the unconscious bank employees at her target.

“With pleasure,” she said, grinning as she turned the great steel wheel that operated the vault's locks. It seemed to go on forever, but after spinning through a dozen different rotations, the vault unlocked and swung open before us.
“Whoa, that’s a lot of money,” I said as I saw the stacks of bills resting there. Money wasn’t such a hang-up for me anymore, but that was still a lot. I couldn’t even guess how much cash was there.

Regent whistled besides me. “Yup, and it’s all ours, Blondie.” That was his nickname for me, based on my fake hair color.

“Let’s get to it, Undersiders,” Brian said, withdrawing a crowbar. “Think your plan is still viable, Apparition?”

I went to the door in the back of the vault and withdrew a few tools as the rest of the team got out bags from their backpacks, I went over the whole frame with scanners. “Give me ten minutes, and I’m good to go,” I said with a smile.

“We’re going with plan A, people,” Grue said, then paused to wrench a safety deposit box open. “Regent, Bitch, get the money in the bags. Tattletale, you have cameras. Alarm, the main lobby.” He turned to me. “Apparition, our exit please.”

I didn’t say anything and simply withdrew the most dangerous tool I’ve ever made, outside of Lucifer. It was basically a blowtorch, true, just a few levels more effective. It just used superhot plasma instead of the flame of a normal blowtorch. It was originally a weapon, a lightsaber-like construct as hot as the sun. I just used it differently, at lower settings.

With this, I made a few holes in the doors, severing the hydraulic restraints keeping the doors from being forced open. It took barely three minutes before I had Brian come over and push the doors open.

The elevator was currently at the basement level, the parking garage, so I cut myself a path after shadow dashing down, then repeated the maneuver on the doors below. Without Brian, forcing them open was somewhat more difficult, but I managed.

And I had everything done under the ten minute mark.

“Doors are open.” I said after flashing back to ground level. Regent and Bitch already had a few bags filled, so I carried them down in shadow state.

“We got company,” Tattletale called once I was back with the rest of the group.

Everyone moved toward the computer, only to be waved off and sent back to what they were doing. In the end, only Grue and I joined the team Thinker in front of the security monitor.

“Two, four, six…” he counted out loud. “Tattletale, why is every member of the Wards, along with an extra, right there in front of the bank?”

“Two extras, actually. There’s someone on the roof, but I can’t get who,” she added, shrugging. “Three or four was an estimate, based on what we knew.”

Grue took a deep breath, clearly trying to calm himself. “We’ll have to discuss this later, Tattletale,” he said. “Apparition, get us our exit now.”

I nodded, only for Sveta to cry out. “Grue, Shadow! Panacea’s waking up!” she said, dashing inside the vault.
The leader of the Undersiders reacted instantly, filling the lobby with darkness once more. “Alarm, go help the others with the bags,” he ordered and she nodded. “Tattle, what are they doing?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “They’re covering the exit, that’s all. I’d place good odds that they’re waiting for Protectorate reinforcements.”

“How much time do you give us?” he asked.

“Fifteen minutes, max,” she replied. “Let’s go with ten, just to be sure.”

He turned to the rest of the group. “Double speed, people. We got ten minutes before we need to be out!”

I didn’t wait to hear more. I grabbed a pair of bags that were already full and dragged them downstairs to the garage. Then I slipped even lower through the pipes there, into the sewers.

The parking garage under the vault hadn’t been part of the Undersider’s original plan because the doors were controlled remotely, from outside the bank. Sure, they could be forced open, but the alert would go out quickly, and people would know where to expect us.

I wasn’t planning on using the doors.

Brockton Bay was wet and in a valley leading to the ocean; and as such it had an extensive system of storm drains and sewers to deal with the potential flooding. They crisscrossed the entire city, and with my shadow abilities I’d already made regular use of them.

A place like an underground parking garage needed sewer access to drain off the water that could get in. I used the same drains to reach the main sewers.

Then I turned my plasma tool to full strength and started carving a hole. What I used was originally made for cutting into the equivalent of battleship armor; as such it burned deep holes into the sewer wall, which I used to dig an opening. It was a longer job than the elevator doors before, but I was done before the ten minutes were up. I did, however, have to spray the hole with liquid nitrogen before it was safe enough for travel by the others.

That was what I’d checked, a few days ago. I’d made sure that there were sewers directly under the bank, and with Tattletale’s help I’d confirmed that the wall between the garage and the sewer was thin enough to cut through. The Undersiders now had a passageway directly from the garage to the sewers, wide enough for everyone.

“Everything fine up here?” I said after dashing back inside the vault.

“We’re down to the last bag,” Brian said, filling said container. Bitch had taken his place opening the safe deposit boxes. By now, about eighty percent were open.

“Tattletale?” I continued.

She replied without turning from the screen. “Wards haven’t changed position, though I’d guess by their body language we don’t have much longer.”

I heard the sound of a zipper. “We’re done then,” Grue said. I had to admit, there wasn’t much left.
We’d taken all the loose cash in the vault, only thing left were the safe deposit boxes.

Bitch looked like she was about to argue, but after Grue focused his gaze on her for a moment, she simply scowled and tossed him the crowbar.

With me carrying the last bags down, all six of us were in the sewer and gone before ten minutes had passed.

*-*-*-*-*-*-*

“So, how does it feel, being victorious after your first heist?” Grue asked from his place on the sofa, back in the Undersiders’ base. It wasn’t the first time I was here, and I had to agree it beat my own place in sheer comfort. We were still in costume, though we’d removed helmets and the like.

“Exhilarating,” I admitted. It wasn’t a lie, even. Everything had gone properly, no damage, not even a fight. The worst that occurred were some people who’d gotten some unexpected sleep, along with a few holes here and there. And we’d gotten away cleanly.

“Have to agree, Blondie; your plan rocked,” Regent drawled, not turning from his game. Yes, he called me Blondie even when I wasn’t wearing the false hair. It grated somewhat. “Easiest money we ever made.”

“We could’ve taken them,” Bitch added from her corner.

“Better to have not taken the risk,” Brian replied. “We still don’t know who our mysterious seventh person was. Could you have taken Battery or Assault? Or even Armsmaster?”

Bitch growled but didn’t reply in any other way.

I looked around. Everyone was winding down. “I’ll be leaving, then,” I said, as Sveta came out of the bathroom dressed in civilian clothes. “Work’s done, so I need to get back to my place,” I said, ducking into the washroom to change.

“Not staying for a while?” Regent said, pausing his game before turning. “We got the latest Earth Aleph blockbuster here, some popcorn and enough drinks for everyone.”

I poked my head out of the bathroom and saw Sveta shaking her head no. Lisa, from her spot, smiled. She knew what I was leaving to do. “Thanks for the offer, but it'll have to be another time. I have a few projects that won't advance if I don't put in the hours.”

Alec shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said, and he went back to his game as if nothing had happened.

Grue waved as I came out. “See you both then, and good work. I’ll send Lisa to your place with your share in a few days.” I waved back, then we went down the stairs and left.

I waited until Sveta and I were back to base before speaking again. “So, how was it?” I asked.

“Fun, actually,” she replied. “It felt good to be part of a team, to be trusted. Lisa and Brian are good people, and even Alec is fun.” She didn’t say anything about Bitch, I noticed.

“You didn’t mind being lookout?” I continued.
“Nope. With my power, it’s an understandable position,” she said with a smile. “Only Lisa could do a similar job, and she was much better off on the cameras.”

“So why didn’t you want to stay over for a movie?” I asked.

“I was starting to crave a little solitude, actually.” She looked down. “I’m... not yet used to groups of people like that. For the heist, everyone was professional, so it felt like being part of a team. For social interactions, however...” she didn't finish, not really needing too.

“I get you.” I did, truly. I wasn't much into big social gatherings myself. “Well, I’m glad you enjoyed yourself at least.” I turned toward my workshop. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some tinkering to do,” I said as I walked off.

“Mind if I order something?” she asked.

“No, go ahead,” I replied. “Nothing for me, though.” I was eating supper home tonight, as requested by my father.

“Ok. Good tinkering,” she said, then went straight for a computer.

I’d barely done ten minutes’ worth of work on a breastplate when the phone vibrated. I removed the ear protection I was wearing while taking a look at the clock.

Three twenty-one... That can’t be T, I thought. Too early.

A quick check showed it was Lisa’s phone.

“You’ve got incoming patients!” Lisa said as soon as I had the phone close to my ear. “Please, you need to have everything ready in three minutes.”

My eyes went wide. “Want me to dash to your place? I can make it in less than that.” Through the sewers, of course.

“Don’t bother,” she said, and I heard sounds in the background of her call. A car engine starting and... were those explosions? “Our place just got knocked out. The Undersiders are homeless now.”
Competition 6.4

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to BeaconHill, Blackmane, landcollector, Robo Jesus, torisuke, hance1986, MilkHornets & RCa. As payment, I give each of them a pet Phantom Cat. Note: keep out of water.

I dashed into my workshop as soon as Lisa hung up. A quick look confirmed what I feared: I couldn’t hide this in what little time I had. “Fuck!” I yelled.

“What’s happening?” Sveta asked as she came down from her room.

“We’ve got incoming wounded. The Undersiders,” I said.

“Ouch.” She then saw my face and guessed. “And you don’t want them to know about the tinkering?” she asked.

It wasn’t really that. “I’m just… not sure if they can be trusted. Regent and Bitch, I mean.” They seemed like decent people, if a little outside the norm. I just didn’t know enough about them to be confident about their reactions.

“You trust my power?” she asked. I nodded. “I’ll check them over as they arrive and inform you if I see anything bad.”

“Thank you,” I replied, smiling. Then I thought for a moment. “Can you bring down your mattress? Some of them might need to rest while they recuperate.”

She ran back to her room. “On it!”

On my end, I went, grabbed my healing beacon and dragged it into what I use as a living room, setting it up near the middle. The table there would be another spot for someone to lie down, if necessary.

At least once it was cleaned up.

I cleared off the table and pointed out where Sveta could put the furniture from upstairs. I then sent her to the door to help the rest of the Undersiders once they arrived.

I didn’t have to wait long. I was barely done removing the trash and pulling out the first aid kit when the Undersiders began staggering through the door.

Lisa was first, helping Rachel walk. The Thinker had quite a bit of blood on her shirt, but it seemed like it wasn’t hers. Bitch, however, was a mess. Most of her clothes were torn, there was blood everywhere, and one of her eyes was swollen closed. She was holding onto something with her one good arm, though I couldn’t tell what since it was covered.
Brian was behind them, also hefting something in his arms. He didn’t look wounded at all, thankfully.

Alec and Sveta were closing the march, Brutus (I think) after their heels. The boy’s arm seemed wrong, but he didn’t seem to be bleeding. He was, however, clearly cursing under his breath.

With that, I went to Rachel, trying to lead her to a chair. “Sit, Rachel. We’ll have to check your wounds for shrapnel before we do anything else.”

“Dogs first,” she said, moving her head.

“Huh?” I replied.

“Dogs first!” she yelled this time, making the same movement again. I realized suddenly that she was indicating the bundle in her bloody arm.

“You can’t be serious,” Brian said, only for Bitch to snarl at him.

I carefully grabbed the bundle and unwrapped it on the table, revealing Angelica. Brian did the same and Judas joined the other canine on the table. Judas whimpered feebly as he was put down, while Angelica did not react in any way. I was afraid for a moment it might be too late for her.

Bitch might look like she’d just lost a match against a lawnmower, but I actually had to take Angelica’s pulse to make sure that she was still alive. She was, though for how long was probably an issue.

“Your power won’t help?” I asked Rachel. She shook her head no, looking desperate.

Then there was only one thing to do. “Lisa, you have the best eyes, take Judas here and go over his wounds. You need to remove as much shrapnel as possible before I start the machine, or they might stay stuck there.” The female Undersider nodded, and I turned to the others. “Sveta, with me, we’ll take care of Angelica. Brian, clean Rachel’s wounds as much as possible. No sutures.”

“What about me?” Regent said. He didn’t look to be in danger of getting worse.

I gave him a quick look-over. “You look like you’ll survive, so you can be last. Take a chair and wait.”

“Fuck you,” he replied, but still went and took a seat.

“Shouldn’t we clean our hands before,” Brian asked from Bitch’s side.

“Normally, yes, but it’s not needed in this case,” I said, already picking out bits of metal from Angelica’s torso. “The beacon kills germs and we don’t really have time.”

It was a few long minutes before we’d done what we could. Brian had finished his part first then, had gone to fix Regent’s dislocated arm. The lanky boy was still cursing over how much setting his arm hurt, even now. He also had a few choice words for being ignored in favor of the dogs.

“That’s the best we can do,” Sveta finally said. She was my spotter, as she could filter for debris with her power somehow. I nodded to her and started the beacon.
The next minute seemed like thirty, but slowly the two wounded dogs’ pulses normalized and their wounds started visibly closing. “They’re out of danger,” I finally exclaimed.

Rachel did not completely relax at that, but she stopped twitching quite as much. She did, however, keep cleaning the two dogs with a towel now red with blood.

“What else?” Brian asked. You could see in his face that he was trying to keep himself occupied.

“Food,” I said. Sveta’s pizza hadn’t arrived yet, but it wouldn’t be enough for everyone. “Dog food too. Meat preferably, because of the blood loss.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Brian said. He went to the washroom to clean his hands, then walked right back out.

“How long?” Rachel asked, pointing at the dogs on the table. She’d left her chair and was watching over them carefully, Brutus right beside her.

“I don’t know, this is the first time I’ve dealt with wounds this extensive,” I replied. “I’ll keep it up as long as you think it’s needed.” She nodded at that, and I turned to Tattletale. “So, what happened?” I asked since the urgency was gone.

“I don’t have all the details, since Brian and I were out when it happened. We’d left barely a minute after you did, transferring the loot to where the boss had asked,” Lisa explained. “We came back to find the building down, with a supersized Brutus digging Rachel out, and Alec walking around dizzily. He’d fallen badly as the building crumbled, it seems. Only thing I noticed is that it started from the opposite side of the building to our living room.”

“Explosions,” Rachel added, not taking her eyes off her dogs. “Three, four of them. Maybe more.” She was clearly trying to remember. “Getting closer each time. Then, ceiling comes down.”

“I had only Brutus with me, so I made him big. Quick as I can,” she continued. “Tried protecting myself, but it didn’t work. Woke back up when Brutus dragged me out. Dug out Judas and Angelica with his help.”

*That’s actually the most I’ve heard out of her ever, I realized.*


“Any clue who it was?” I asked. There would be some retribution for this, I’m sure.

“My guess is, that was the other shoe dropping, and the gang wars are going to start again,” the Thinker explained. “I told you earlier Lung was waiting to make his move, right?” I nodded. “That was his move.”

“Why go against you?” I asked. “I mean, I’d expect him to go after the E88 first, not the Undersiders.”

“If he was really going against us, he’d have been waiting as the building came down,” She replied. “I have the feeling we were just an attack of opportunity. Brian and I could hear more explosions all the way back to base, and we had to do a detour to get to your place because of a police barricade.”

“It’s worse than that,” Sveta said from the computer.
“You have anything for this damn pain?” Regent asked from his spot.

“Check the first aid kit,” I said as I joined Lisa and Sveta at the computer, where she had the main webpage of the Brockton Bay Bulletin open. “Updated list of targets?” I read.

There were a lot of important places on this list. The PRT headquarters. Brockton Bay Hospital. Various Police and Fire Stations. The Medhall building, home to one of the biggest pharmaceutical corporations in Brockton Bay.

Arcadia.

*What about T?* I thought, then realized I’d know the moment she died. I didn’t, so she was safe.

“Here’s the proof that it’s a setup,” Lisa said, pointing to a paragraph on the page.

“The gang known as the ABB wasted no time in taking advantage of the explosions to strike deep inside rival territory,” I read. “With the parahuman known as Lung leading them, the group surged, attacking known Empire 88 businesses and neighborhoods. This was the first sighting of the leader of the Asian gang in weeks, proving that the rumors of his retirement were false.”

“He wouldn’t have been this ready for it if it wasn’t planned,” Lisa pointed out. “And it makes sense, too. He’s hurting the E88 right in their faces, while the explosions are keeping everybody who might interfere busy. The Empire’s not ready for it, and once Lung gets strong enough, there won’t be anything they can do about it. They’ll have to retreat, and that’ll cost them, especially since Lung won’t let them go easily. They’ll probably have some wounded, maybe even some losses.”

I grimaced at this. “The Empire won’t take this easily.”

Lisa just shook her head sadly. “Of course not. It's gonna be all out war between the gangs for the next month at least.”

For the next thirty minutes, the three of us alternated between the computer and the table, checking on the dogs. Rachel didn’t move an inch from where she was, and Alec found a beanbag chair to try to fall asleep in. The destruction wasn’t done, and every few minutes another name added itself to the list.

I did, however, find time to do two things. First, to talk to Sveta alone. She confirmed that I wasn’t in any danger of betrayal coming from any of the Undersiders. It was one thing off my shoulders, at least.

Second, to send a message to T not to come to the base. My tinker abilities weren’t much of a secret, but I preferred keeping T’s existence unknown for the moment. One thing at a time was better.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

It took more than an hour before Brian came back, his hands full of groceries. By that time Judas was fully healed and moving once more. Angelica seemed in full health, but she hadn’t regained consciousness yet. He messaged me to follow him back again as soon as he’d dropped his packages, and I did so.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” I asked.
“Sorry to drop this on you suddenly,” he said, voice low. “I’m pretty sure you didn’t expect to be hosting us today. You don’t mind, do you?”

“I won’t say I’m happy about it, but I understand the need. I did promise you access to my healing beacon too. Don’t worry much about it.” I grabbed a large bag of dog food from the truck. “Only issue is T and my tinkering. I’m not sure how much I should reveal exactly.”

“Don’t say anything,” Brian replied, hefting his own bag. “I’ll talk to them, make sure that they know everything they see here is secret and not to be talked about. At worst, you’ll get some pointed questions, but that’ll be all.”

I nodded, then thought for an instant. “How long will you be there? It isn’t like this place is set up for hosting multiple people after all.”

“No clue for the moment,” Brian replied. “I’ll have Lisa talk to the boss, get us a new place to work from. He was the one who arranged for our former building, actually.” He smiled a sad little smile. “Thing is, I don’t know how much time that will take. Whoever he is, he seems to be pretty much on top of things, but with the state of the city…” He left the rest hanging.

“Yeah, we read,” I said. “We’ve been tracking what’s happening over the net.”

“It’s worse than that,” the leader of the Undersiders grimaced as we got inside the base. “You didn’t see how it was on the streets. There’s looting and fires everywhere. It isn’t only about the explosions anymore; every two-bit thief is profiting from the fact that they know the police and the capes can’t react. It’s chaos out there.”

“You’re thinking of laying low, then,” I asked.

“Until we heal, for sure, but we can’t stay out of sight forever,” he pointed out, eyes down. “Whatever happens, this won’t stop until either whoever’s bombing the place wins, or until they get whacked. And in both cases we need to be ready for that. I’m pretty sure the boss will have something to say anyhow.” Brian looked directly forward, as if he was seeing through the very walls of the base. “This will change the city, whatever happens.”

I nodded. And I’ll make sure to be ready for it, I said inside.
“Okay people, dispersal pattern four!” Aegis yelled as we exited through the back of the PRT truck two streets away from the bank. Said truck would then circle the building and cover the parking garage exit. The Undersiders, judging by the darkness filling the bank lobby, probably wouldn’t exit that way, but better safe than sorry.

Pattern four was the one used for boxing in people with movement abilities, Hellhound’s dogs in this case. We formed up in a semi-circle centered on the front entrance, with only Browbeat not reacting instantly. He hadn’t trained much for this specific maneuver, so it could be forgiven.

“Do we storm the bank?” Browbeat asked through his earpiece once in position.

“Negative,” said the PRT member monitoring the deployment. “Stay in position. Protectorate support will be on site in fourteen minutes.”

Great, sent here to wait, I thought. Fun. I had to agree though that surging inside into that darkness didn’t appeal to me. My power worked by touch, something which meant close range; it would be near impossible to use with my sight blocked.

“What is she doing here?” Vista’s voice rang, this time not on the Ward channel.

After a quick glance at her to see where she was looking, I spotted Gallant’s girlfriend standing on top of the bank. I inclined my head toward him. “Might want to talk to her quick,” I whispered loud enough for him to hear. “We don’t want to blow this op.”

The Ward in white armor said something under his breath, and withdrew a cellphone. For the next minute, while we waited, he exchanged texts with New Wave’s golden child. “She’s here because her sister isn’t answering her phone and she was supposed to come to the bank,” he finally said in our ear buds.

“You mean, the Undersiders might have Panacea hostage inside?” I replied.

I saw him nod. “Possibly. She agreed not to do anything without our say-so unless she gets an SOS from Panacea.”

Looking at Aegis, who was wearing my costume, I noticed him relaxing. “Good enough,” he said on the channel. “Everyone, keep your positions and be ready for anything. Console, ETA for Protectorate reinforcements?”
“Nine minutes.”

“Stay sharp people!” the Ward leader said.

The wait was agonizing. I kept my attention on the doors as much as I could, but that became more and more of a chore.

“Six minutes.”

The worst part was knowing the Undersiders could be coming out at any second. They tended to be scarily well-informed, and I was sure they knew that reinforcements were incoming. They might have even known that the Protectorate heroes would be out of the city at this time.

“Four minutes.”

I went over the known members of the team. No one knew exactly what Tattletale’s Thinker power really was, but she wasn’t a frontline member. I didn’t think she’d come against me. Hellhound had her giant dogs, but I could put the freeze on them like anything else. Facing her might cause some pain, but it would be a net win for the team.

It was the other two that could cause issues.

Regent could work from a distance, which meant I probably wouldn’t get into touching range. He was a telekinetic of some type, if the rumor was right. Grue however could leave me stumbling in the darkness, unable to do anything. He might even manage to trick me into tagging other Wards. He was the one I’d have to be the most careful about.

“Eighty seconds.”

Any moment now, I thought, tensing myself for action.

Said action didn’t come. The Protectorate transport appeared in the distance, stopping one street over. Armsmaster wasted no time in coming out, followed by Miss Militia, Assault, Battery and Velocity. Only Dauntless and Triumph were missing.

Now that the adult heroes were there, time seemed to return to normal. Grue’s darkness quickly started fading, and Battery was sent inside as fast recon. Her face when she came back said it all; The Undersiders had gotten clean away.

*_-*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_ *

[Kid Win]

*Finally, I thought. I can get back to my workshop!*  

The entire thing had been a waste of time, and we’d just stood there while the Undersiders robbed the city’s biggest bank. The newspapers would probably have a few comments to make about that, but we’d respected orders, so our PRT bosses couldn’t complain about anything. I had to agree with them though that we weren’t made for a situation like this one.

There were a few minutes of discussion between Aegis (who was dressed as Clockblocker for some reason) and Armsmaster, but finally the leader of the Wards gave the signal to pack up and leave. He rose in the air, clearly intent on flying to base, and I followed him up.
“Fun mission, eh?” I said sarcastically to him once we were side by side above.

“Yeah, right,” he snorted. “What a waste of time. They keep us at base the whole day in preparation for something, only to force us to do nothing once we got there.” He sighed. “At least they won’t be complaining about what we did.”

“Hopefully,” I said. “But, knowing them, they might…” I stopped as I saw something in the distance. “Aegis, six o’clock.”

He turned in the air, and I pointed toward a column of smoke in the distance. “Might want to call that in, Boss.”

“Console, this is Aegis. I’m seeing a column of smoke coming from….” He focused for an instant. “Corner Beachside and Mountainview. Should we respond? Over.”

“Negative. We already have people dispatched to the…” I didn’t catch the rest, as an explosion rang from a police station not a block from where we were.

I reached out for my ear bud. “Console, we have an expl…” I saw another detonation in the distance, quickly followed by a third. “Multiple explosions all over the place. Please respond.”

“Aegis, Kid Win,” Director Piggot’s voice rang out on the Wards channel. “Take Browbeat and Clockblocker with you. Go directly to Brockton Bay General Hospital. Vista, Gallant; head to Fourth Precinct. We suspect an escape attempt.”

Aegis glanced at me and nodded. “Acknowledged.” The both of us turned around and grabbed the other two members of our team. Browbeat rode with me, while Aegis grabbed Clockblocker.

Whatever bomb had exploded near the hospital, it wasn’t a conventional one. There was ice all over a good part of the building, centered on the trauma ward. Luckily, the building was still stable, as such the evacuation was going smoothly. Clockblocker went directly to the doctors, to use his power where it might help, while the rest of us dove into the frozen part of the building. I mainly worked on getting doors to open, melting the ice there to allow passage. Then the three of us started carrying whoever we found alive back outside.

By our third trip, Panacea was there to go over the people we found. I was tempted to ask about the bank, but this wasn’t the right time. In the background, more explosions could be heard from deeper in the city.

There wasn’t much more I could do here, so I called the console for further instruction. “Console, I’ve done what I can here. Where should I go now?”

“Kid Win, regroup with Gallant at Arcadia. There's unexploded ordnance we need a Tinker to dispose of, and Armsmaster is already busy with another such device. Disarm and collect if possible; if not, contain it as well as you can. There's already a bomb disposal squad in place.” The PRT member on the other side of line line answered. It wasn’t Piggot, this time.

“There was a bomb at Arcadia?” I asked, taking to the air.

“Two detonations, along with at least one intact bomb.” Console replied.
“On my way,” I say, cutting the comms off. With my other hand, I withdrew my personal phone and typed.

U ok?

The seconds were long before I got an answer.

Yes. Was @ other side of building.

I released the breath I’d been holding. Good, Taylor was alright. I wouldn’t want the only person I could really talk to dying or being hurt. The rest of the team were fine as friends, but it was clear that whenever I talked tinkering it went right over their heads. And the least said about social interactions with Armstrong, the better.

U still @ school? Could use some help.

Two tinkers were better than one, especially when dealing with another tinker’s work.

No. Students sent home. Too much danger of explos.

Damn, I said to myself. I could have used the help. I wasn’t surprised, though. Last we’d talked, she didn’t want to be more publicly known.

Thks anyway. Going to disarm bomb.

Good Luck.

I was landing when I received a last text. I hadn’t been expecting another one.

Send screenshot. Maybe I can help.

I smiled. Good to know I had some backup.

Gallant was waiting for me when I touched the ground. We talked a little, but went directly to the explosive. It had been hidden in an open locker.

“Jamming still up?” I asked.

He nodded. “They kept it going, since it might have been the reason this one didn’t activate.”

Understandable. “Can you get access to the network? I need to be able to check stuff up at a moment’s notice. Cable will be fine. Get me the bomb disposal people also.”

He nodded again, this time with a grim smile, and left. I went outside to send Taylor a message, opening a chat with her where we might send each other stuff.

I went to work as soon as Gallant came back with the specialist and a plugged laptop. They had no clue how to deal with such a bomb, so I was the one controlling the robot. The laptop had a webcam, so Taylor was able to see about as well as I did.

And thank god for her.

The bomb had numerous booby traps installed, including a motion sensor, and without her I would have missed a few. She caught the thermal detector hidden under the signal amplifier before I tripped
it, and was the one to point out the pressure sensor on the wireless receiver.

After an hour of careful work, I released a long breath as I had the bomb disposal robot remove the secondary detonator. The first had been dismantled a few minutes ago. I cleaned up the sweat from my hands and went on the forum to type a message.

KW: Done. Thanks a lot for all the help. Can I call you if I have to do another one?
T: I can’t promise anything, but I’ll try. Glad to have helped.
T: See you tomorrow.
KW: If we have school.
T: Yes, if we have school. So long.
KW: Bye.

“So, that’s your mystery Tinker friend,” Gallant said from behind me. I could hear the smile in his voice. I had sent him away once I started working, but it seemed he’d come back. “First time I’ve seen you happy to be going to school.”

“How did you…?” I started.

“Kid, I’m an emotion reader. It doesn’t take much to notice something happened, especially when you’re happy to go to a math class,” he explained. “I could probably figure out who she is with a little work, but I’ll keep silent.” He raised his hands in the air, in a gesture of surrender. “She’s good for you, it seems. You’re more happy these days.”

“I didn’t say my friend was a woman,” I replied.

“You didn’t need to, Kid,” he said, smiling. “I know you’re not into men.”

I opened my mouth to say something, then closed it. I wasn’t going to argue that I might be gay. He’d never let go of something like that.

“You’re done here?” I nodded. “Then let’s go. I’m sure the higher-ups will have more work for us.”

I nodded again. Today had been a bad day for the good guys, and it wasn’t over yet.
“Yes, Dad. I’m alright,” I said into my cellphone. It was half past four now, and it seemed my father had just learned about the explosions all over the city. The majority of the Docks had been spared from the destruction, which might explain why this call hadn’t come earlier.

“Are you sure?” he asked, still stressed, “The news is saying there is still a detonation somewhere in the city every hour or so.”

“Dad, my base is an abandoned building nowhere close to anything important. There is no reason why a mad bomber would come here,” I explained. “It’s probably safer here than home, actually.” Especially with the fighting power the Undersiders currently had here.

It took a moment before my father answered, and this time he was somewhat more calm. “Will you be home for supper, at least, like we’d planned?”

“I’ll try. I might be a little late though, since I’m hosting people at the moment,” I answered.

“The Undersiders, I suppose?” he said with a smile in his voice. “Going over what happened at the bank?”

“No, that’s long done,” Especially since there wasn’t much to say, I thought. “They haven’t been as lucky as I was with the bombing spree.”

“Are they alright?” he quickly asked. It was good to see he cared somewhat, even if they were criminals.

“Yes, Dad, they’re fine,” Now, I finished silently, “Their base is just a mess right now, so I’m letting them stay at my place.”

He was silent for a fifteen seconds or so. “I’ll be waiting for you at home to eat, then. Call me if anything comes up,” he said. “Love you kiddo.”

“You too, Dad,” I answered with a smile, then hung up.

There wasn’t much going on right now in my base, now that I’d left the phone. Regent was asleep in a beanbag after taking a painkiller, Grue and Lisa were out purchasing inflatable beds and the like, and Sveta was making a complete check of the building, just in case. Bitch was the only other conscious person in the room.

I went to her. “You okay?” I asked.
“I’m fine,” she answered mechanically, keeping her face down. Her tone was surprisingly low, compared to her usual voice.

“And the dogs, everything’s fine with them?” Angelica had regained consciousness less than ten minutes ago and was still much less energetic than usual, so I was concerned.

Rachel simply nodded, not meeting my eyes. I was pretty sure there was some subtle meaning to her actions, but I didn’t get it.

“Well, I’ll be in the room farther down there…” I pointed toward my workshop. “If you need me, just go knock.”

“Ok,” she confirmed and went back to taking care of her dogs. I stayed there a moment longer, thinking about what she had done, then walked into the room I used for tinkering. There was work to be done.

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Dinner with my father was less stressful than I expected. He’d wanted to go over the bank heist, and that subject lasted for our entire meal. While it was clear he didn't really agree with what I'd done, he was content to learn that I’d not even been seen and that my promise of no combat had been respected. He even gave me a toast on my planning, calling it ‘a job well done,’ even if he clarified he’d sleep better if it never happened again. I didn’t promise anything, only saying that it wasn’t in my plans.

His questions about the villain we were spying on were more difficult to answer. I ended up saying that, with the bombing, we suddenly had new priorities. He did nod understandingly at that. I did clarify that, to the best of my knowledge, he wasn’t involved in it, but I wasn’t completely sure.

I came back to my workshop a little after ten. T was already there, since I’d sent her to base once I arrived at home. It was a risk with Bitch and Regent being present, but I doubted they’d see the difference, especially since she said she'd sequester herself in the workshop. I had expected to find her there tinkering, but not for Lisa to be present.

“Good evening,” I said to Lisa as I returned to physical form from my shadow state. “I didn’t think you’d be in here.” I took note of what T was working on, and realized it wasn’t my newest Slenderman outfit, as expected. “What is that?” I asked her.

“Better jamming device,” T said, taking it off the bench. I did recognize somewhere in there parts of the ECM emitter I’d used when I traveled to Sveta’s old place. “I suspect we’ll need it soon, with what’s happening outside.”

“If you say so,” I answered.

“I went over what happened today, and she did the same,” Lisa added from her chair in a corner of the room. “Turns out there’s another female parahuman Vista’s age at Arcadia, and that’s who she had in sight.”

I nodded. I’d forgotten about that message with everything that happened.

“There’s also something else you should know,” Lisa continued.
“What?” I asked, curious.

“I helped Kid Win disable a bomb at Arcadia.” T spoke, turning from her work.

“When?” the fact that the Ward Tinker knew was bad enough; I didn’t want my real identity being compromised even more.

“While I was at home after classes were cancelled,” she explained. “I did it remotely, of course.”

“Oh, OK,” I had much less an issue with that. In Arcadia she might have been noticed, but I doubted she could have been caught by others while working from a distance.

“That’s why I started building this.” She pointed to the still-incomplete jammer on the table. “From what I saw, the bomb at Arcadia didn’t detonate because of the ECM device installed in the school. I’m pretty sure we’ll be planning on visiting our bomber, so I want to be ready for it.”

“Right.” I couldn’t blame her. The same thoughts were running in my head, and had been for the past few hours. I couldn’t leave the terrorist continuing his spree.

“That’s what I thought,” Lisa said, rising from her chair. “Any idea on how you’ll do this?”

“Mind if I join the conversation?” Came Brian’s voice from the other side of the door. I nodded, and Lisa invited him inside. “I’d like in on anything you do against that mad bomber.”

“I don’t have anything more than a general plan,” I replied quickly. “I’ll be sure to inform you once I have something concrete.”

His grin was somewhat vicious. “Good.”

“Weren’t you going home to bed?” Lisa asked.

“Not going to happen, not today. Maybe not even tomorrow,” he said, then sighed. “I drained dozens of people earlier, and that energy doesn’t dissipate easily. I knew that draining things woke me up, but it seems like it’ll also keep me awake.” He turned to Lisa. “How long do you think I have?”

“Difficult to say,” she replied after a moment of examination. “You look completely awake to me, as if you just woke up from a good night’s sleep. I might be able to tell later, but right now I can just say at least ten hours.”

“Better than nothing,” he said. “Did you tell her about your phone conversation with the Boss?”

“Not yet,” Lisa answered, then turned to me. “We’ll only be in your way for the next week or so, according to him. He says that, unless something happens, we’ll have a new base by next Wednesday. He also told us to make sure to be ready, since he’ll have us going against the ABB as soon as he has more information.”

I nodded, and the conversation lapsed for a moment. I suspected this was because Lisa had more to say, but didn’t want to say it in front of Brian, who didn’t know about Coil. As the silence stretched, I went to the closet where my Slenderman suit was stored, and T went back to her jamming device.

“Need any help with that?” Brian asked with a smile on his face. “It seems I’ll need to occupy myself
for a few hours.”

I sighed. “Not really.” Truth was, in a normal case scenario, non-Tinkers weren’t very useful to have around for this kind of work. There was very little in tinkering that could be left to unskilled labor, which was pretty much every normal human being. Maybe Lisa could pick up something with her powers, but even there I wasn’t sure.

“Okay,” he said, his smile falling off. “How about your computer? Can I borrow it?”

“Sure,” I replied. With the amount of tinkering I needed to do, I wasn’t going to use it. “Knock yourself out.”

The smile came back. “Thanks.” He then walked back out, closing the door behind him.

Lisa waited for a good minute before continuing on the previous conversation. “Coil failed.”

“What?” I asked.

“Whatever Coil was using us as a decoy for, he failed. I picked it up in his words and tone,” she explained. “Because of some form of interference, I would guess.”

His powers had limits then. “What was he trying?”

“That, I have no clue.” She shrugged. “What I have I only picked up while I was talking to him. I didn’t find any clue pointing toward anything else happening at the same time as the bank robbery.”

“How about afterwards?” I asked.

“After that, all the news are about the terrorist bombing, nothing else.” Lisa answered, shaking her head. “And I’m ninety nine percent sure he isn’t involved in that.”

“Could that be what stopped him?” I pointed out. “Bombing in his territory might have simply made him cancel his plans.”

“My power says otherwise,” the Thinker explained. “I’m not one hundred percent sure about it, but I get the impression that he was attacked somehow, and that’s why he failed at what he tried. I don’t have much more than that.”

“That’s at least something,” I said after a moment of thinking. Something then came to mind. “His power may be similar to the Steven Wright quote, actually.”

“What is?” she asked.

“‘If at first you don’t succeed, destroy all evidence that you tried,’” I quoted.

“I’d seen it attributed to Murphy before, but it is possible.” She sighed. “And how will we go about proving that?”

“We’d need more information about what he plans to do, that’s for sure,” I pointed out. “And if he’s manipulating us, we’ll need to write things down. We may simply forget, otherwise.”

“Noted,” she replied.
The both of us said nothing for a few moments, so I brought up one of the questions that came to mind. “Can I ask why you haven’t told Brian about Coil? I can understand the others, but Brian’s loyal and has a good head on his shoulders. I don’t see why he couldn’t know.”

Tattletale gave a sad smile. “He’s actually the person I fear learning the most. You know why he’s doing this, being part of the Undersiders?” I nodded. “One of the things Coil does for him is make sure that a part of his salary comes from a regular paycheck out of a perfectly normal company he owns. A teenager without a valid job wouldn’t be able to take care of his sister, after all.”

“Oh…” I said, eyes going wide. “I see. It’s…” It isn’t good, that’s what it is. Forcing him to choose between his sister and the gang? I’d guess his sister would win. He isn’t a criminal at heart and simply became one for her sake; abandoning the Undersiders wouldn’t be much different.

“Changing the subject,” Lisa interjected after a few seconds. “I have a name for you; the identity of our friendly mad bomber.” I turned to her, focused. “Bakuda. She took Cornell hostage with a bomb a little more than a month ago, then disappeared from the map. Asian-American, so she fits perfectly into the normal ABB recruitment criteria. The photos of her rampage were clearly indicative of her abilities.”

I nodded, turning back toward my Slenderman uniform. “Thank you. That’ll help.” I’d need to find images or videos of her, but that could wait until I started to scout for her. I dropped the suit on my workbench.

“I see we’re done here,” Lisa said, leaving her chair and moving for the door. “Good luck with that, and don’t stay up too late. I fear we’ll have a few busy days in front of us.”

I nodded, not looking away from my work. I simply waved with my right hand, then grabbed a pair of goggles to protect my eyes.

*Time to get tinkering.*
Contracts 7.1

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to Chunq, MilkHornets, RCa & Suryn. As a reward, I give each of them a single specific card. In order, a Charizard made out of foil, an adventurer's card from Recettear, a 1Tb SD card and a Nicol Bolas.

The week following the return of Lung and the ABB wasn’t as bad as the first or the second day, but it still was bloody. Explosions continued apace, with at least four a day, and the Asian gang did great damage to the city, especially the E88-held regions. There were skirmishes every day and large battles every second night, but no one managed to stop Lung. Worse, the wounded were piling up against him, and every single attempt was more and more costly.

Which led to the meeting today, in a small desolate bar found in one of the worst parts of the city, ten days after the start of hostilities.

Somer’s Rock.

I hadn’t known before earlier today, but Somer’s Rock was neutral ground for the capes in the city, the one place where the various gangs might talk to each other. I’d been surprised there was a mechanism in place for something like that, but it seemed it was actually an old tradition. Marquis supposedly had been the one to declare the bar neutral ground a dozen years ago, and still it held.

The Undersiders and I were early, but surprisingly still not the first. That honor was reserved to the E88 who, judging by the number of glasses on the table, had been present for at least an hour.

Kaiser, the man who lead the Empire, was alone at the center table, looking like a knight in full plate armor. Behind him in a booth were a trio of his capes, the size changer Fenja, the flying artillery Purity and the metalmorph Hookwolf. It was only a portion of the capes under his command, but rumor was these were the only Empire parahumans still viable in combat. Menja, Fenja’s sister, was rumored either dead or seriously wounded after taking on Lung nearly alone.

Grue went straight to the center table, while the rest of us took a corner both. I made sure to have clear sight of the door, since I had a mission here.

*Speak of the devil,* I thought.

Coil walked in, alone. Another might be surprised at him coming without any backup, but I knew better.

This wasn’t Coil.

I could see the glow around everyone, could see their powers, but not around the Undersider’s secret boss. The man in the snake suit was simply a normal human. Still, the fake Coil took a place at the center table as if he was sitting down for dinner, right beside Grue.
Tattletale looked directly at me as he sat down. I shook my head and whispered just loud enough for her to hear through my helmet. “Not a cape.”

She looked back down at that, and I could hear her swearing under her breath.

Faultline was the next coming in, right on time. She surprisingly went the long way around, seemingly only to snarl at Tattletale when she passed right in front of our booth. She then took a chair opposite Grue, right next to Kaiser. The rest of her group, which included two Case 53s, sat behind her in another booth. I looked at Sveta beside me, and she nodded. She hadn’t yet made contact with the pair of them, but the look on her face meant it wasn’t going to be long in coming.

I’d expected that to be all, but another group came in before talks started. I didn’t recognize them, something which I supposed meant they were from outside of town. They were all in red and black, the four them, which included a large ape-like creature. I’d have thought a Case 53, but it wasn’t glowing, so it it something different, without powers. Coil introduced them as the Travelers, confirming my hypothesis, and their leader, a man in a tuxedo and top hat who introduced himself as Trickster, bowed before taking a seat on the other side of Coil.

“This is everyone, as Lung won’t be showing, being the subject of this meeting,” Kaiser said, opening the discussion. He turned to look at everyone. “All of us have faced the ABB in one form or the other, but only now have they gone beyond being a nuisance. More than a hundred dead and three times that in wounded, including students, businessmen and candidates for mayor. Open fighting in the streets. There are even talks of the army being deployed in Brockton Bay. It can’t go on.”

“I agree,” the Coil impersonator replied. “The ABB won’t be able to maintain this rhythm long, which might have been a good thing, but even a single week more could mean there wouldn’t be enough left of the city for it to matter. There are rumors that Bakuda is currently building some form of superbomb, and trying to hold the city hostage as she did Cornell.”

“She’s the danger here,” Grue said, joining the conversation. “We’ve each faced the ABB before, so we all knew it. Lung was the only reason the gang didn’t disappear. They could hide behind his monstrous strength.” He shook his head. “But he was only one man, and couldn’t be everywhere. Bakuda is the one who’s given the ABB the ability to do real damage.”

There were nods all around the table.

“Everyone seems to be in agreement, then,” Coil said. “The ABB cannot be left to do its business the way it has been doing.”

“I propose an alliance,” Kaiser said. “All of us against the ABB. No infighting, no skirmishes, nothing. Our territories stay the same until Lung and Bakuda have been taken down. We concentrate all our forces in making sure the two of them are removed from the city, however that is.”

“I would actually recommend more,” Coil said. “We limit our illegal activities to the bare minimum and enforce the same in the lands we hold. That will leave the PRT and the Protectorate free to focus their full might on the ABB. I’ll even contact the authorities to make sure that they know of this.”

Everyone nodded. I wasn’t surprised at that; the only group left whose parahumans held territory and dealt directly in crime was the E88, and they were having enough problems as it was. Coil, from what I understood, mainly had a protection racket going on, we Undersiders were flush with cash after the bank heist, and Faultline was a business owner and a mercenary. There wasn’t much crime
to affect at the moment.

I was surprised when Faultline rose from her chair. “This is all good, but I unfortunately can’t be part of this. I’m already under another contract, and I don’t have time for this. If the ABB is still a nuisance once I’m done with my current job, I’ll be happy to help you provided my rates are paid. I’ll keep things low and calm, though.” She walked out the bar, and the rest of her group followed. “Good luck with that,” she said as she went out. Beside me, Tattletale’s eyes went wide.

“That’s too bad.” Coil sighed, turning to the other leaders. “How about you, Kaiser.”

“I can agree with that.” The E88 cape answered.

“It sounds fun,” Trickster said with a smirk from his place beside Coil. “I’m in.”

“That’s pretty much…” Grue started, only for Tattletale to rise and tap him on the shoulder. “Yes?” he asked.

She turned to look at everyone. “Faultline’s under contract with the ABB.”

All eyes turned to her. “Seriously?” Grue said.

Tattletale simply nodded.

“That’s an issue,” Coil said. “For all their limited power, Faultline’s crew are professional mercenaries. Fighting them while hitting the ABB might be too much.”

Kaiser turned to Grue. “Let’s ask the newcomers at this table,” he said. “You trust the information your team member brought up?” he nodded. “Then you take care of it. While everyone else will be hitting the ABB, your job is to keep Faultline and her team from interfering. Or do you think this is too much for the ‘Masters of the Escape’?”

That was the nickname the newspapers had given us. The heist hadn’t been first page material, but only because Bakuda’s rampage had started the same day.

Grue didn’t even look back. He simply nodded. “Fine. If that’s what everyone wants. We won’t hold back if the ABB attacks us, though.”

Both Kaiser and Coil nodded, and the meeting wound down after that. People exchanged contact information, then everyone went their own way, including the six of us.

“You better be sure of what you’re saying, Tattletale,” Grue said once we were a mile or so away from the bar. “You end up wrong this time, and our reputation’s in shreds.”

“Ninety nine percent sure,” she replied. “If she’d been under another contract, she’d already be gone outside the city. Only reason she’d stay was if her contract’s in Brockton Bay. And who else would give her team a contract now?” She looked away. “I could read it in her. She was sizing up everyone, as if she was planning on fighting us. I don’t see many more reasons for that.”

I nodded. What she said made sense. I had the feeling the ABB went all-or-nothing, and hiring mercenaries fit that.

The six of us stepped into a van and drove off.
“So, what did you find out?” Brian asked an hour after the meeting. We were three around the table in my base, Lisa, him and I. Coil had finally given the Undersiders an exact date for their new lair, which was three days from now. He was late, true, but he’d said that the place he’d been preparing had ended up being damaged in one of the detonations.

“Quite a bit, but not the exact detail we wanted,” I replied, scowling a little. “The Coil there was an impersonator without powers, so still no clue about his powers. I did, however, get a good look at everybody else. Anyone in particular you want to know about?”

I did a little trick at the meeting. While I was there, T was with my father and he was using his powers on her. That was one of the details I’d noticed recently: anything that affected my powers, be it switching powers around or boosting them, also affected T, even if she wasn’t present. The opposite was also true.

Lisa and I had hoped to find out about Coil’s power that way, but it seemed the man was too paranoid for a plan like this to work. The both of us had informed Grue about it without telling his why, and he’d given the OK. We still found out quite a bit, though not what we wanted.

“Are you writing it down?” Brian asked seriously.

I nodded, pushing the papers I had in front of me. “I’m not done yet, but soon enough.”

“I’ll read them then,” he said, then turned to Lisa. “I still don’t get why knowing Coil’s power is a priority. There were at least five capes there more dangerous than him.”

“Yeah, but we at least have an idea of what their powers are,” Lisa explained. “Coil’s is a mystery, and that’s the kind of thing that gets you killed.”

“OK, OK, I get it,” he said, raising his hands up. “Anyway, the current priority is Faultline’s team. It would be good to know Coil’s ability, but they’re the ones we’ll have to fight.”

Both Lisa and I nodded.

Brian turned to Lisa. “Any more details about their contract? That would be useful to prepare for battle.”

“There’s three possibilities that come to mind:” Lisa started. “First, backup, like Kaiser said. I personally don’t think that’s the valid one, since Lung has been fighting alone since forever.”

Brian nodded. “Agreed. It’s possible, but not the most likely.”

“Second, defense. Lung hired Faultline to protect something. If that’s what he did, I’m pretty sure you can guess what they’re protecting.”

“Bakuda,” he snarled.

“Bingo!” she said with a smile. “Like was said earlier, Bakuda is the lynchpin of this operation. She falls, the ABB’s done, so this option seems pretty plausible.”
“And three?” I asked.

“Three’s breakout or something similar. Backup, but not for combat,” she continued. “That one will be tougher. We’ll need to stop her from breaking the pair of them out, something which her team is very talented at. Won’t be easy to do.”

Lisa then shrugged. “Every other option I can think of would’ve already been done by now if Faultline was under contract. She’s not one to wait on the sidelines, looking for a better time. You agree?” She looked at the both of us.

I raised my hands in defeat. “Seems valid, but I don’t know Faultline that well. I’m not the best to ask such a question.”

Brian was longer to reply. “Makes sense,” he finally said, face tight. “So, only thing to wait for now is the first assault by the allied forces. We’ll have to be ready, but at least we’ll be able to remove one of the three options off the table.”

Lisa and I nodded again, her with a smile. *We’ll be ready for them, I thought.*
As I’d been doing for the past few nights, I used a good portion of the hours after sunset to search the city. Preparing a visit from Slenderman required both time and knowledge of where I’d meet my prey, so I needed Bakuda to be found as quickly as possible. Svetta had tried using her power to help, but found no result with the maps she’d been given either physically or on the computer. It seemed to be some form of restriction she had, but now wasn’t the time to test the limits of her powers.

It was my third day spent on extended searches, after six of smaller ones, and from the looks of it I was having no more luck than I had been having the past few days. I did, however, have an extra lead to track down.

The Palanquin.

With the results of the meeting at Somer’s Rock earlier today, I went and asked Tattletale for as much information as possible about Faultline and her group. Not about their powers, since I already knew everything about them, but about their personalites, their histories and whatever other info she possessed about the Striker's crew.

Including the location they worked from.

The issue with the Palanquin was that it was a nightclub, and as such had its busiest hours while darkness covered the city. With my age I couldn’t go in as a civilian. Which meant I had to scout the place in shadow form.

Not as easy as one might think.

I started with the top floors and cleared them without difficulty, especially since they were nearly empty. The VIP rooms were busy, passionately so in some cases, but I wasn’t there to be a voyeur. The rest of the top floors were nearly abandoned, with only a janitor present.

The dance floor, however, was an issue.

With the disco ball and the lasers there, My field of view would have been bizarre in normal form, let alone shadow state, to say the least. Added to this bizarre sight was the annoyance/pain that came whenever one of those light beams passed over my position on the ceiling. As such, it took a good thirty minutes before I could confirm that no one matching a member of Faultline’s crew was in the building. I was pretty sure that if I hadn’t been in shadow form, I would have lost my lunch trying to look at everyone dancing. The effect wasn’t disimilar to when Grue used his power on his costume, only applied to my shadow sight.
After leaving the club I continued my rounds in ABB territory and its surroundings. By now this was almost half the city, which meant hours of work. It wasn’t completely useless, as I managed to stop a couple of robberies by ABB gang members, but there was no sight of my real objective.

Sighing inside, I made my way back to base and to my workshop. I’d done what I could for the moment.

_Time to do something more interesting_, I thought. I loved the feeling of creating something with my very own hands, and that was exactly what the doctor ordered after a few hours of tiring searching.

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I didn’t work with T very long before she left for her own round of patrolling. Each of us did a single such round every night, me first and her second. It allowed us to have two different points of view, all the better for finding Bakuda. I’d made sure to tell her about Faultline, as a second check there couldn’t hurt.

In terms of tinkering, most of what was on the drawing board was done. The fact that school was closed had been of great help. I’d finished Apparition’s breastplate, the last missing part of her costume, which gave me the illusion I was quite a bit more ‘gifted’ chest-wise than I actually was. Slenderman’s new suit was also done, completely this time. I wasn’t going to be leaving with generic gloves and shoes when I went out now. In terms of toughness, this version was pretty much the same as the previous one, only quite a bit more fire resistant. Once complete, I’d sprayed the suit with a liquid that left a flame retardant film behind. This was in preparation for fighting Lung at some point in the future. Right now, however, Bakuda had priority.

What I was working on now was the costume planned for a third identity, which I nicknamed Arsenal. Unlike the others, this was an actual set of power armor rather than a suit. The frame and the exterior were already done, so it could already be worn, but the systems I’d planned for the inside weren’t even ten percent complete. The only thing fully built was a voice modulator which would give me a somewhat deep, masculine voice.

I’d planned on Arsenal being ‘officially’ male, so that specific piece of equipment had priority.

The reason I was working on Arsenal’s armor before any new project was because I would need it when the PRT interviewed me regarding my rogue affiliation request.

Some might be surprised, but affiliating with the PRT did not require a real name and identity. It did, however, require proof of one’s abilities, which sometimes meant extensive testing. More than sixty percent of the rogue capes affiliated with the Parahuman Response Team were either Tinkers or Thinkers. Brutes were the least represented type, even below Trumps.

Tinkers tended to have the easiest time getting such a request accepted. For two reasons, Lisa had said. First, because the PRT wanted Tinkers. They could make equipment for use by non-capes, which was the entire composition of the PRT, contractors not included. And they wanted that very badly. Second was because Tinker-made equipment was easily recognizable, as were plans made by such. Rarely did Tinkers have to prove their abilities to build devices when they came well-prepared.

That was what I planned. I wanted to have enough equipment with me to make it clear enough I was a Tinker that no one would doubt it. I wanted that interview to be as short as possible, to give myself the smallest chance of screwing up. Once that identity was secure it would be easier for me, but for now I wanted to be careful.
Picking up the arm of the suit, I opened it and started soldering chips and resistors inside. This was going to be a Tinker’s suit, so integrated tools were par for the course. The blowtorch attachment, similar to the one on my first costume, was already installed if not fully connected. By the time T came back, I was done placing a multi-headed screwdriver inside the index finger of the right hand of the armor, finished with the connections of the blowtorch, and well on my way to adding a soldering iron.

“Back,” she said as she reverted from shadow state inside the workshop.

“Any results?” I asked. I didn’t expect anything, but hope springs eternal.

“As much as you think,” she replied with a scowl, taking a seat at a workbench. “Aside from a few unpowered criminals, nothing.”

I looked at the clock. Two fifteen in the morning. “Time for me to go,” I informed her.

“Before you leave,” T asked. “Do you know if I’ll need to be going to school on Monday?”

“I don’t have a clue, actually.” I logged onto the computer set up at one end of the room. “Let me check.”

T and I had originally learned about school being closed on the Brockton Bay Bulletin’s news site, so I went there to check. There was no news about the reopening of the school, so I turned toward T. “Nothing in the news, so I’m pretty certain we’re still off.”

“Thank god!” T said. “I’d take Arcadia over Winslow any day, but a full day tinkering before either of those.”

I nodded. “I hear you.” I was about to shut down the computer when I noticed something.

I didn’t check my email often these days, at most once a day. I currently lived with everyone who might send me one, and my father wasn’t the type to communicate with his daughter using anything but phone. Even Kid Win primarily chatted with texts, it seemed.

The email ended up coming from the PRT. I hadn’t given the PRT my own email address, just gave them one I built specifically for Arsenal. I did, however, make it so that it would forward emails in such a way that, after a couple of stops, they ended in my own inbox.

The message, in simple terms, gave their excuses for taking so long to reply, then set up a time for an interview next Wednesday.

I wasn’t surprised that it had taken this much time, as it was clear from the events in the city that the PRT had bigger fish to fry. I also had no issue with the proposed date and time, as it would give me plenty of hours to finish Arsenal’s suit. I almost logged on directly to Arsenal’s account for a reply, then decided it might be less suspicious if I did that tomorrow during normal working hours.

“Weren’t you going?” came T’s voice from behind me.

“Yes, but the PRT finally replied.” I answered.
She raised a single eyebrow. “On a Saturday? Surprising. I suppose you have an interview?”

I nodded. “Next Wednesday.”

She turned and took a good look at the armor I was building. “More than enough time to add some more to this. A flight pack, perhaps?”

I sighed. “I told you before that I wanted to have better materials to work with before I built anything like that.” Flight was something I’d liked the one time I’d gotten a lift from someone, but I wasn’t going to tinker something until I had the materials for a device that would last. Falling to my death because I’d built a flight attachment that was too flimsy was an experience I didn’t want anything to do with.

T raised her hands in surrender. “OK, OK, I’ll let it go. You can be certain however that, as soon as I have some time off, I’m going to be building myself one.”

“Suit yourself,” I said, turning into shadow. T and I were starting to have more and more differences in opinions, I supposed due to the fact that she felt she could take more risks. We still didn’t know what would happen if she died instead of her time running out, but I didn’t feel like testing it. Knowing Brockton Bay, I was pretty sure I’d find out one day or another, but wasn’t going to try hurrying it up.

“Night,” T said, waving as she turned around. I did the same with one of my shadow tentacles, then slipped outside through the sewers.

As I did every time I went home, I did a quick survey of the events hapening on my path. As usual, there was nothing requiring my attention, and I slipped directly into my room. Undressing with my shadow powers didn’t even take a second, and I was comfortably laying on my pillow before five minutes were done.

*I wonder how exactly the interview will go,* I thought. While Lisa and I had gone over other cases like mine, there were few common points between them. *I suppose I’ll have to see.*

That was the last thought of my day.
I was surprised to find Lisa and Sveta waiting for me outside of my workshop on Wednesday. Lisa wasn't generally a morning person, so I knew something was up. Sveta, on the other hand, was up with the sun, so her presence was less exceptional.

“Hello, Lisa,” I said, keeping the door as closed as possible. T was dressing somewhere behind me, and I didn’t want to expose her.

“Morning,” the Thinker replied. “Mind if T or you come with me to check something?”

I didn’t mind, but I was still curious about what. It might help me push back the stress from my pending interview. “Sure, I can come as long as it doesn’t take too much time. Where are we going?”

She looked around to see if there was anyone else, then turned to me. “Coil sent me the location and path to the Undersiders’ newest base,” she whispered. “I wanted to sweep it thoroughly for bugs or dangers before I had everyone move out of here. You have some form of jamming device, right?”

“Sure we do,” T said behind me. After a quick look to make sure she was decent, I opened the door fully. “It'll be a good test, actually.” She handed me the device.

I grabbed what she was offering me. “You know what to work on, right?” I just wanted to make sure.

My clone nodded. “No worries, I’ve got it. I’ll make sure to have the display working before one.”

“Perfect.” I turned away from the other me. “Lead on, then.”

There wasn’t a lot of interesting conversation in public this time. Sveta and I stayed silent while Lisa chatted about light subjects. She ended up directing us to an abandoned apartment complex.

“That wasn’t what I expected,” I said, and Sveta echoed my feeling.

“Even the place I slept in after I escaped the asylum was better.” The former inmate did a quick scan of the place. “Looks like some of the ceilings will collapse soon, even.”

Lisa smiled. “You haven’t seen anything yet,” she said, leading us deeper into the building. “Jammer up.”

I withdrew the device from my pocket and put it back once it was turned on.
The Thinker went in one of the apartments at the bottommost floor, then turned into a room on the side there. Pulling open one of the wardrobes, to my surprise, she revealed an elevator inside.

“What?” I asked.

Lisa’s grin only got wider.

Below there were two floors, both well lit and meticulously clean. The first was composed entirely of bedrooms with a pair of bathrooms, while the other was a combination of a large living room, a kitchen and a padded training room. I was speechless. I couldn’t even imagine the cost of something like this!

Lisa tested the three couches in the living room, then bounced back to Sveta and me. “You like?”

I nodded mechanically. “It’s… a little much, actually.”

“Coil never skimps on the equipment, I’ll give him that,” Lisa said, then she turned to the third member of our group. “Sveta, can you do your sweep of this place? Take your time; it’s better to be certain than to go fast.”

“Sure,” Sveta replied with a smile, then started meticulously going over everything. It wasn’t long before she scowled and moved to one of the sofas. After a few moments of searching, she retrieved a small device from between the cushions.

“Really?” I said, scowling like Sveta. I hadn’t expected Coil to go for something that blatant.

Lisa only grinned widely. “Perfect,” she replied. “That’s one of mine. I brought it up and placed it incognito just to make sure you could find it. With last Sunday’s issue about the maps, I had to be certain.”

“Oh,” Sveta said, then thought for a moment. “Right. Mind if I destroy it? It’ll interfere otherwise.” she indicated at the tiny device with a movement of her head.

“Go ahead.” Lisa said, nodding.

Sveta squished the listening bug between her two hands, then tossed what remained in a trashcan before going back to her sweep. She looked everywhere I could think of in the room, then turned back to us. “Nothing else here.”

“Perfect,” Lisa replied.

I just smiled and did a thumbs up at Sveta. “Mind if we chat here while you check?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Go ahead. I won’t be long.” She then went to the kitchen.

I turned to Lisa. “So, what’s happening with the rest of the alliance? How are things going?” Lisa was the one serving as contact for the Undersiders, naturally.

“Badly,” she replied. “Out of the seven places that were targeted for combined attacks, five were empty and the other two were traps. No cape casualties yet, but a few serious wounds. Hookwolf barely survived one of Bakuda’s booby traps, and Cricket ended up with a broken arm and leg when a building fell on her. It’s starting to get ridiculous.” She scowled. “The current theory is that they
have a traitor in their midst, but they haven’t managed to find out who. We’re lucky not to be involved, since both Coil and Kaiser are looking someone to pin this on.”

“That’s… worrying,” I said, frowning.

“Yeah,” Lisa agreed. “The alliance is hanging by a thread, and everyone is blaming everyone else. Only good thing is the ABB has diminished their rate of attack, so the damage everywhere is lighter.” She sighed. “And on your side, how is it?”

“Not much better,” I replied. “I must have gone over every place in ABB territory at least twice with no results. The Palanquin is no better; no trace of Faultline or any of her capes. I’m starting to think you were right about her group being recruited to defend Bakuda. That’s the only reason I can think of for them to be absent for so long.”

“Agreed,” Lisa said. “Question is, where?”

That tension stayed in the air until Sveta came back. “No bugs or traps. Floors are clear.” She then saw our expressions. “Everything OK, Taylor, Lisa?”

“Just the ABB again,” the Thinker explained. “The alliance isn’t getting the results it should, Bakuda’s no closer to being found, and Faultline’s crew is still missing. It just seems like nothing’s advancing right now.” She stopped for a moment. “Thank you for the scan, though.”

“No problem. Want me to do some more patrols?” Sveta asked, turning to me.

“You don’t mind?”

“Everyone has to do his or her part, right?” she answered. “I can deal with a few hours off the Internet.” That was Sveta’s main hobby.

“Thanks, that would be very helpful,” Lisa said. “We’ll plan those patrols later today, back at Taylor’s place.”

“I’ll have to excuse myself, though,” I added, taking a deep breath. “I’ll be out early in the afternoon, and I have no clue when I’ll be back.”

Tattletale’s body language was questioning for a second, then she remembered. “The rogue affiliation interview! Right, I’d forgotten about it with the ABB.” She smiled. “Don’t worry; you’re gonna do fine.”

“I wish I was that sure about it.” I sighed. “I never thought I’d enter a PRT office walking under my own power, let alone willingly.”

Lisa rose and gave me a hug. “With what you can build, Taylor, you’ll knock them dead. They’d have to be insane to reject you.” She then put an arm around Sveta’s shoulders while keeping the other around mine. “Now, let’s go. It’s not that I don’t like your place, Taylor, but sleeping on my own mattress tonight instead of a pneumatic one is exactly what the doctor ordered for my mental health.”

*-*-*-*-*-*

The interview with the PRT was at two, and I was planning on being early just in case. Thankfully,
my newest costume did not go over the size limits of my shadow form, and as such I was able to walk out of an alley not two blocks from my destination.

Thank god, I thought. I wouldn’t have wanted to walk halfway through the city like this.

One thing was sure, I was drawing attention. As such, I didn’t dally and walked through the main door directly to the receptionist. “Arsenal, meeting at two,” I said in this identity’s male voice. It was barely one forty-five, but I wanted to make a good impression.

I was led to a conference room where, surprisingly, the tinker-made chairs were solid enough to support even my power armor.

Director Piggot, the woman whom my father had met, arrived right as the clock above the door hit two. Behind her was Armsmaster, in his armor but without one of his famous halberds.

“Good afternoon,” the director said with a curt nod. “I’m Emily Piggot, and I lead the Brockton Bay PRT. I don’t think I have to introduce Armsmaster here…” Said man did an even smaller nod. “Who will be helping me judge the value of your services. Also present, though remotely, is Dragon, who will also be taking part in this interview.”

“Good day, Arsenal,” a voice rang through the room from the speakers above. “I’m very interested in seeing your work.”

“Noted,” I replied, though inwardly I was sweating. The greatest Tinker in the world, along with one of the runner ups, checking my devices? I was thankful the two of them couldn’t see anything of my face and how I was nearly hyperventilating. “I’m surprised to have the PRT director here to meet me along with the Protectorate regional leader. Especially with the current issues in the city.”

“I try meeting every one of our rogue affiliates, and planned the meeting in accordance. Protectorate capes must have downtimes, also.” The director looked straight at me and went directly to business. “So, tell us what you have to offer. Why should the PRT be affiliating itself with you of all people?”

I took a deep breath inside my suit. This was the most important part of this interview, the sell. I needed to prove that I had something the PRT wanted badly enough to deal with me. I opened my suit’s forearm to reveal a keyboard and screen there, then typed to bring up the relevant file. A projector opposite the screen sent out the image as a 3D hologram.

“This device is what I call a healing beacon,” I started explaining. Lisa had recommended that I open with this one. “This version has a range of only a dozen meters and is without the other attachments of the original device I was planning, but within that range it boosts cellular regeneration, closing wounds quickly. It is ideal for most forms of trauma medicine, doing in an hour what would normally have taken days or weeks.”

I saw the surprise in Arsmaster’s body language and wondered if it was a good thing. “You have a prototype?” He finally said.

I nodded. “Not with me, though,” I added. The image stayed perfectly still while my arm moved; proof that T had done a good job with it.

“Tested?” he continued.

“On both myself and others, human and animal.” Healing Bitch’s dogs proved that enough.
“I see this version is meant to be plugged in a wall,” Dragon added. “Would it be possible to make it mobile?”

I nodded again. “The original version is mobile, so yes. I’m lacking the resources needed to make the miniaturized power supply. I’m also running right up to the edges of what I can accomplish without access to better equipment and materials, so I can’t build the add-ons that could improve the beacon.”

Both Dragon and Armstrong went silent, the second becoming even immobile. This state lasted for about a minute, before the male Tinker turned to director Piggot.

“Director, can you come with me for a minute?” Armstrong said, pointing toward the door.

Piggot scowled, glancing down at her legs for some reason. “This better be worth it, Armstrong.” She rose and moved outside the room with the male Tinker.

“Is there something wrong with my device?” I asked, suddenly uncertain.

“Quite the opposite, actually.” Dragon answered. “You do not have to worry. Should the PRT not accept your affiliation request, I will pay and equip you as necessary out of my own pocket. I think we can come to a valid agreement, you and I.”

“Really?” I replied, surprised.

“Yes,” Dragon voice rang out. “Simply looking at casualty reports for the last year, a single copy of this device would reduce the death rate in both PRT and Protectorate operations by at least twenty-seven percent. And that doesn’t even factor in hospitals and the like. There may actually be a bidding war for the first of these devices, and it could easily enter the millions if the results of testing match the specs you’ve provided. I wouldn’t lose money backing such a project.”

Piggot and Armstrong came back to their seats then. “The PRT will accept your affiliation request,” the director said, face serious. “We have a few more questions, if you will?”

I nodded mechanically while I was boggling inside. The greatest Tinker wanted my stuff enough that she'd back me even if the PRT didn't?

Armstrong was the one who spoke. “Do you have knowledge of what your specialization is as a Tinker, Arsenal?”

It took a few seconds before I managed to answer the question. “Personal equipment,” I replied automatically, then continued. “Anything meant to be worn, held or used by a single person.”

Armstrong’s jaw went a little slack this time. “Are you sure you wouldn’t accept a Protectorate position? Someone like you could go pretty far up in the Protectorate hierarchy.” I had indicated against that in one of the fields on the PRT rogue affiliation request document.

That shook me out of my surprise. “No,” I answered, my voice confident. “I’m a lone wolf; I don’t take well to orders. My identity is also something I keep to myself only.” Not to mention I was too young for such a position.

The director asked for a few more pieces of information, along with both Dragon and Armstrong. The three of them didn't have any issue with the requests I made: my identity as Arsenal was signed
up as having access to the PRT suppliers, I had workshop space under my name with a list of equipment under order, and there was a lump sum waiting for me in a bank. The only problem was that I didn’t get away without an order for a dozen beacons to be fulfilled before the end of the year, with at least one done before the last of May.

I got out of the building before four, still shocked at how well it went. I’d expected they’d want access to what I could build, but not to that point.
Contracts 7.4

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to hance1986, Logos, zergloli, MilkHornets, Suryn, Dynamesmouse, Essex, LordsFire & Mysterius. I grant each of them in reward a Ring of Power. Note: May turn one into a Nazgûl.

Having a new identity meant that, once again, T and I worked separately.

As they had been in regards to my placement in Arcadia, the PRT were once again very prompt in getting what I wanted. It took less than a day before the Parahuman Response Teams delivered me the address of my new workshop, along with a few of the deliveries I requested. The money had also been wired to me, but that was very low on my list of priorities.

The place the PRT had found for my purposes was a factory building which hadn’t been abandoned long from what I gathered. It was selected because it already had some of the machines I’d asked for during the interview. Not everything of course, but having an industrial press on hand would have been quite useful for some of the devices I’d already built.

I ended up passing the day after the interview examining, organizing and generally making myself comfortable in what would be my new workspace. The place was clean enough at least, though severely lacking in usable furniture. I would once again need to buy chairs, beds, and everything else.

“Arsenal, are you available?” Dragon’s voice rang through the building.

I hadn’t been expecting her. I did a quick check of what I had unpacked, seeing if there was anything that might identify me. There wasn’t. I was wearing my suit, so my identity was as secure as I could make it. “I am.” I answered.

“Good,” her voice spoke from speakers somewhere. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but I wanted to make sure everything was going well.”

“I have no problem with the place or with the equipment already on site, but it’s only a start.” I looked around. “Are there cameras installed?”

“If there are, I am not connected to them. I never monitor people inside private spaces unless given authorization to do so. I am speaking to you through the intercom system, which is still working.” There was a second of silence. “If you look to the the left of the door leading to the main hall, you’ll find one of the microphones there.”

With those directions, it didn’t take me long to find it. “Noted,” I said when I was in front of the device. “Can I ask why you're calling?” I doubted it was to see if I found my new accommodations viable.

“I was wondering, when you would be able to have the first of your healing beacons ready?” the
Guild Tinker asked.

“I did promise a working beacon before May thirty-first. Any reason why you need a more exact date?” I countered.

There was a moment of silence. “There is an Endbringer attack expected some time in May, and odds are favoring Leviathan being the one attacking. While he is the least dangerous in terms of cape deaths, chance of survival is still only seventy-three percent. Most of the injuries he causes, outside of drowning, are blunt force trauma, something which this beacon of yours could help with. A great number of our casualties die on the way to hospitals and the like, and your device might at least keep them stable long enough to get treatment.”

With everything that had been happening in my life, I hadn’t thought a lot about the Endbringers. I could understand now why Dragon and Armsmaster had been in such a hurry to have my beacon working. I’d had to argue to get at least a month before I was supposed to deliver one, and I’d done so mainly because, with the situation in the city being what it was, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to work on these beacons efficiently or get everything I needed.

“I can try to have the first one done as quickly as I can, but that really depends on when I receive the necessary materials,” I replied out loud. “I can start on some parts quickly enough, but I don’t know how much time that’ll shave off the total process.”

“That will have to be enough,” Dragon said, and I could hear a wistful tone in her voice. “Thank you. I’ve sent a message to your email account. Use that address to contact me in case you need something urgently. I’ll try my best to have it delivered to you as soon as possible.” She was silent for a second or so. “Have a good day, Arsenal.”

“You too, Dragon.” The light of the intercom before me shut off, and the speakers went silent.

I turned back to my current improvised table. I had work to do, and it just might save lives if I did it fast enough.

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It was early evening when I arrived back at base, and I was surprised to see that T wasn’t around. I knew her patrol schedule, and she wasn’t supposed to be out until later. It was the very reason I had come at this exact moment.

Sveta however was there eating, so I went to see her.

“Want a bite?” she asked as I came forward.

I shook my head. I’d just eaten before coming here. “Thank you anyway. I was just wondering where T might be.” If I wanted to have a beacon built as fast as I could, her help was necessary.

“Out checking the Palanquin. We have a lead,” she replied after taking a bite.

I was instantly curious. “Do tell.”

“I noticed today when I did my own rounds that my danger sense told me I could possibly meet Newter in the sewers, with the likelihood rising the closer I got to the Palanquin,” Sveta explained. “I discussed this with T earlier, and we came to the conclusion that Newter comes and goes out of the
Palanquin, using the sewers, probably to keep his boss up to date with what’s happening.”

She took another bite. “T decided to wait in the sewers right under the Palanquin until she could track Newter back to wherever his team is lairing.”

That… was rough. I had done some travel in shadow state, but the idea of staying still for hours watching for someone felt like it would be horribly boring. I’d do it if necessary, and it was, but it wasn’t an experience I’d look forward to.

Hopefully, it would give some results.

Sveta and I chatted for close to three hours, waiting anxiously for T’s return. In the end, it was nearly midnight when my clone turned back to physical state in the middle of the room. She had a wide smile on her face.

“I’ve found Bakuda,” she said.

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“So you’ve found Bakuda,” Grue said. Sveta, T and I had moved to the Undersiders' new base. Only Brian and Lisa were currently awake, but it looked like we’d be waking up the others before long.

My copy nodded. “In the Smithson Building, yes.”

“That’s some nerve,” Lisa said from her spot on the couch. “Not even four blocks away from the PRT building.”

Brian nodded. “Continue.”

“I followed Newter there. Every member of Faultline’s team is there, along with a few ABB guards,” T explained. “I haven’t seen Bakuda myself, but there’s a sealed room in the back where I could hear welding in the background. I couldn’t see anything inside due to the light, but a woman came out of there requesting parts for Bakuda, and one of the Asian guards dashed out instantly.”

“Between that and Faultline, I’d say that’s enough for the Undersiders to move out.” Lisa then turned to Brian.

He nodded. “I don’t think we’ll have any better info, and I’m tired of waiting.” He looked straight at T. “How ready did Faultline’s team seem?”

“Three of them awake, two asleep last I saw them. Patrols, though they stayed in line of sight of each other.” She shrugged. “Not much I can say, outside of that.”

“Good enough,” Brian said. “Lisa, wake up Rachel and Alec. T, Taylor, I suppose only one of the two of you will be coming?” The both of us nodded. “Then, whoever’s coming, get suited up, you too Sveta. We meet behind the Smithson building in an hour, OK?”

“Right,” Sveta answered, and all of us dashed toward the elevator. Sveta, T and I stayed in while Brian and Lisa left for the bedrooms.

We three quickly made our way to base. Walking, since Sveta was with us.
“So, which of us is going?” T asked as Sveta went into her room to change.

“I suppose you want to go?” I asked her.

“For sure!” T replied. “You’re not the only one who wants to make a difference.”

“Then you go,” I said, turning to my workshop. “I have something else to do. Don’t worry, I’ll be taking part in this my way.”

T grinned. I knew very well that she felt she wasn’t a big enough part of whatever important stuff was happening. “Perfect.” She rubbed her hands together. “I’ll get dressed.”

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[T]

“This better be worth it,” Regent said just as I arrived. The Undersiders were already present, and Bitch’s dogs were by now big enough to go toe to toe with a human.

“We take down Bakuda, our reputation’s made,” Grue said. “There won’t be anyone disagreeing with us. Even better if we take out Faultline at the same time.”

Tattletale grinned at that, and I remembered she had something against Faultline herself.

“Now, the plan,” the Undersider leader continued. “Apparition, where are they situated?”

“North end,” I answered. “The Best Buy that closed two months ago? In there.”

“Good.” He nodded. “We’ll approach from the east. Everyone will have his own designated target. Each of you, your job is to take that person down, then help the others. No killing, no excessive maiming…” He glared at Bitch. “But do what you can to make it fast.”

“In order…” He turned to me. “Apparition, Labyrinth is yours if she appears. The longer she stays up, the more dangerous the terrain’ll be, so speed is of the essence. Regent, Newter is yours. No one among us can approach him, so keep him busy.”

Regent smiled and bowed.

“Alarm, you and Tattletale are on Gregor. Be careful, he has a lot of tricks up his sleeve from what I gathered. Delay him as much as possible. If you can keep him off helping the others, that’ll be enough.”

“Bitch, you’re up against the boss, Faultline herself. She can’t affect living matter, so your dogs are perfect for dealing with her.” Rachel’s grin was all the answer Brian needed.

“I’ll be tackling Spitfire, as she’s the most directly dangerous.” His voice was grim from behind his helmet. “Now, Apparition, get us inside.”

“With pleasure,” I said, slipping through the glass to unlock it from the other side.

Grue was the first in, and he put a carpet of darkness a few meters both above and around us. “Let’s go, Undersiders!” he cried out as he made his way forward, trusting his shadow to cover the sound.
Behind him, Bitch’s dogs and their mistress followed. I closed the march, since I could catch up easily in this light.

*Look out, Bakuda, I thought. We’ve caught up to you.*
Contracts Interlude: Battle

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to Dynamesmouse, MilkHornets, Ph’nglui mglw’nafh, Robo Jesus, zergloli, Essex, Flere821, NMS, RedPockets, Stratagemini & bobnik for Beta work. For their great work, I give each of them a copy of the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System. Warning: May have cake.

[Faultline]

I never should have taken that contract, I repeated to myself for the hundredth time.

Normally, a defense contract like this one wasn’t an issue: long hours, good pay, limited action. Defending non-combat members of the ABB wasn’t a problem either. Three weeks was more than usual, but the payout was worth it in my eyes. Working for Lung wasn’t the kind of work I preferred, but mercenaries had to take whoever was paying. I’d expected a few clashes with the E88 and maybe Coil, but nothing more. There had been a few arguments about price, but little other than that before the contract was signed. I’d suspected that Lung was planning an offensive against the E88 soon, and wanted to have some of his businesses protected now that his lieutenant was gone.

And then the next day, Bakuda started demolishing Brockton Bay.

The job went from little combat to everyone in the city coming after them in less than four hours. I’d nearly broken my word right there, but feared what retaliation the team would face. None of us were on Lung’s level, and Bakuda would turn the Palanquin into a crater. And with what I’d learnt about the ABB, the team wouldn’t escape unscathed.

I’d discussed it with the others, and they reluctantly agreed with me to stay on the job.

It would have been easier though, if it wasn’t Bakuda they were charged with protecting. The Asian Tinker was a pain to deal with, on every level. It was clear that people, even her own ABB guards, were no better than props in her eyes. If it had been left to her, there would have been enough explosives in the former store we were using as a safehouse to give an Endbringer pause. Worse though was the fact she only really listened to one person, Lung, and Lung alone. There had already been a dozen arguments, and if the ABB leader hadn’t intervened, I would still be arguing with her.

Our second target to protect was much less of an issue, compared to Bakuda. She worshipped Lung as if he was a god, which didn’t endear her to any member of the group, but she at least listened and kept to herself. After the Tinker, it was a breath of fresh air.

I took another look at the cameras and microphones we’d installed, and saw nothing. Everything was quiet and dark.

A little too quiet, actually.

Background noise could tell one much, and learning to pay attention to it did a lot in evading
ambushes. I made sure to always listen to such things, as it has more than paid for itself, dozens of times.

It seemed this time would be no exception.

I took a closer look at the monitors before I noticed the issue. On the one screen showing the east side, I finally found a moving zone of blackness. A few moments later, another small light disappeared into the darkness, and I had confirmation.

The Undersiders. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

I turned to Gregor, who was seated on a chair a little behind me. “Gregor, we’ve got incoming. The Undersiders. Wake up everyone, and get the message to the Tinker.”

He nodded somberly. While Gregor was good and reliable in combat, he wasn’t someone who looked forward to fighting. “We take specific equipment?” he asked.

I thought about it for a moment. “Get the night vision goggles and bring me a taser. I don’t know if the goggles will counter Grue’s shadow, but we waste nothing by trying.”

The man nodded again and moved deeper into the abandoned store.

I turned back to the screen and couldn’t help but smile a little. I’d known someone would end up tracking Bakuda down since Lung sent us to the meeting at Somer’s Rock, and I’d hoped Tattletale’s group would be the one to do it. Getting one over the smug bitch would be a perfect end to the day. Not that this was the only reason. In terms of raw firepower, the Undersiders were the least powerful group that could possibly end up fighting us. The four of them, with Tattletale being a Thinker, was something the crew could handle. Though it might be prudent to keep an eye out for the two new members that were at the truce meeting; they'd be inexperienced, but unknown capes would present an unpredictable element. That is, if they weren't support members.

Still, compared to the possibility of fighting a dozen E88 capes, I’d take on the ‘Masters of the Escape’ any day.

Gregor came back with Newter, Elle and Spitfire. Everyone was silent and serious, as they tended to be before battle. Only Newter had a slight smile on his face.

“We’ve got the Undersiders incoming in less than three, so everyone to their position. Our targets are the Undersiders, and we’ve gone over their abilities and viable tactics enough that I know you won’t need a last minute reminder. Be careful, take care of each other, and strike fast.”

Everyone nodded and took their places. I did the same, putting on the goggles Gregor had brought.

Showtime.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

[Sveta]

The air was heavy as we advanced into the building. I looked everywhere, watching out for danger, but nothing reddened. I’d expected Bakuda to have the whole place trapped to high hell, but there wasn’t a bomb in sight. As such, it barely took five or so minutes before the six of us arrived in front
of the closed store T had pointed out.

Grue looked at everyone in turn before dropping the shadow hiding the store’s entrance, and instantly the door bloomed red in my eyes. “Danger!” I cried. “Coming from the door.”

“A bomb?” Tattletale asked. Beside her, Bitch growled and her dogs followed suit.

I filtered in turn for bombs, explosions and the like, but nothing came up. “No,” I replied. “Something else.”

Apparition stepped up. “I’ll check it out, and try to distract anyone who might be waiting for us on the other side of the door,” she said. “Follow me in as soon as Alarm gives the OK.”

She waited until Grue nodded, then sank into shadow. All of us tensed, preparing to charge in. I stared at the currently red door, waiting for the color to clear.

I was the first through the door when it did, ramming it off the frame with all of my strength. “Go, go, go!” I yelled, then found myself rolling to the side instantaneously as one of Bitch’s dogs broke apart the doorframe as he ran in. The other dogs were next, followed by the rest of the team.

Taylor had told me that my power reacted automatically to attacks, but this was the first time it happened, and I froze for a second as I landed. I then shook my head and looked around.

“Above!” I cried this time, and everyone scattered from the door. Bitch whistled as she did so, and Angelica (if I remembered correctly) jumped straight up to meet Newter who was coming down. The dog hit the orange colored man hard enough that he was knocked further back into the room, but the canine fell to the floor and didn’t come back up. Obviously as a courtesy of Newter’s spit, given what I had learned earlier of the man and his abilities. I could see a few drops fell here and there on the floor, but none had come close to anyone else.

There was suddenly a burst of flame further in the room, and a second later Apparition appeared beside me. “Tried and failed to knock out Faultline.”

Grue waved his hand, filling the rest of the room in shadow. It barely lasted a second before slash-like holes appeared in the darkness, each wreathed in red and blue energy, and the whole thing evaporated after a few moments.

That… I thought. That wasn’t expected.

The whole place devolved in chaos not an instant later. Each of us Undersiders ran toward their pre-assigned target, but in some cases this didn’t help. Gregor dodged Lisa’s taser and swung at me, which triggered my automatic dodging and aborted my attack. He then ignored me, rushing toward his boss. He followed that by shooting a stream of something right into Brutus’ face once he was close enough, and the dog went down after swaying a little. This didn’t deter Bitch in the least, as she jumped straight at Faultline to start punching.

Regent managed to send Newter sprawling before he jumped back into the fray, and to keep him down with his power. Newter was fighting it though, and you could see in Regent's body language that this was taking more effort than expected.

Grue was going after Spitfire, but his shadow kept disappearing in a slowly growing circle around Labyrinth. The young Shaker’s power was somehow cancelling Grue’s in her radius, and the
disparity would only grow with time.

I tried fighting Gregor as I was supposed to, but this gave no appreciable result. Either my swings hit nothing but air, or my power reacted and stopped me in the middle of an attack to evade.

I felt useless there, and wasted precious time trying to figure out something better to do. Then I remembered my power, filtered for ‘being useless’, and looked around.

*The dog?* I thought. That was what my power was showing as the least red in my quick scan of the room.

I ran there. *Maybe I could wake her up?*

A few slaps did nothing, and neither did shaking her. I did belatedly realize I could lift her, then an idea flashed in my head. I turned to see Newter was now next to the wall and using it to push himself up.

I didn't wait a moment and tossed the still-large dog straight at Regent’s opponent. Bitch growled and turned toward me, a lapse that allowed Faultline to whip her hair in the dog controller's face and escape her hold. By the sound Bitch made, it hurt quite a bit.

Angelica was as tall as a human when she made contact with Newter, and the man folded instantly. Regent had made sure he couldn’t dodge, and he was now stuck under a few hundred kilos of dog. Regent gave me a thumbs up and I smiled under my helmet. *One down,* I said to myself. *Next!*

*_**_**_**_**_**

[**Bakuda**]

“Move it you slackers!” I yelled in Japanese at the six ABB thugs under my command. “We need everything packed as soon as possible. You're still in the room when I leave, good luck with the traps!”

Said thugs piled my important tools and delicate masterpieces haphazardly in boxes as fast as they could, making mistakes all the while. I kicked a man who dropped one of my devices to the ground.

“Be careful, idiot!” I yelled at him. “There's explosives everywhere in here! The rest of you, faster!”

Lung had forced me to use this particular place as a workshop because, while it was hidden, it gave us easy access to a loading dock. Not only was this a great way to send the fruits of my labor out, but it allowed for easy packing of my workshop in case an escape was needed. Some of the equipment I would have to leave behind, since it couldn't be moved with only six people, but most of it would be following me out.

Most important was the halfway done superbomb that Lung had ordered. There were still a few days of work left on that one, and leaving it behind would be a waste.

“Finally! You done?” Tian Yan asked, looking down at me. “You were supposed to be able to evacuate in less than five minutes!”

I scowled. I hated the fact that Lung respected this newbie more than me. Her power was weak anyway. I answered regardless, since the ABB boss had put her in charge. “One last load and we go,” I said between gritted teeth.
She glared at me. “Be quick, slowpoke.”

I turned around, growling inside, and yelled at the grunts to follow. That bitch had something against me, I knew it. Another one of those wannabes who thought themselves better than me without reason.

The last load was leftover tools and materials, along with a few unfinished grenades and the like. Thankfully, it wasn’t long before the ABB guards had everything transferred to the truck. I went and started taking a seat in the front, only for Tian Yan to push me out.

“You ride in the back!” she ordered. “I don’t want anything blowing up while we’re on the road.”

I bit on the insult I was about to hurl, and obeyed without answering.

“The rest of you, go back inside and shoot down the intruders! They’ll pay for going after us!” She cried out. “ABB forever!”

“ABB forever!” they repeated with equal fervor, and ran inside to join the battle.

I took one of the few open spots in the back, and waited. There wasn’t anything I could do in the dark like this. There was a small opening where light came from the driver’s section, but talking to that slut was the last thing I wanted to do.

The truck started a few moments later, and we were on our way. I released a breath; at least Lung wouldn’t be able to hold this delay against me.

Then the truck stopped dead, and even the light in the cab disappeared.
Contracts 7.5

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to Curious, Logos, RCa, Robo Jesus, Walker Of The Yellow Path, Dynamesmouse, EmilieHardie, hance1986, Ryune, zergloli, Essex, Mysterius & theBSDude. As part of Project Mayhem, I have zeroed all their credit cards. Except for hance1986, since he didn't think I could do it.

[Taylor]

I smiled as the truck stopped below me. It was still inside the alley behind the shopping center, so there was no one to see me work.

Outside of Bakuda and her flunky, that is.

Returning to shadow state, I had a quick look at the woman in the cab before going after the mad bomber. I was very surprised to see the female driver with three floating spheres arrayed before her.

She’s a cape? I thought. T hadn’t said anything about that.

I thought she had probably never left shadow form when she scouted the place, I realized. If this woman didn’t have her spheres out, she wouldn’t have shown up as anything special.

I ignored her for the moment and slid into the back of the vehicle. The woman there was clearly Bakuda, and she was haranguing the woman in the cab in a language I didn’t know. I couldn’t tell what the words meant, true, but the tone and volume made the general meaning quite clear.

Even better, she wasn’t minding her surroundings.

I resumed human form right behind her and tased her in the back. While stealing her powers was part of the plan, I needed to make sure she was secured.

The woman in front didn’t even notice the flash of the taser due to how focused on her spheres she was. I took advantage of that to slip back into the cab. I waited until she turned to look at why Bakuda had fallen silent. As she was preoccupied, I chose that moment to appear in the seat beside hers, and started my soundtrack of laughing children.

Once she noticed me I had expected a reaction of fear, defiance, or, if she hadn’t heard of me, curiosity. I got none of those as she instead smiled a large and unhealthy grin.

“You are nothing, little spirit!” she shrieked, reaching into her pocket for something. “The Immortal Dragon shall consume you, and your power will be his!” At this, she withdrew a small device similar to a pager. “You will never escape the mighty Lung!”

She pressed the button, to no effect. This didn’t surprise me in the least, since my EMP emitter was still working and stuck to the truck’s ceiling.
“No!” she yelled, mashing the button frantically a couple more times with no more reaction than before. “NO!!!”

I inclined my head to the side, raising the volume a little, and she lost it. She pulled out a handgun and unloaded the entire magazine into me.

It was just like when Victor fired at me, weeks ago. This version of my suit was even more durable, due to the synthetic spider silk I’d used to make the basic costume. Not enough to stop larger calibre bullets, but enough to handle handguns and the like.

Now that she was done, I used the one big change I had made to this version of my costume. Out of miniscule covered slits in the back and on the shoulders, my tentacles slid out and away from the suit, and I was soon flanked by eight of them, four on each side.

This finally got the reaction I’d been waiting for. She clumsily unbuckled herself from the seat, her face pale with terror etched across it, and as soon as she was loose from her buckles she tried to escape out of the vehicle, yelling all the while. Every word was in Japanese of course, so their meaning was lost to me.

Still, as soon as she had her back to me, I tased her like I had Bakuda, and she fell limp against the door.

I grabbed her with my tentacles and dragged her out, then pulled Bakuda out. I was thinking all the while.

I had been planning for only a single ABB cape being present, that being Bakuda. Fact is, I had only a single open slot, and that was if I put Tentacle and Shadow together. And I had plans for Tentacle alone right now.

I formed an empowering zone, and withdrew every single spark both ABB women possessed. Bakuda had a single one like I’d suspected, another Tinker, while the unknown cape had two. This didn’t surprise me, since she had a bronze aura just as Sveta did. Her sparks were also smaller, being sixty and forty percent the size of normal ones, and once again she had a Human spark. Her other spark was the concept of sensing, which I nicknamed Perception.

*That’s gonna be an issue,* I sighed. I was three over the limit, and I knew Human did not match with anything I had (except possibly Clone, which I wasn’t going to test).

There was definitely something up with those bronze auras though. Two out of two I touched had a Human spark, and both had smaller sparks than normal. I’d have to discuss this with Sveta and Lisa later to see what they thought.

But now I needed to work with what I had. First I did what I’d planned on trying, even before the unexpected surprise of finding two capes instead of one, fitting two Tinker sparks together. As I’d hoped, they synched together easily, leaving me with two left to match. What changes that made I had no idea, but that could wait.

Perception did mesh with Area, but once again it cancelled the latter’s empowering effect. I left them joined, as I could split them if I needed to use an unmodified Area spark. I doubted the few extra seconds necessary would slow me down much.
Human, I gave back to the unknown cape. I kept a tentacle on her, so I could take her power back as needed, but right now it was better if I wasn’t overloaded.

It was time for part two, after all.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

[T]

Ouch, that has to hurt, I thought.

Faultline had just managed to escape Bitch’s hold, and had used her power to create a hole the size of Bitch’s leg right under her foot. The dog mistress hadn’t been able to dodge, and after her leg had fallen through she was then tackled by the opposition’s leader. The whole team heard something in her leg snap, and now Faultline was free of her opponent.

Dodging another burst of flame coming from Spitfire, I saw that Sveta had gone and intercepted the enemy Striker, who’d been going directly after Grue. The fight there wasn’t advancing, with Sveta dodging anything that looked close to connecting while unfortunately failing at every counterstrike, but still she kept Faultline busy.

On my side, things weren’t going so well. Spitfire had formed a ring of fire that she maintained inside the area Labyrinth controlled, and this kept me from approaching my target. By now, the Shaker had an area a few meters wide that she could change at will, and defenses were already starting to form inside, blades and the like. I had to do something, as things would only get worse with time.

I had no help coming. Bitch was currently trying to get herself out of the hole in the floor with the help of Judas, her single conscious dog. Grue was going after Gregor, along with Regent and Tattletale, but the Case 53 still managed to keep the three of them busy. He was assisted by Faultline, who dispersed Grue’s darkness whenever it appeared. This gave Sveta an opening when it happened, but she failed to capitalize on it due to Faultline’s skill.

I shadow-dashed under a fiery wave, and focused on my environment. Grue couldn’t help against Spitfire before Labyrinth was taken down, so I had to get to her. That was the issue.

Maybe there’s something around here I can use?

A quick look around revealed nothing useful. I’d have hoped for a fire extinguisher at the very least, but the whole store was empty. There were only a few racks left here and there, and old lights hanging from the ceiling.

Eh, that gives me an idea.

I stole a move from Taylor. I dashed to the ceiling, placing myself right over Labyrinth, who wasn’t moving, then turned back into my solid state and pushed.

I fell straight on top of Labyrinth. Spitfire spat more of her liquid at me, but I was too fast and reached the Shaker first. I turned into shadow right as I touched her, so the both of us weren’t affected from the impact, but only for a second. I reappeared and tased her instantly, causing her to crumple and her zone of control to vanish. Her defenses already present quickly started shrinking.

Only problem was, this left me in close range with the Parahuman equivalent of a flamethrower, and
surrounded by fire to boot.

I extended one of my arms forward and waved as if to say ‘come here’. I could turn into shadow for only a short period of time in this place, but I supposed at least long enough to dodge.

She didn’t react as I hoped, throwing her spit at her own arms. They instantly burst into flame, and she was visibly unaffected by the heat.

*Oh, and she’s fireproof, too, I thought. Unfair.*

Spitfire started slowly sliding forward, only to stop as a sound echoed throughout the entire room. She wasn’t the only one; all combat was put on hold as the laughter of children resonated everywhere.

I smiled under my helmet. Backup had come.

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[Taylor]

I saw the reactions as I advanced into the room, Bakuda and the other ABB cape hanging like fruit from my tentacles. Said reactions were as varied as the people here, but they had one thing in common: the previous fight was completely forgotten.

Gregor was the first to react. He dashed toward Spitfire, releasing a spray of liquid at the same time. Whatever it was, it was effective; the foot-high flames died wherever the liquid touched. I saw T as Apparition vanish as soon as there was a hole big enough in the fire curtain for her to escape.

Regent was the next to react. He waved his hand toward me, then his eyes went wide. That was one of the reasons I’d wanted to keep the Tentacle shard available; during the discussions regarding Faultline’s crew, he’d said that he had issues affecting people with abnormal bodies. He did make a few of the limbs taking the place of my right leg twitch, but not enough to have a visible effect. I couldn’t help but smile inside as he blanched and yelled “He’s not human!”

That cry rallied everyone. Grue shot a wall of darkness at me, but it was clear he’d understood what I was trying to do, as he’d made it hollow. I continued walking as if it didn’t affect me, passing through the small layer separating me from the others quickly.

Faultline’s crew was already retreating, Gregor carrying the unconscious Newter. I was surprised to see the Case 53 being carried so easily, but I supposed Gregor had sprayed some form of neutralizing liquid using his ability. Good, fear was the only impact I wanted to have, and by their body language I had it nailed.

I turned to the Undersiders, upping the volume all the while. I didn’t know if there were cameras watching, but I wasn’t going to take the risk. I advanced toward Grue, who was trying to help Bitch out of her predicament. The dog controller was nearly out, but not completely.

T appeared straight before me, striking forward with all her might. This had been planned beforehand. Not today, but many days before that. To make sure the two of us were seen as different people, the one under the Apparition persona had to attack whoever Slenderman was as if it was a serious fight.

I didn’t stop walking, my tentacles tossing Bakuda straight at Apparition as if the Tinker were trash. I
did the same with the other cape when Sveta stepped forward, continuing to walk toward Grue and Bitch. I, of course, took the power I left her beforehand, and tried to focus beyond my rising headache.

Grue created another curtain of shadow, but this one was like one of those he cast for Apparition. There was an inch loose at the bottom, which allowed me to once again advance. I wasn’t halfway out when I heard Grue yell “Retreat!”, and when I came out, the entire group was nearly out the door. They’d taken Bakuda and the other cape with them, just as planned.

I did appear in various corners of the building on their way out, just to maintain the spectacle and drama. The last place I appeared was behind a streetlight right outside the center, where I slowly raised the volume as the Undersiders escaped. I then disappeared to an empty spot in the sewer, merged Shadow back with Tentacle (which took three tries with my headache), and waited until the pain in my head vanished once again.

Then I made my way back home with a smile on my face.
Contracts 7.6

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Dynamesmouse, Essex, Logos, Robo Jesus, Suryn, greynoise, Mysterius & theBSDude. In exchange for the effort they gave, I give each of them a can of liquid handwavium. Note: Seraviel takes no responsibility to what happens if one decides to drink it. Do not mix with a Cauldron vial.

[T]

“So, are you gonna be okay, Rachel?” Grue asked from his place on the sofa. All of us were seated in the Undersider’s living room except Rachel and Lisa, who were just coming in. Bitch was holding onto the smaller girl’s shoulder for balance while Lisa had crutches in her hands. Plaster was clearly visible around Rachel’s right leg.

Rachel didn’t answer, so Lisa did it for her. “Clean break, so all it needed was a cast.” She glanced up at the beacon I had brought up. “Works for fractures, right?”

“As long as the bone has been properly set, yes,” I replied, and went to activate it. “I’d recommend drinking quite a bit of milk though.”

Brian rose and went to the fridge to fetch said drink while Lisa helped Rachel to an easy chair. It was clear that she didn’t like having to rely on someone else, but she didn’t say a word.

Grue came back with a whole quart and handed it to Bitch. “Just so you know, Angelica and Brutus are fine. Brutus is already up and Angelica should be back to normal by morning.”

Rachel relaxed a little bit more in her chair at those words. She then took a great drink right out on the milk carton.

Brian turned and looked at everyone. “Well, we’ll keep this short, since it’s already past two and some of us had a long day.” He smiled. “First off, good work everyone. The fight might have been cut short, but we all held our own and we were well on our way to winning before it was interrupted.”

“Especially you, Bitch.” He turned to the girl. “Faultline might have gotten the better of you in the end, but you did good keeping her busy as long as you did. They had a few tricks we didn’t expect, but you still gave us the time to take control of the fight.”

“Alarm, Regent, good teamwork on your part. Taking Newter out was the most important part of the fight, and we would have been in dire straits if you hadn’t.”

Bitch growled, clearly not in agreement.

“Leave it, Bitch,” Brian added. “She didn’t even get a scratch outside Newter drugging her.” He stared her down until she stopped growling.
“What happened with Bakuda and the other ABB girl?” Lisa asked.

“We dropped them in front of the PRT Building with a note about their identities.” Said building was guarded at all hours of the day, and ended up being closer than any police station. “It’s not like we had anywhere else to dump them.”

Lisa nodded.

“Any more questions?” Grue asked. His question was met with silence. “Alright, meeting adjourned. I’m gonna go catch up on sleep.” He went for the elevator.

“Me too,” Lisa said. “I’ll be sure to come by your place tomorrow, though.” She then followed Brian upstairs, waving goodnight behind her back. “See ya all later!” she said as the elevator doors closed.

Regent waited until Grue had left before turning to me. “Hey Blondie…” he said, and I sighed inside. He never was gonna let this one go. “Your taser is damn effective. Tinkertech, right?” I nodded. “Probably same source as this thing here.” He waved toward the beacon, and I nodded again. The fact that I had access to Tinker equipment wasn’t much of a secret.

“Mind giving me a way to contact your source?” He grabbed his staff and twirled it. “My scepter could use something with more kick.”

I thought for a second. Modifying Alec’s scepter wouldn’t take more than a few hours. If I managed to go the night without sleep, I could have it done before I vanished in the morning. “You need it?”

“No right now.”

“Give it here and I’ll see what I can do,” I answered.

He moved as if to toss it to me, then clearly thought of something. “How much is this gonna cost me?” he asked.

I hadn’t even thought about asking for money. It wasn’t in my priorities, and I had enough now not to be bothered about spending a few thousands on a whim. “Couple of hundreds.”

His eyes went wide. “Seriously?” I nodded. Maybe it was too little, but I wasn’t gonna overcharge teammates for stuff that might help save either my skin or Taylor’s.

He threw me the staff. He did it fast enough enough that if I hadn’t been expecting it, I might have gotten hurt. “Take it. Just make sure to get it back to me before the next job.”

“No problem,” I said, and Sveta beside me started yawning. I rose and was about to give my goodbyes when I realized that Bitch might not be completely healed yet.

“Sveta, mind telling me if Rachel’s healed?” I asked.

She turned and stared at Bitch’s cast for a few seconds. “Not yet, no.” Rachel scowled at that.

I scowled. “Can you wait until she’s healed before leaving?” I asked. I didn’t want to stay, but I liked leaving the beacon here even less. It was the only one I had working, and I didn’t want to risk anything happening to it.
“I’ll wait,” she answered, though by the look of it, she’d be asleep before long as well.

“You know you and the kid don’t have to leave, right?” Regent said. The kid was his nickname for Sveta, based on the fact that she seemed the youngest of the group. With her missing memories and her Changer ability, I wasn’t so sure. “The both of you have bedrooms upstairs, in case you didn’t know.”

I did not know, actually. It seems my face made this clear since Regent continued. “We have ten bedrooms. Even if we gave one to each of Rachel’s dogs, we’d still have some left over.”

Bitch must have scowled at him, because he turned to her. “Come on! They have more room than ever, and it’s not like they need more.”

Rachel continued scowling.

“Well, if you’re gonna be a bitch, I’m gonna hit the sack,” Alec said, rising. “Blondie, see you later. I’ll be waiting for that scepter of mine. Sveta, good work on that toss.”

That didn’t help Rachel’s mood, though she calmed down when Regent left the room. She fell asleep not much later, and Sveta did the same in her spot.

I waited a good hour before waking Sveta back up for another check, tinkering with Alec’s staff all the while. It was clear I could improve it since the thing was of pretty average construction. Usable, sure, but not efficient.

Bitch was healed by that time, so I packed up the beacon. Sveta was visibly not up for walking home, so I led her to her room and put her in bed. The drawing of a classic alarm clock, red numbers over a black background, was very helpful in finding the right room (My own door had a silhouette of a cloaked figure rising from a patch of shadow; someone here clearly had quite a bit of artistic talent).

I left Sveta a message on her nightstand and dashed to base to find Taylor had done pretty much the same. Just a piece of paper congratulating me on my acting, true, but it was still good to hear.

“Time to get to work!” I said to myself, pushing the note aside. If I wanted Regent’s scepter done before seven, I couldn’t dally.

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[Taylor]

I was at the breakfast table with my father when we heard it. “We interrupt this program for a special news broadcast,” the radio announcer said. “This just in: the Protectorate confirms the arrest of two Parahuman members of the Asian Bad Boys gang, including the capture of the Tinker Bakuda! Bakuda, if you remember, was the provider…”

I tuned out the rest of the broadcast. I did notice that they said nothing about how said capes were captured.

“You left a message yesterday saying you were going on a hunt. Were you part of this?” my father asked.
“Me, T, and the rest of the Undersiders, yeah,” I confirmed. “The Protectorate wasn’t involved. Grue must have dropped them off at a police station or something.”

“You and T…” he thought out loud. “Does this mean there will be another of those videos up?” My father had done some research after I’d given him the name of the identity I used, and quite logically had come up with the three videos that were out there. I’d discussed them all with him; he wasn’t pleased with them, especially the last one, but understood that I’d used that identity to take four villains off the street.

“Maybe,” I answered. “I can’t be sure, since I didn’t plan this as much as I normally do for a visit. I played it up, just in case though.”

“And why wasn’t this planned that much?” he asked.

“We wanted to catch Bakuda as soon as possible, before she could do any more damage,” I explained. “She’s a Tinker, which means giving her time makes her more dangerous. Waiting meant more risk, and more damage done to the city.”

The conversation tapered off after that, so I finished breakfast and made my way to base. I found T asleep on one of the tinkering benches, which didn’t surprise me a bit. Yesterday had been a busy day, especially for her. I decided not to wake her before her time was up.

I did, however, check what she was working on, and was surprised to see Regent’s scepter on the bench next to her. She wasn’t lying on it, so I looked over her work.

*Good design,* I noted. *Very efficient. Works with different levels of shock, too. And a much better power source than the batteries he probably had.* I’d have to remember that one. My suits could use something like it also.

The alarm rang, proving that T was completely out of it since she didn’t even budge. She turned to ash a minute later, and I went over her memories.

It was strange remembering Slenderman through her. I had to agree that my relentless walk, carrying two unconscious capes and ignoring everything that was done to me, made me seem like a monster out of a horror movie. I also saw nothing wrong with her performance in combat, which was good since it was our first battle as Apparition.

I did confirm that she was working on Regent’s actual scepter, too. I didn’t have an issue with such a commission, especially for a non-lethal weapon. It would take some time away from working on our beacons, but not enough to really matter.

One thing I did not do was test my new Human spark with Clone. I’d thought about it earlier today, and I wasn’t willing to take the risk with T. I might have tried experimenting like that a few weeks ago, but she was on her way to becoming her own person now that differences were starting to crop up between us. I didn’t want to take the risk of ‘killing’ her personality by messing with the spark that created her. Not unless I knew it wouldn’t have a negative effect.

The alarm rang again and I recreated my clone with a wave. She teetered for a second, then straightened up.

*That’s new,* I thought.
“Let’s not do that again,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Letting me vanish while asleep,” she specified. “It’s like going from dreaming to instantly awake and on your feet, with nothing in between. Not like waking up at all.”

“Noted,” I said and nodded. “What’s up?”

“Just need to finish Regent’s scepter, then we can go back to the beacons.” She thought for a moment. “You know about Sveta, and about Lisa coming over?”

I nodded. I’d seen the events when going over her memories.

“You gonna go to Arsenal’s workshop today?” T asked.

I inclined my head a little. “Maybe after meeting Lisa, however long that goes. I’ll do what work I can manage here while waiting.”

It was an hour before T joined me on the PRT’s order, the scepter now done. We worked together for about another two hours before I received a message from Lisa. Nothing much, just the hour of our meeting, along with a recommendation to check the Brockton Bay Bulletin’s website.

I did so while T was busy adjusting a beacon’s emitter, and found that there was new information regarding this morning’s news bulletin. Under the site’s 'Update' banner were a trio of videos.

The very ones I’d half expected.

The image quality wasn’t very good and there wasn't any sound, but all three showed different viewpoints of last night's battle. No cuts, just raw footage.

Everyone now knew what Faultline, the Undersiders, and Slenderman had done during the night.
Lisa wasn’t alone when she arrived at the base. I took a quick look at the clock to make sure it was two pm. Sveta was with her, which didn’t surprise me at all, as was Brian, which I hadn’t expected.

“Hello, you three,” I said as I cleaned my hands. Behind me T waved, then went back to wiring a beacon. “I didn’t think you’d be coming, Brian.”

“Well, I had something to deliver,” he replied, putting the sports bag he’d been holding on the table. “Your share of the Bank Job, fresh from our employer.”

Curious, I opened the bag to find it more than halfway filled with bills of every denomination.

“How…” I started, eyes wide. “How much money is in there?”

“A little more than five hundred thousand dollars,” Lisa answered.

That was more than ten times my father’s annual salary. More than twelve times. More than the payout from the PRT, even. “For me and Sveta? That’s a lot.”

Brian smiled. “That’s only for you. Sveta already has her share.”

My eyes somehow managed to go wider, and I turned to the Changer. I noticed just then that she was wearing a backpack which I hadn’t seen on her before. “I… I didn’t get a bigger share than the others, right?” I asked, falling back into my chair.

“Nope, equal shares for everyone,” Lisa explained with a grin. “We made one million and eighty three thousand from the bank itself, and with the boss’ two for one deal we end up with three million and two hundred forty nine thousand dollars.” She pointed to the bag. “That’s a sixth of it right there, in cash.”

I didn’t know what to say for a moment. “Well… thank you,” I finally replied.

“No, thank you,” Brian countered. “With the work you did, we had the easiest and safest time we could at the bank. You deserve your share. And you deserve it again for your work yesterday. Catching Bakuda was the main goal, and without you she’d have escaped. Not to mention that I feel safer knowing that, whatever else Lung manages to do, the Mad Bomber won’t be making any more explosives.”
“You also have my thanks for yesterday,” I said, smiling back. “You could have made my job a lot harder if you hadn’t reacted the way you did.”

Lisa advanced a little, curious. I expected her to ask what I meant, but Sveta was the one who spoke up, “What do you mean by that?”

I pointed to the Undersider's leader while answering Sveta's question. “Brian here caught on to my plan instantly. The first blast of shadow he threw at me was hollow, so apart from the darkness I had no issue, and the second was similar to those he’d use when giving me a ‘lane’ to travel, with the free inch at the bottom. Basically, he made it so that I could go forward as if I wasn’t affected.”

Lisa smirked. “Very nice. And how did you manage to have Alec react like he did? With the things he said afterwards, I’m pretty sure you didn’t inform him about Slenderman.”

“I wouldn’t mind knowing as well.” The leader of the Undersiders stated as Sveta also nodded in interest.

“I didn’t tell him. Remember when Alec said he had issues with people with abnormal bodies?” She nodded, so I turned my arms and legs into tentacles. I kept the bottom ones in my pants and shoes, simulating normal legs, and rose from my chair. “That’s what I did. He’s used to controlling single limbs, and suddenly I had dozens. It isn’t much of an issue keeping your balance when you have more legs than an octopus.”

Brian released a booming laugh, Lisa started cackling, and even Sveta chuckled a little. “All warfare is based on deception,” he quoted. “Thank you. The reaction he had, it was perfect.”

“My pleasure.”

“How about we get to the meat of this meeting?” Lisa asked.

I looked at her. “Which is?”

“Powers, of course,” Lisa replied with her usual grin. “You hit two capes yesterday, so that’s at least two more powers.”

“Three, actually,” I pointed out. “The new ABB cape was a bronze aura.”

“I remember that term from the power lists you gave us, but I have to say I have no clue what it means,” Brian spoke.

I inclined my head toward Lisa, indicating that she could answer this one. “Up to now, Taylor has seen two different types of auras around parahumans. White ones are more common, but there are some bronze auras,” the Thinker explained.

“How common?” Brian asked.

“Remember the list?” He nodded. “Everyone not specified bronze is a white aura.”

Brian focused, clearly trying to remember. “Pretty much everyone, then.”

Lisa nodded. “Yes. People with bronze auras are different. Their powers are different, and they have an extra power which the others don’t seem to need.” She turned to me. “Let me guess, your third
power is Human, correct?”

“Correct,” I said, nodding. Sveta came closer, clearly interested in the conversation.

“Human?” Brian asked. “Why only some and not everyone?”

“I’m pretty sure it has something to do with the fact that all known monstrous capes, like Gregor and Newter, have bronze auras,” Lisa continued her explanation. “Our current theory is that there’s someone out there giving out powers, maybe even selling them, but whatever method they’re using has side effects. They somehow add the Human power to try to balance things out, and even then it doesn’t always work.”

“It would also explain why the ABB suddenly had a new cape, and with exactly the power that gang needed,” I added.

“What was her power, actually?” Sveta asked.

“Now that I have it, I call her power Perception. In her, it manifested as a trio of floating spheres with images in them. I didn’t pick out exactly what was on them, but the one time I saw her use her power she was gazing into one of them very intently.”

“Clairvoyance,” Lisa replied. “Like a crystal ball. I’m ninety percent sure that’s it. There were probably some restrictions or constraints about what she could see, but it explains clearly why the Alliance had been having such a hard time going on the offensive. She saw them preparing their attacks hours in advance, so by the time they got there everything was gone.” She had a knowing smile on her face by now.

Brian thought for a while. “Makes sense. Better than a spy, at least. I don’t see someone working for the ABB managing to infiltrate the E88, and Coil seems above having things such as spies in his ranks somehow, probably due to his power.”

“So Perception, Human, and…” Sveta asked.

“Another Tinker,” I finished.

Lisa counted on her fingers. “That’s eight, seven if you have Shadow and Tentacle combined. How do you manage that?”

“For short periods of time, I can use my zone,” I explained. “But in this case I just combined more powers; both Tinkers meld properly, and Perception fits with Area.”

“Which brings you back to five, right.” Lisa smiled at me. “What do they do?”

“So far, I’ve only figured out the Area and Perception combo. When combined, I can mentally select an area and apply my power to it. Within that zone, I know everything.”

Everyone’s eyes went wide. “Everything?!” Lisa cried out.

“Everything physical and material. I know every item’s dimensions, quantity, position…” I thought of something and rose. “Actually, let me test something.” I went to the place where I had a small fridge and cupboards. “Brian, mind throwing your shadow over me and the area around me? No draining.”
He nodded and did so, which confirmed what I’d thought.

“How are you doing that?” Brian said, surprised. Lisa looked on in interest as I came out of the darkness with a glass of Coke.

“She didn’t have any issue getting herself a drink while inside my darkness,” Brian explained.

I smiled. “I know everything about my area, so I can easily navigate and do things even if my senses are blocked.” I then took a sip.

“That’s pretty powerful,” Sveta pointed out.

“It has some disadvantages.” I said, and pointedly did not elaborate. Knowing where every speck of dirt was, how clean your teeth actually were, and every single germ in a zone wasn’t something one liked knowing. Knowing the taste and texture of everything was also an ability I could do without. I had taken two showers since this morning, and I still didn’t feel clean.

“Ok…” Brain said after a moment of silence. “When are you planning to test your other powers?”

“Right now actually.” I answered, bending down to draw a zone under my chair. I’d already split Area and Perception, if only to cancel my previous power. I was starting to get used to the headaches by now. As soon as the zone was done and empowered, I split every single one of my sparks, putting me at eight. “I need to drop a power, preferably Human, so testing it with others is necessary.”

“With the results you had last time, I don’t mind,” Brian said, and the two girls beside me nodded.

I turned to Lisa. “Anything you’d like me to try first?”

“I’m most interested in Perception, obviously,” she said.

“Perception it is.” I focused on it, and found it was already activated, and telling me something. ‘Three’ it said in the back of my mind, in a manner similar to how my power knew about other powers under my father’s ability.

Why three? I thought.

I looked around, glanced at Sveta, Brian, and Lisa in turn, then behind me toward the workshop. Still the number was the same.

Then something came to mind. “Everyone, close your eyes.”

They did, and instantly the number fell to zero. Asking them to open their eyes one by one made the number rise similarly. Focusing a little gave me an idea of the direction and distance.

“Got it. It tells me who’s looking at me, how many and in what direction they are.”

“That’s not very powerful,” Sveta replied. “Especially with how much better it was with Area.”

I nodded in agreement. I had the feeling I was missing something. I focused on one of the directions, Lisa’s, and found something like an on or off switch there. I flicked it.
“Hey!” Lisa cried out. “Where did you go?”

Brian looked at her bizarrely. “She hasn’t moved, Lisa.”

I smiled at that. This had so much potential for pranking. I focused on the other two directions and switched them off too.

“Hey!” Brian repeated as I must have seemed to vanish from his sight just as he turned back toward me. Sveta only smiled, having figured out what the power did.

Further tests revealed more. I could make it so that I was naturally invisible to everyone when I came into their line of sight, basically putting a default ‘on’ to every switch. On the other hand, my power only dealt with sight, not any other sense, and didn’t affect cameras or people through them. Worse, getting too close to someone cancelled the effect for that person. Still, there was so much that could be done with this.

“I’m keeping this one,” I said, and saw Lisa pout at the side. I wasn’t surprised to learn that she’d been interested in this spark; I was pretty sure it would combine effectively with her own, and be quite powerful. I’d probably test this with her alone later.

“So, Human now,” Sveta said, clearly curious. This was unsurprising, since she had a copy of that exact spark.

I nodded and put all my attention on it. It was also already active, but this one said nothing. It seemed to do nothing also, since I found no switch or way of affecting it.

“So?” Lisa asked after a minute of waiting.

“I got nothing,” I admitted. “It’s on, but it doesn’t seem to do anything. No slider, no switch, nothing.”

Both Lisa and Sveta stared at me for a moment.

“Nothing also,” Lisa said. “You seem perfectly normal. I don’t even get the fact that you have a power active.”

“That’s the only thing I get,” Sveta added. “Human is active, and does something, but I can’t tell what.”

“You’re going to get rid of it, I suppose?” Brian said.

“If I can,” I replied. “Mind if I tried it with your powers?”

Human ended up working with both of their sparks, each having a very similar effect. It limited their powers to human beings, but made them more effective at what they did. In Brian, it basically shut down all of his target's senses, and he could use it on multiple people. We suspected, but didn’t test, that the draining effect was also increased. On Lisa’s side, it made her power more effective at reading humans in general and less prone to inducing headaches, but removed every ability outside of that.

Both of them declined on keeping Human. Brian preferred his cloud of darkness, and I concurred,
while Lisa wasn’t going to go without her password cracking abilities. As such, I turned to Sveta.

“Me?” she asked. “But I already have it.”

“Won’t know until we try,” I said. “I currently have two tinkers, and they mix perfectly well. Since I’m pretty sure your Changer ability is coming from Human, having two might give you more control over it. Or maybe a new related ability.” I smiled. “With what it is, I doubt it could turn you into something other than a human.”

She was silent and immobile for a moment before she nodded, giving me her hand. I took it and drew out her three-part power, then stopped as I noticed something.

Her powers had grown.

Originally, her three powers together equaled one of mine, while now they were bigger. Not as much as two normal powers combined, but somewhere around one and a third to one and a half. Still, I pushed that fact to the back of my mind and grafted the new Human to her trio. As expected, it went without issue. I then pushed it back to her.

“Done, and no problem,” I announced.

Sveta tried doing some changes to her appearance then, and Lisa confirmed; it was going faster. Where before it took around a minute to make a complete change, now it barely took a few seconds.

“Any negative effects?” I asked.

The changer tested every one of her powers in turn, and none seemed affected. “None that I can see.”

“Perfect!” I said.

“We have a winner!” Lisa announced from her place at the table. Brian simply smiled.

“Now what?” Sveta asked.

“Now we can…” I started, only for my alarm to ring. I turned to the clock which said four thirty. Time to get home, I thought.

“Your time to go, right?” Brian asked.

I nodded and finished my soda. “I’d stay, but my father has probably seen the videos by now and will have some questions.” I realized something. “Actually, you never said where the videos came from,” I asked Lisa.

“I’m not one hundred percent sure, but I’m guessing Coil. It fits his modus operandi, and I’m pretty sure he has moles of some sort inside the PRT, as he tends to be very well informed about their comings and goings.”

“So the PRT got to the footage first?” I asked.

She nodded. “The videos are from normal security cameras judging by the video quality, and we did
I said goodbye to Sveta and T, who were staying, and walked out with Brian and Lisa. “So, what will happen now?” I said, clearly indicating the state of the city.

“Well, I’ll inform the Alliance of who their ‘spy’ was, in case Coil doesn’t already know, and the attacks on the ABB will restart. This time, they’re finished. Lung alone isn’t enough to ensure their survival, and with the Protectorate taking part, he’s bound to get caught sooner or later. Only way this doesn’t happen is if he skips town.” She put her hands on both mine and Brian’s shoulders. “We did good, guys. Another gang in Brockton Bay is done for. The Undersiders are that much closer to the top!”

I smiled at that. If the Undersiders were the worst this city had to offer, this place was sure to get better.
Special thanks go to Essex, .IronSun., Robo Jesus, Mysterius, hance1986, RedPockets, Suryn, theBSDude & zergloli for their work on this part. I give each of them half a dozen bright blue dice. Note: Includes contact with an asshole GM named X.

[Dragon]

My usual checks and verifications went through: no movement from any of the Endbringers, the Ash Beast was still four days away from anyplace populated, the Sleeper was quiet, there were no new reports from Ellisburg, and the Slaughterhouse Nine were seemingly silent for the moment. Rumor had it that they were in the process of testing a new member, which usually meant they wouldn’t be moving for a few days, not that anyone knew exactly where they were at the moment. The rest of the S-rank threats beyond the big names were similarly inactive.

A-rank threats showed more action, but nothing requiring an intervention. Black Piper’s location was still unknown, but based on previous patterns he would be hiding for at least the next two weeks. Bloodthirst hadn’t been seen in the last month, and probably wouldn’t be seen for at least two more. The Seattle Protectorate was on his trail, and didn’t need my presence.

The Baumann Parahuman Center, better known as the Birdcage, was calm. There had been only a single new inmate, Hansel, in the past month, and he hadn’t lasted longer than a day, regardless of what I’d tried. It was well known that the man attacked children, and like the more regular prisons, the inmates had taken justice in their own hands. It hadn’t helped that the children of some of the inmates already present had been part of the man’s rampage. The AI I had put there to manage the place had no outstanding issues for me to look at.

I could focus on other projects.

Tinkering-wise, there wasn’t much. I was still waiting for five shipments of components required to finish my latest suit. I could always do another pass to see if there were improvements I could make, but that could wait.

Instead, I immersed myself in Protectorate news, information and reports.

Again, there wasn’t much. There was always a dip in hero/villain confrontations in the days preceding the expected arrival of an Endbringer, at least since someone had theorized that these S-class threats were attracted by violence and destruction.

That fact only made Brockton Bay seem worse by comparison.

Brockton Bay had always been a cape-heavy city, even in the early days of parahumans. I suspected this was due to the city’s less than flourishing economy, a high ordinary crime rate that predated even capes, and powerful drug commerce tied to the then easy shipping. The fall of said shipping and the incident that created the Boat Graveyard certainly did not help.
All of these could have caused trigger events.

I was happy that Bakuda was no longer a threat, but I unfortunately was one of the few that didn’t feel some form of apprehension at the way the mad Tinker had been captured. The Protectorate disliked being shown up, and having the cause of the recent problems delivered to one's door by a group of criminals was galling. The information attached was even worse, because it meant that the PRT had been sitting less than a kilometre from the source of this problem, and had found nothing for all of their effort.

But the worst part, for sure, was that the footage the PRT had recovered from Bakuda’s lair had been leaked to the public at large by persons unknown. Not all of it, in fact only a minimal portion of the total footage recovered, but the final and most important part was now all but spread all over the net.

I had been the one to recover the footage on the night of the capture, since the fact that I didn’t sleep meant I could always be on call, and I’d made sure to wipe all traces of the videos outside the PRT servers. It was from there that it got sent out.

And the PRT had no clue how it had been done.

Currently, the main suspect in this data theft was the villain known as Coil, but if it was him who did it, the Brockton Bay Parahuman Response Team was infiltrated with more moles than were currently known. Coil had three known informants in the PRT, and none of them had clearance, let alone physical access, to this data. Only the higher-ups and the analysts could currently touch said footage, which was unavailable remotely, and all of them were accounted for and beyond reproach.

I loaded the entirety of the data into a custom program of my own devising, made to enhance video by combining multiple angles of the same footage in a 3D gestalt that was customized to my own senses. This still took some time, so I made another check of my responsibilities.

No change since the last sweep.

Once the data was collated, I went over the entire fight with a fine-toothed comb. This was the first time the Undersiders were known to have engaged in an actual battle with a group of similar strength, and there was much information to be found. Especially since they'd added two new members since the last time they had been caught on camera.

The group was quite effective considering their lack of direct offensive capabilities. Hellhound and her dogs were still an important part of the attack, but the loss of two didn’t seem to change the rhythm of the battle.

I had my own database of cape information, and I added point after point, linking the relevant parts of the video.


At the time of the interruption, I estimated a 73% percent chance of an Undersider victory within eight minutes.
Then he came in, the current bugbear of the PRT and the main subject of conversation on the parahuman Internet forums.

Slenderman.

He was why I’d gone through all this effort. He was the most talked-about cape on the net due to the events in Brockton Bay and the videos tied to him, and hundreds of theories each less likely than the last had been spawned and fed by the Parahumans Online Forums. I kept track of everything that was happening there in case something new came up, but the current theories were so out there that there wasn’t anything useful in them.

The video of the Faultline/Undersider battle was the second longest recording of Slenderman, and the one where he moved the most. The fact was, the PRT and I had very little concrete data on this cape, and anything my systems could flag was one more detail that would enable us to pierce through his mystery. I personally wasn’t even sure he was a man. Coming from the point of view of a being who didn't have a physical gender, I disliked using male or female without proof.

The program didn’t take very long before generating a message.

**Error! Non-human body type!**

Along with that warning were a number of video frames. Slenderman’s lower body was highlighted throughout, and a normal human skeleton was superimposed over each image.

The bones of the skeleton didn’t match with Slenderman's movements.

Checking closer, it was even visible to the naked eye if one knew where to look. The Trump’s legs were too fluid, and sometimes they didn’t bend at the knee as a human's would. Checking step by step, I noticed that while he imitated a human frame most of the time, rare frames showed that this was simply him masquerading under an illusion of normalcy. He didn’t need to walk as a human did, since he apparently wasn’t.

I went through everything the program reported, but it was useless. I’d built the program with the human frame in mind, and now it had to be recalibrated if I wanted to draw valid data.

*One step forward, ten steps back,* I sighed electronically.

I’d hoped that going over the battle might have helped me decide one way or another regarding my dilemma, but all it did was raise more questions.

Still, I went through the battle over and over again, and as time went by I became more and more certain that both the Undersiders and Faultline had been in no real danger from Slenderman. He’d moved at a sedate walking pace, not hurrying, and hadn’t expended any effort in trying to catch either of the two groups. He’d even ignored the two that had attacked, continuing forward relentlessly toward either Hellhound or Grue. I suspected that this entire show was a message for one of them, probably Grue as the leader of the gang.

Connecting back to the traffic cameras and going over that night’s data only confirmed those facts. Faultline was seen escaping without pursuit, but Slenderman appeared outside, in the shadow of a lamppost, right beside the Undersiders as they escaped. Like Slenderman had done when he’d demolished Victor’s house, this was his way of making things clear, of giving a warning.
I felt a bit better at that. Slenderman was suspected to have knocked out half a dozen ABB gang members, making this the first time he was implicated in an attack on a non-cape with some form of proof rather than hearsay. Maybe they had been in the same room as Bakuda and the other ABB cape, or maybe they had interfered in some other way with Slenderman’s message. Still, they had been simply knocked out, with little injury done to any of them.

There was still no proof that Slenderman was a danger to the general public.

I now had a choice. I could either do nothing and have someone suffer for a simple mistake, or I could take a risk and try to save a poor soul.

I chose.

I transferred my consciousness to one of my spare bodies, this one not a powersuit. It was actually a backup server I’d built and launched into space by myself, a satellite of my own. I’d been afraid the Simurgh might have taken offense, but she hadn’t reacted any more than she did when commercial satellites were launched.

This was my haven when my creator’s rules were impeding me. While this place did nothing to let me create AI, it freed me from the rules of the land. I was in space, and this land had no rules except mine.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t do everything from here. Even with Tinkertech, there was still enough lag from earth to space that I couldn’t use this server to pilot one of my suits, but it was enough to let me talk with people without being restricted by human laws.

I connected.

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Morris_Elk
Contracts Interlude: Sveta

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to Kinter, MilkHornets, Mysterius, Suryn, Warhammer651 & zerglol for their work on this part. To reward them, each get a working copy of the Harkonnen-2. Note: May cause user to be attacked by Nazi vampires, Nazi werewolves, and other such forms of Nazis.

[Sveta]

Eleven in the morning, I thought, looking at the clock. Time to go.

I logged out of the online game I’d been playing. It had come recommended by Void Cowboy before I’d left the institute, and I used to have a horrible time playing it due to my lack of control over my body. Now, I was approaching an eighty-five percent win rate. A few more days like this and I’d be able to join him in the Hero League.

It didn’t hurt that my danger sense also applied when playing a game.

I waved to T as I passed her on my way down the stairs, and she returned the gesture. Most people wouldn’t be able to see the difference between her and Taylor, but I’d gotten used to her tells. It had taken a while, but I could now recognize the details. T tended to be more confident than Taylor, more sure of herself. Somewhat careless, also, and she liked Tinkering even more than her source did.

I was surprised to find Taylor and Lisa at the table as I made my way out. Taylor’s presence wasn’t anything abnormal, but it was rare to see the Undersider Thinker before the afternoon started.

“Morning Lisa,” I said, and she turned to me and eyed me. It was bizarre, as if she could see right through me. “I’m surprised to find you here this early.”

“I promised her she could try my new ability, Perception,” Taylor replied as Lisa continued looking around. “Both with and without her original power.”

I nodded. “And what does it do?”

“It allows me to selectively not perceive stuff, and see what is behind or inside,” Lisa explained.

“Something like X-ray vision, you mean?”

“Pretty much.” Lisa shrugged. “And even better, both powers combined give me much the same as if I had the two separately. I can pick up cues from Perception and deduce things with it. I can see muscles tensing and the like, so with some time training I might finally be able to read attacks properly.”

“Quite useful,” I said.
Lisa turned to Taylor with puppy-dog eyes. “Can I keep it? Please?” she begged.

“No.” Taylor crossed her arms, trying for a glare. It didn’t work that well, even I could see her lips trying to curl into a smile, and if I spotted it Lisa already knew it. “I might lend it to you a few times however, if you’re a good enough girl,” she said, playing along.

Of course, that was all Lisa wanted. She jumped and hugged Taylor with all her might. “Yay! Thanks, mommy!” she said in a clearly fake kiddish voice.

Taylor rolled her eyes in exasperation, then turned to me. “You leaving, Sveta?”

I simply nodded.

“Are you going to pick something up?” Taylor asked.

“No, but I might later,” I replied. “I’m going to try and meet Gregor and Newter at the Palanquin.”

Taylor’s face instantly turned serious. “Are you sure this is a good idea? We fought them not two days ago, and they were protecting Bakuda for who knows how long.”

“She’s not in any danger,” Lisa said, disentangling from the Trump. “Faultline’s a mercenary, so she doesn’t fight unless there’s money on the line. And even then, she doesn’t kill, ever.”

Taylor looked down at Lisa. “Doesn’t kill? She and her group were basically protecting a serial bomber who caused the deaths of hundreds all over the city.”

“And I’m pretty sure she didn’t plan for that when she signed her contract. And after that, what could she have done?”

“Break her contract, for one,” Taylor replied, arms crossed again.

“That could have killed her team, in case you didn’t know,” Lisa explained. “Heroes are not the ones who tend to hire mercenaries like Faultline, villains are. And a reputation as a betrayer means a huge drop in business. Sure, it was a bad move accepting the contract in retrospect, but once she’d signed she was pretty much screwed. Fighting us was actually the best possible case; they might have been losing, but prospective employers will know that they’ll fight until the end. They only retreated before Slenderman, and there aren’t many capes that would go and face that, especially with two of their number already down.”

Taylor clearly wasn’t convinced. “People would hire someone who protected a mad bomber?”

“In Brockton Bay, probably not, but outside the city, sure. In a way, this proved that they would do the job no matter what plans their buyer has, which is a selling point for some people,” Lisa continued. “They won’t be popular around here for some time, but that won’t mean much outside the city. They will certainly make sure to leave Brockton Bay for a while, to let tempers calm down.”

“All the more reason to go now,” I said. “Don’t worry, I’ll be careful. My power will warn me of dangers anyway, and I intend to listen to it.” Not that I’ve ever ignored it.

Taylor was silent for a moment, then sighed. “It’s your choice,” she finally said, still unhappy about my decision. “I’m not going to stop you. Just be careful, ok?”
I nodded. “Catch you later.”

She smiled sadly. “Stay safe.”

With the number of patrols I’d done, Brockton Bay was well known to me by now, and the walk to the Palanquin passed quickly. It helped that neither Taylor’s place nor the Palanquin were involved in the Alliance/ABB war going on. The battles were still continuing, but this time it was the Alliance that had the advantage. Lung had shown himself a couple of times, but he alone wasn’t enough to stem the tide, not with E88’s heavy hitters concentrating on keeping him busy. He would eventually reach a point where he was unbeatable, sure, but by that time the ABB troops had lost and the place was levelled. The E88 would then escape, mostly thanks to Purity’s suppressive fire, leaving the ABB leader alone in the ruins of his former holdings.

I didn’t go through the main doors of the Palanquin, of course. It was much too early for them to be open, so I went through the alley and knocked on a side door, where a cook answered.

“I’d like to speak to Gregor and Newter, please,” I said.

Said cook looked at me for a few moments, then nodded and closed the door. I had to wait for a few more minutes before it opened once again, and this time Gregor was there.

“You are much younger than the ladies who usually find themselves attracted to my friend Newter, miss,” the bald Case 53 said with his accented voice. “How can I be of help to you?”

I looked at him and filtered through various dangers just to be sure, and nothing came up if I didn’t start a fight. I then pointed to my cheek and forced my body back into my original shape.

I didn’t have long to wait before Gregor reacted, moving back to let me enter. “Please come inside, miss. I see we need to have a conversation.”

It wasn’t long before I was seated in a booth on the second floor with both Case 53 before me, along with Faultline herself who remained standing. “What is your name, miss?” Gregor asked.

I used my power to be sure, but there was no danger in telling my real name. “Sveta.”

Faultline raised an eyebrow at that, and opened a folder on the table. She brought out a file, one with a picture of me in my previous condition, taken while I was at the institute. “This Sveta?” she replied showing me the picture.

I nodded.

“There’s some resemblance with the face on the photo, sure, but Gregor told me about the little trick you did downstairs,” the leader of the crew said. “How do we know you’re not trying to fool us?”

I’d expected that. “I can answer any question you want.”

“Where were you found?” she asked.

“Madison, during the Simurgh attack. First thing I remember is falling from high up in the city, and my body landing by itself.”
“No memory before that?”

“None.”

“What happened then?” Gregor said.

“I didn’t have control over my body, not even the little bit I managed later. There were people running around and the Simurgh screaming in my head. My limbs, they moved by themselves, ripping apart whoever came in range, and carrying me to hunt the ones escaping.” I grimaced. I didn’t like remembering that day, which hadn’t faded a bit since then. “At the time, I was convinced I was having a nightmare, and tried over and over to force myself back awake. I closed my eyes to what was happening, and tried to ignore everything. In the end, my body tried breaking out of the city limits, and the PRT fought me at the wall. The machine guns they used were useless, but one of the men I squeezed to death had a foam dispenser at his back, and it sprayed all over me as it broke. That held me down enough for capture, and the next day I was in a containment facility.”

I’d not noticed, but Faultline had been going over my file while I was talking, looking for discrepancies. “Good enough,” she finally said. “How come you no longer look like that?”

“I would like to know also,” Gregor added.

“No kidding,” Newter confirmed.

“I…” Red. I mentally changed what I’d been about to say, and the color faded. “My powers changed for some reason. I wasn’t a Changer originally, and when I became one I returned to a human form.”

“How?!” Newter replied, moving closer.

I shook my head. “I was asleep when it happened.” The truth, technically. “When I woke, I was back in a human body, and escaped the asylum as soon as I could.”

Faultline sighed. “What do you know about people like you? Do you have any idea how you ended up looking like this?” She showed the picture to make her question clear.

“I don’t remember anything;” I started. “But some friends of mine and I came up with a few guesses based on the information we had.” I’d call Tattletale’s deductions more than guesses, but that’s what they were in large part. “Powers like mine aren’t natural, we think. There’s either someone or a group who are giving people powers, and the ones like us…”

“Case 53s,” Faultline interjected.

I nodded. “We Case 53s were the test subjects. They’ve been trying different things, trying to figure out something that works reliably,” I thought for a second. “That’s pretty much all I have.”

The three members of the crew looked at each other and nodded. “Well, that at least confirms what I have,” the leader said. “We have a lead on more, but that’s just about all we have at the moment. Now, another question: are you looking for work?”

I was surprised for an instant, so Faultline continued. “The crew here is always recruiting, and not everyone is comfortable around Newter and Gregor here. We pay well, and we could use your abilities. We’re even looking for who created the Case 53s, which I’m pretty sure you’re curious about. So what do you say about joining us in checking it out?”
I saw Gregor and Newter lean forward in anticipation, but I unfortunately had to decline. “I’m sorry. I’m already part of another group.”

They were still polite after that, but the meeting wound down quickly. Gregor walked me back out the building. “Goodbye, little Sveta,” he said as I walked out. “Know we will accept you if you change your mind. Best of luck to you.”

“You too, Gregor.” I couldn’t be angry with them, even if I’d fought them earlier this week. Gregor had been polite and even somewhat charming, while Newter just seemed like a big kid. Lisa had been right, as usual. For them, it had simply been a job, and there were no hard feelings. I did wonder however what Lisa had done to earn Faultline’s ire.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*

I wasn’t logged into PHO for a minute before I received a private message.

Morris_Elk: Are you available?

*That was unexpected, I thought. While Morris_Elk seemed to be always connected, he hadn’t sent a single message in the past few weeks. Still, I had no issue with talking to him.*

Wyrmmidon: Sure.
Morris_Elk: Could I ask you for a favor?

*I do owe him, I thought. More than once, too.*

Wyrmmidon: Ask away.
Morris_Elk: I saw what happened to you, and the post you made in the visit request thread.
Morris_Elk: Slenderman was the cause of your change, correct?

I instantly pushed away from the screen at that. I’d gotten the fact earlier that someone could guess what happened to me because of the post I made, and that was the reason why I was ok with deleting my account. I verified again, and my post was still gone from that thread.

I went back to my messages, and stared hard at the screen. Not red. Not traps, not trying to get Slenderman’s identity, not fishing for information. I had to go back to the visit thread just to make sure my power was still working (it was).

Wyrmmidon: I can’t confirm or deny anything.

That was the best I could answer.

Morris_Elk: But you are in Brockton Bay, correct?
Morris_Elk: I’ve tracked your IP to the city. Not to a specific address, of course, just enough to be sure.

_Facing a master hacker is dangerous, I realized. Still, there was no red in my sight._

Wyrmmidon: What if I am?
Morris_Elk: I have a job for you, then.
Morris_Elk: I am looking for a way to contact Slenderman.
Morris_Elk: If he is still interested in helping charitable causes, I might have something for him.
Morris_Elk: [link].

Wyrmmidon: Why come to me?
Morris_Elk: He was at least interested enough by your case to help you.
Morris_Elk: He might be more likely to listen to you, for whatever reason.

I checked the link, read it through twice to make sure.

Wyrmmidon: Why this?
Morris_Elk: I’ve been following the trial, and it’s a farce.
Morris_Elk: They aren’t really putting her on trial, but rather going after all Masters through her.
Morris_Elk: It disgusts me.
Wyrmmidon: And how would Slenderman stealing her power help?
Morris_Elk: The punishment for capes is the Birdcage in cases like this.
Morris_Elk: Once you’re in, there are no appeals.
Morris_Elk: But I’ve verified, and the place is the Parahuman Containment Center.
Morris_Elk: Non-capes cannot be interned there.
Morris_Elk: Without her power, she’d end up in a regular jail, where she could appeal or request a retrial.

I didn’t say anything. This wasn’t a decision I could make, not by myself. I ran down the stairs and dashed into the workshop. T was there but not Taylor, and I needed both in a case like this.

So I sent a text message and waited. That was all I could do for now.
Contracts Special Interlude: PHO

Chapter Notes


Special thanks to Robo Jesus for his help with the formatting & with my own part. Double that for his good idea. He gets his own 'Punisher' cross, just in case someone tried nailing him to one.

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Vae_Victis
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Twenty-five posts per page
• Last twenty-five messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.
You have two infractions and one warning. You were last banned on September 03, 2010. Your probationary status expired 55 days ago, on March 11, 2011.

♦ Topic: Brockton Bay Cape scene Thread 43
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay
Avacyiel (Original Poster)
Posted on April 17th, 2011:
Next thread is up. Recent events are the reappearance of Lung, mass ABB bombing, and looting in the city. Latest news say the all schools in BB will be closed until further notice.

Anyone have more information?
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► MadHornet52
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
So we have the Undersiders fighting the mercenary Faultline and her crew when Slenderman shows up. Faultline's group doesn't even seem to think about it, they turn tail and run immediately. The
Undersiders seem to at least try to stop him before having to run. My point is, counting Bakuda and that new ABB cape, They had Slenderman outnumbered 13 to 1 and they ran.

► OldWarBeast
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Has anyone got a list of the people Slenderman has hit? Considering that Oni-Lee was killed I'm wondering if the effect of losing powers is instant or done over time. If it's the later Faultline is probably in some trouble now.

Edit: Wait, is that Bakuda?! Damn, I knew Faultline were mercenaries but I didn't think they would stoop so low as to being accomplice to mass-murdering of civilians!

► Catgirl Cosmo
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Hey hey, they are mercs. Maybe they were hired by Lung or something, they might have been stuck in teh contract. Mercs can't just up and leave if the going gets rough or the Boss's pet Tinker goes batshit.

That's a one way road to no one hiring you.

► OldWarBeast
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
That doesn't really matter though does it? The PRT, lazy ass's that they are, take mass-murder of civilians very seriously. Not to mention most of the E88 is still alive.

If it was a choice between cancelling a contract and being hunted down and either being Birdcaged or killed I know what I would pick.

But Y'know, hindsight 20/20, etc.

At the very least they will probably try and skip town. Try that is, they aren't no S9 (assholes).

► UmbrellaLake
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
So the ABB took some lumps, but I think Faultline and the Undersiders just got dissed. Slenderman could totally have taken their powers, but he just gives no shits about them.

► The_Highest
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Okay, so does anyone know who that other ABB girl cape was? And what she could do? It's not like she could do it anymore, so it's not like it's a secret worth keeping anymore.

► MadHornet52
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Waitwhat!! Faultline was PROTECTING Bakuda???? That's insane!! She'd have every cape in the city after her team.
EDIT _ After thinking about it a minute, I can see Faultline working with Slenderman to take out Bakuda. As soon as Slendy shows up with Bakuda in tow, Faultline and her entire group take off leaving the Undersiders to face the Devil. Smart. (Brrr)

► ImportantIdiot
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
We don't know what happened to Shadow Stalker, less so that she was attacked. For all we know, she could have retired because of some family situation or just moved away and they are giving her time to adjust to protect her secret identity. I really don't know from where all this "Slenderman attacked a Ward" discussion came about, the only evidence is that Shadow Stalker stopped showing up.

 ► GreenJeans
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
I seriously don't get why this guy is such a big deal! Why are capes freaking out about him? It isn't like most of them didn't spend the majority of their lives as regular Joe's.

 ► Explode_Horses
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
@GreenJeans
Because he's scary as s***!

 ► AR234B
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Guys, why are we focusing only on Slenderman? He wasn't the only addition. Do anyone knows the two unidentified capes with the Undersiders? I don't think we have ever seen those before. Were they part of the bank heist or are new additions? And why were the Undersiders fighting the ABB and Faultline's Crew there. I doubt that they just happened to stumble into them so close to the PRT, much less decided to fight them just because. The Undersiders are not known to go looking for trouble, they're the 'Masters of Escape' not the 'Masters of Brawling'.

 ► Undead Gust
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
You have to give props to the two new kids the Undersiders have. Trying to punch out Cthulhu is a pretty ballsy move. They failed horribly, but you have to give them props none the less.

 ► Realist
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
If there's one nice thing about Slenderman, it's that if you aren't a cape, you don't have to worry about him going after you. He's a parahuman-only problem.

 ► PainKiller
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Yeah, but if he grabs the wrong capes, shit gets worse for everyone. No one wants another superpowered gang war because some jumped up freak in a suit decides he's gonna eat Kaiser and totally destabilize the current power structure.

 ► Realist
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
True. It's also possible that he could work his way up the totem pole and leave Kaiser for last.

 ► kittyball
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Bit late for that, Lung is the only cape the ABB has left, the Merchants are gone, and the E88 has had two of their capes chomped. The villains are already on notice.
Kreig's Flail
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Is that he doesn't go after capes, or is it just that the non-capes he goes after slip through the cracks of the many missing persons cases that crop up every year? Hell, we don't even know when he actually got his powers/materialized/budded off from Y'Golonac/HOWEVER HE CAME TO BE>, so who knows how long he's been going around doing his creepy stalky thing. Honestly it seems to me like his first appearance was captured on film by sheer dumb luck. I mean, who actually films themselves sleeping? (Squealer and Skidmark apparently)

CheeseWasp
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
@Krieg's Flail
Or... maybe one of their enemies did it?

Logic: Skidmark posting this video would have been pretty much political suicide as far as the BB gangs go. Ergo, he didn't post it. Instead, somebody (Coil or Kaiser - Lung's not that subtle) caught the video by accident and decided to cement Skidmark's being out of the gang scene.

Nue
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
I'm not sure, but I think we might be seeing the first Slenderman attack with survivors, here.

Faultline's crew are mercenaries, right? Maybe an enterprising reporter can hire them to give an interview?

Kreig's Flail
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
not saying Skidmark and Squealer are the ones that posted it, just that they were apparently paranoid enough to have a camera filming them while they slept (or maybe the camera was part of some other system, who really knows with tinkers) and that had they not been so we would likely never have found out about the Slenderman until maybe Oni-Lee and we would have had far less to go on.

What I'm saying is that we have no idea how long he's been active or how many victims he has.

NowhereNearU (Double R)
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
@ Nue. Not quite the first one with survivors. There were pretty solid rumors of him striking at Triple E. There were explosions, but nobody died.

Platy+
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
@Nue: I don't remember there ever being casualties during a Slenderman attack. IIRC, only Oni Lee died in an "unfortunate accident", which probably was a Slenderman attack.

Nue
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Sorry for being mistaken. I remembered the capes attacked kind of dropping off the planet as far as activity goes, and assumed. My bad.

Say, didn't the Myths suggest that Slenderman will continue to appear in the area of those who remember him? It might be wise to keep an eye on the Undersiders and Faultline's group. Especially
that one Undersider that tried to punch Slenderman.

► steampowered
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Dude, the internet. Everyone remembers.

► Irreglreg
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
Othala and Victor were pretty competent villains right? And Slenderman snuck up on them while they were asleep, while they were in their own home. He did the same to Squealer and Skidmark. (though they aren't so competent) He also went after Oni Lee at night, probably while he slept. (yes, yes, I'm assuming)

Given that he can go anywhere, knows when your asleep, and knows if you've been bad or good, are there any villains in BB sleeping without guards anymore?

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► WeAreTheChampignons Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
Welp...
I wake up and there's this.
-Scary-ass video
-Whole lotta speculation
-Whole lotta shitposting (PHO Y U SO PHO)
-Sothoth being rational and thoughtful, as usual Sothoth
My Thinker 0 power (also known as "common sense") tells me that now would be a good time to take a vacation somewhere far away.
I heard Nome is nice this time of year.

► MisterSock-Puppet (Confirmed Cape) Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
Guys. Lets cut down on the irrelevant speculation, panic mongering, and baseless slender.

► Durenas Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
What kind of cape name is MisterSock-Puppet?

► Hades Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
Obviously someone with a Master power, he probably creates a proxy construct and acts through it.

► Uber (confirmed cape) Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
Well well, hasn't life in the Bay got interesting. Some capes are terrified of the Slenderman but those are guys who define themselves by their powers - me and Leet are defined by our style. I won't say I'm sleeping like a baby behind my bevy of beautiful bodyguardettes but I'm confident that if Tall, Dark and Creepy comes calling we've got some fun surprises for him.
Meanwhile, place your bets ladies and gentlemen! Who will the Slenderman try for next: Lung?
Kaiser?
Purity, to further the eternal battle between light and dark?
Coil, if he even has a power to lose?
Faultline, Bakuda's henchwoman?
The Undersiders?
Armsmaster, he's not a villain but he is a dick? 
or the most dangerous game of all, i.e. me? 
My money is on the Undersiders - they fought back and then they got away.

► **NowhereNearU (Double R)**  
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:  
You could probably try and make a show where Slenderman is supposed to be the antagonist. I'm sure he'll be right there when it starts, just say when and where. [/sarcasm mode]

*This user has received a 1-day ban for inciting criminal and/or reckless behavior. Do not do it again.*  
-Tin Mother

► **CraniumSunnySideUP**  
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:  
I would so watch this! Maybe it could happen? You could go out to the docs or one of the major abandoned building by there and do a horror/thriller/survival episode?  
Set it all up before hand and advertise I can't Imagine slendy would be able to turn down something like this...Achance to scare people. I mean why else have the tentacles?  
You could call his name a few times or something and he could just show up or maybe...  
You could donate some of the money to a charity and it might not end up causing Slendy to do anything to insane from the whole taunting thing...  
A charity for kids might work according to some of the Aleph mythos and that laughing stuff he likes kids...  
Wonder if we could actually get him to talk?  
If He doesn't show I'm sure there could be a good show anyway.  
What kind of game though? I mean horror obviously but do we want it to be based survival (as in how long), a set endpoint for quests or on the collection of items (pages of a book or something)?? I know base it on Amnesia Dark Descent!  
I haven't seen you guys do anything like that yet!

*This user has received a 7-day ban for inciting criminal and/or reckless behavior. Do not do it again. Especially when I just told someone else you replied to*  
-Tin Mother

► **Uber (verified cape)**  
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:  
Hey now! Don't cite for incitin', cos it's me that you're slightin' if ya think that my fightin's determined by write in.  
Not on this board anyway.

► **Some_of_us_live_here**  
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:  
So slenderman is scary to capes? Good!! A load of them could do with being scared of something and there's plenty that should lose there powers. If he wants to dress up like an internet era kid on halloween fine by me. I'll even act frightened  
My problem with Slenderman is he was to soft on Bakuda. After he took her powers he should have hung her from a lampost. I lost 2 friends, lost my business and got maimed by her f***ing spree.  
And Faultline, all that shit about she's amerc not another gangster and shes in bed with that scum. Someone should burn out her f***ing club then hunt her and her freaks don like dogs. I'd do it myself but I've only got 1 foot now!!
*This user has received a 14-day ban for inciting criminal and/or reckless behavior. Do not do it again. Especially when I just told someone else two posts above you. Next person is getting a 1 month ban. You have all been warned.*

-Tin Mother

► Dragish
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
What is with the wank on Slenderman? Sure he has done some impressive things but when you get down to the nitty gritty feats, they don't seem to be that impressive when you compare them to other parahumans. I would rather face him then fight Legend for instance. He is just the cape of the moment with his moves. We have yet to see him really fight anyone. Almost all his wins are straight up ambushes, for all we know he has no staying power.

► FigmentWolf
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
Really? ^^ A snake doesn't need staying power to kill a lion, And if YOU are a cape, then I really don't get you. You CAN escape Legend ( there are ways, like staying inside a crowd, or making him unable to home in on you ) but how are you going to fight a freaking teleporter that only needs ONE touch to FOREVER depower you...

► Zohtct
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
@Dragish
I'd like to point out Oni Lee. How long did that fight last? Might have started as a straight up ambush, but...

► Dragish
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
@FigmentWolf
My point that you seemed to have missed was for all the gushing that is being done to him, he is not as impressive as is being made out.
Sure hes a scary bastard with a crazy ablity, but the field is not as empty as is being made out. One touch and out? did you forget the whole situation with Oni Lee? I think it might take more then just a touch to depower someone. Would I want to see him in a dark alley hell no, but I could say the same for many a cape. He is just another cape.
@Zohtct
We don't know how long that fight lasted, since all we have left is the aftermath. For all I know Slenderman got in a good first shot and the whole rest of the battle was just waiting out Oni as he bleed to death

► HoboKnife
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
Oni Lee has the same kind of horror-movie feel to him. He appears from nowhere and kills without warning. I bet Slenderman wanted that niche all to himself.

► FigmentWolf
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
@ Dragish
Oni Lee is a very bad example. A fight between two teleporters is not the same as an attempt by a teleporter to touch some one without that crazy movement capability. Most of that damage is
probably done by Oni Lee attempting to get rid of his opponent in a game of deadly tag. No other incident of Slenderman attack (as far as I know) has that much collateral damage, while it kinda fits with Oni Lee's MO.

► Lantalia
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
Hey Slendy! If you need $20 dollars, it's totally yours, no need to stalk me for it, no need to take my (nonexistent) powers. We're cool, right Slendy?

► PsychoPoet
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
*When in Doubt, Turn about, proceed to Run, To grab your gun,*

Now maybe it's because I (likely) have the Atlantic between me and this "Slenderman", or maybe it's due to the less strict gun laws since the Temple Meads attack(1) meaning I have my Webley & Scott .32 ACP Self-loading Pistol. I'm a little less frightened of some weird cape like some of you scaredy cats, so unless this "Slenderman" actually does something more than: Taking down a Tinker who only makes Bombs, some random cape, the Merchants, Possibly Oni Lee and maybe Shadow Stalker(2) then can we please talk about more Relevant things?

Like say The Cape Regulation Party over here in not so merry old England?

(1) For all you who have forgotten the attack nearly five years ago when Detonate turned every Pigeon at the Bristol Temple Meads into biological bombs causing hundreds to die? You know the one that all of you bastards have forgotten about?

(2) Again as others have said Proof please instead of random speculation.

*Please stop spamming other threads, I understand from several of your posts that you had family at Temple Meads but repeatedly bringing it up in multiple different threads is a violation of the rules. Stay on topic and please don't also bring your politics into it as well. You are on thin ice as it is. Stop.*

-Tin Mother

► Questionmark_Period
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
First Slenderman, now Candlejack? Who knows who will be targeted nex

... Heh, just kidding. But did anyone consider that Slendy hid his tentacles, right up until he came across two Japaneese ABB girls?

At least they weren't wearing schoolgirl outfits at the time...

► LoyalKoopa71
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
From what I've been able to tell, Slenderman's been staying in the Brockton Bay area and has only gone after criminals with powers. My question is what happens when the Bay runs out of criminals
to keep Slendy occupied? Will it go to another city or will it go after the wards and Protectorate?

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Topic: Slenderman Thread 9
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay Discussion (Public Board)
Tamestaff (Original Poster)
Posted on April 29th, 2011:
The newest cape boogieman, worse than Hatchet Face ever was. Continuing from [here].

Incidents:
- Merchants Video: [Link]
- Victor & Othala Video: [Link]
- Oni Lee Article (No video): [Link]
- Undersiders & Faultline Videos: [Link 1], [Link 2], [Link 3]

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Holy Prophet
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Dude, stop- Slender ain't no Demon and it doesn't prove your god. Space Whales- Seriously? Go sit down before you hurt yourself.

kittyball
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
What do you mean "baseless speculation"? I gave the basis right in the post!

*This user has received a 1-day ban for arguing with a moderator.*

- Wyrm_Engineer

FigmentWolf
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
@ lrcglrcg
Omg... You are not thinking that he is... No, no way! But, on the other hand.... OMG, IT ALL MAKES SENSE NOW ! Slenderman is ( dun dun DUUUN ) SANTA !!!
I should probably go get some sleep now. On the other hand, darkness.
Nah.

Questionmark_Period
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Yes, of course!

Slender Claus visits the houses of capes, riding in his non-euclidean sleigh pulled by seven tentacle monsters - with the one in the front having a glowing [REDACTED].

If you are a naughty cape, he turns off your powers.

If you are a nice cape, he tosses you an Asian girl.
Because why not?

Happy holidays, and have a Merry [REDACTED]!

► Zohtct
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
THE VIDEOS ARE FAKE! THE ENTIRE THING WAS SCRIPTED! SCRIPTED I TELL YA!
Now I'm gonna go sleep with the lights on. Forever. For no reason...

► [][][Redacted][][
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
I for one welcome our new tentacle equipped overlord!

► Catgirl Cosmo
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Woah.

Just, woah.

That thing is scary.

Wonder if it's like an Endbringer.

► ImportantIdiot
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Seriously, stop with the endbringer talk. Endbringers are a serious matter and there is no reason to think Slenderman has anything to do with them. Joking about that is of bad taste. Also, there is nothing to say that the guy could break into the Birdcage and based on the fact that he is targeting villains there is no reason to think that he would go for the already captured ones or that he could. Yes, he is a power suppressor, brute teleporter and probably shape shifter but we don't know how strong of a teleporter he is and if that were all it took to break out then it wouldn't be as effective as it is.

► Monster Sack (unconfirmed cape)
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Does anyone else think this Slenderman might be a projection.

Maybe somebody in the city triggered an doesn't even know they did.

Slenderman might be someone's dream of vengeance on the crooks.

► Pothar
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
So Slenderman is an Aleph Myth right? And it just so happens that when Haywire opens that portal, Slendy appears a few decades later?

Coincidence? I think not.

Edit: Assuming it is a parahuman, how crazy would it be for anyone to trigger with the exact same powers as him? Something doesn't add up.....
Replied on May 1st, 2011:

... My god. I just figured it out it all makes sense!
Stories about Slender man have been around for years right? Both here and Aleph? Kidnapping kids who are never seen again? I was thinking about this when another question popped into my head that fit disturbingly well... Where do Case 53’s come from? Their monstrous appearance and inability to remember?

HE CHANGED THOSE KIDS INTO MONSTERS LIKE HIM!

*This user has received an infraction for this post; Case 53s are unfortunate victims not monsters*
- Wyrm_Engineer

Riftthetypodemon
Replied on May 1st, 2011:

!!!! I figured it out. SLenderman is obviously a top secret PRT weapon. Think about it, we know Armsmaster is a top level tier and ShadowStalker vanished just before Slender started showing up with his shadowy BS. Obviously Shadowstalker has been tricked out with a Tinkertech suit designed to seal cape powers and sent out as 'slenderman' for a secret War on the gangs of Brockton Bay!

SwissRod
Replied on May 1st, 2011:

I think you all have it wrong. Clearly, Slendy is the world's first Para-animal. It's just an Octopus in a suit. Nothing to worry about

But here's another theory. Shadow Stalker hasn't been seen recently because she became Slenderman.

Perhaps she triggered a second time (somehow) and in addition to gaining new powers, her form turned monstrous.

So she wanders the streets, trying to hold the last vestiges of her fading sanity together as she continues battling criminals and villains the only way she can now.

In any case, it's all pure speculation now.

Maybe with time and more evidence, we'll find out who or what Slendy really is.

My money is on two hyper-intelligent mice in a robot suit.

Rifttypodemon
Replied on May 1st, 2011:

DUde your half right but I'm telling you its a PRT black ops unit that has secretly made cape sealing technology. We all know Shadow Stalker wasn't bright and shiny enough for the Wards so they recruited her to do the dirty work against the villians of Brockton bay.

Durenas
Replied on May 1st, 2011:

Little Green Man (Unverified Cape)
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Slenderman is obviously Scion counterpart. Scion had appeared - and people had started to get
powers. OK, we do not see him near trigger event - but who knows what his range is? And now
Slenderman appeared - and capes are losing their powers. He is just either holding back or is not
experienced that's why he had to touch to do it for now. But he is evolving. Also Scion is all glowing
- Slenderman is all dark. Clearly, we are going to see Doomsday battle between Scion and
Slenderman in the near future.

Gnoalak
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
He's a chicken I tell you, a giant chicken!

Order in Chaos (Veteran Lurker)
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
I hate to say it, but the giant chicken theory seems to have the best evidence backing it.

That aside, what do we know?
• Targets mostly-villains. ◦ What about rogues and vigilantes? BB is a parahuman heavy city, but not
  all are Protectorate/Wards or gangers. Is anyone tracking all the independents, could he be picking
  them off as low hanging fruit?
  ◦ Have there been any confirmed responses from the "please visit" threads? I know there've been a
  bunch of deletions, but that could be normal mod activity.

  [sarcasm]Is Slenderman a PHO mod?!?!?[/sarcasm]

  • Turns powers off, possibly/probably permanently. ◦ Maybe reverses the process that causes powers
    in the first place?
  ◦ Could be some kind of healing/regeneration ability, restoring people to baseline human?
  ■ Powers track back to the whatsit thingumae in the brain, do his targets still have that?
  ◦ Is the power negation a primary or secondary effect? Does he go out to shutdown capes or is the
    shutdown incidental?
  ◦ Power resistance.
    ◦ Could be a trump, could be a brute, could be tinkertech. Could argue for other mechanisms too,
      maybe something like Vista's space manipulation, he just redirects everything away instead of full
      out no-selling it?
  ◦ Scary/creepy as hell.
    ◦ Is that cause or effect? Is he inherently scary or is it because of what he does and how he does it?
      Did he start out this scary or did everyone build him up and now he's just using it to his advantage?
    ◦ Is he getting scarier over time? Is he getting stronger over time?
  ■ He just took out two capes, and ten more ran made a tactical withdrawal rather than confront him.
    How many people can walk into a cape fight and have both sides bail?

On the subject of cause and effect, is he Slenderman because he is/has powers identical to the Aleph
urban legend, or is he just cashing in based on superficial resemblance and thereby inheriting a ton of
cred and using it for more mind games?

Guildfan#2415
All this talk about Slenderman, pfah it is sooooooooo Obvious that the thing we call Slenderman is
just a projection made by a parahuman who is customising it as he learns about that stupid aleph
nonsense myth, I mean yes this projection seals Parahuman powers but that's all that's special about it.
Catgirl Cosmo
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
It's not nonsense
It's based off of a 16th century german myth

Guildfan#2415
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
It is nonsense: it was made up a lot later and all the so called "proofs" are false made by some Aleph nerds. Heh, next you are going to tell me that the greek and viking gods were parahumans

PsychoPoet
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
And Parahuman powers have only been proven to have existed since Scion appeared on May 20th 1982. There is less in Heaven and Earth, Wild Mass Guesser, than dreamt of in your philosophy. We have no evidence of powers before 1982 on our Earth. So a German myth from the 1500s is as applicable as saying Scion is a god again. Go back to Wild Mass Guessing and babble there. Maybe you can also say "Slenderman" is a Time Lord as well?

Malice
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Slenderman is obviously Eidolon. Think about it; have you ever seen them together at the same time? The only other Trump that strong is in the Bird Cage.

Sothoth
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
In case of being observed by cameras that would mean that they either don't count, or he's teleporting between individual frames. The first possibility tells us something about his/her/its Manton limitations, and the second might be indicative of his/her/its reaction times (possibly giving him/her/it a mover/thinker rating for enhanced reaction times).

Wasn't there a cape in Brockton Bay who transformed into some sorta monster when no one was looking at... her, I think? Night, I think the name was. Could her/his shaped form be observed by cameras? Wiki is unhelpful. The point is, however, that abilities with "can be used when no one is watching" modifiers aren't exactly unknown.

Ruler
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
*sigh*
No, you tinfoil hats, if Slenderman is getting stronger it's either because he's similar to Lung and get's stronger based on unknown criteria, or he get's stronger whenever he uses his power null touch, making him sort of like Dauntless, or, more likely, he's just getting used to his powers and learning more about how to use them.

And stop with the damn jokes about the fake myth, Slenderman didn't start doing any of this shit until we started that stupid in joke, given there are VILLAINS on here, he probably saw you bring up the fake myth from Aleph and decided to play it up. It's not like there aren't thousands of other capes who decided to play up a theme like a troupe of ham actors, like those Adept psycho's in New York.

This isn't the kind of crap you can joke about, go to Creative Writing or Cape Theories if you want.
to fuck around.

*This user has received an infraction for flaming language.*

- Wyrm_Engineer

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► ProtosShota
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
You people, I swear. What's more likely, "teleporting between frames" or video editing software?

► Kreig's Flail
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Forget all this talk of power stealing and morality, there is a far greater issue here: Where the hell did he get such a sharp looking suit, and if he made it himself then what do I have to fork over to get one? I've seen CEO's with less well-cut suits and with those proportions tailoring it would be hell.

► The_Celestial_Monster
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
So with every appearance this guy becomes more like the Slenderman mythos, ethier by Trump ability or Tinker bullshit?

Placing bets on next power, mind fuckery to the point of bloody noses or pyrokensis. Which will it be!? Place your bets here!

Edit: 1000th post!

► SinisterMister
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
No need to involve weird dimensional shenanigans. We're all talking about Slenderman because we all know about Slenderman via ongoing contact with Earth Aleph. 'Slenderman' is obviously a cape who saw the same movie as everyone else, and based their costumed persona on the character.

Maybe they triggered while watching the movie. Maybe they triggered, did an online search of their new powerset, learned of the character that way, and decided to use the fictional identity as their cape persona.

Also, to kittyball, there is absolutely no need to subscribe some sort of power stealing Trump ability to Slenderman. Neighbors heard children laughing at the Victor/Othala site? Must be a Tinker (because Slenderman couldn't possibly own an MP3 player ). Slenderman didn't exhibit tentacle limbs when targeting Skidmark/Squealer or Victor/Othala? Those must be new (couldn't possibly be because Slendy needed a few weeks to learn how to use his new, non-human physiology in a potential combat situation ).

I am getting tired of people on this forum slapping all sorts of nonsensical power tags on parahumans. This power theft debate is just as stupid as the time that Taggart tried applying a rating of 2 in all categories to that one girl with the Master power.

So enough with the senseless speculation. Slenderman's power nullifying attack is a Striker/Trump effect. The teleporting is a Mover power with unknown range and limitations. The tentacles are a Changer manifestation. His immunity to firearms is either a Brute or Breaker power. I'm leaning
towards Breaker since he can also apparently ignore some Parahuman powers even at range (Regent waved his scepter, but his TK did nothing. Grue threw his sleeptime darkness twice to no effect). I've already speculated that he may have a Thinker ability to recognize the presence of capes, since he attacked most of them in private.

These most recent videos do, I think, support my evidence based Thinker theory (as opposed to the rampant wild speculation that usually happens on these boards) that the more capes you have in an area, the easier it is for Slenderman to find them. Note that every verified attack except for Oni Lee has happened near a concentration of capes (and he likely counted as a 'concentration of capes' all on his own).

The media has already identified the site of the most recent videos as being within a few blocks of the PRT building. I bet they've got capes going in and out of the place at all hours. But Slenderman isn't stupid, he's not just going to rush the Protectorate/Wards/E88/etc. with a Striker power. Thus, paradoxically, numbers may both protect Capes from him while also drawing him to them.

I believe he was prowling around the PRT base, looking for Parahumans to follow to isolated areas, and wound up running across the Undersiders/Faultline/ABB battle when the sheer concentration of active parahumans made the place light up like a Christmas tree to his Thinker senses. Note how Slenderman walked into the most recent video carrying Bakuda and that other (presumably parahuman) ABB member. He waited until they were alone and then he pounced. Classic guerilla tactics/ambush predator behavior.

The only anomalous point of data was Slenderman then choosing to confront the Undersider/Faultline combatants. Why did he do that? If they'd all turned on him at once, he could have been in trouble. Did his possible Thinker ability let him know that several were already down? Did his victory over Bakuda and her friend embolden him? Does neutralizing other parahumans affect him mentally, like a drug?

► HagbardCeline
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Here's a fun thought for y'all: forget Endbringers, what if Slendy gets his mitts on Scion?

► FigmentWolf
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Awesome post there, Sinister ! Would have given more likes, if only could.
I disagree with you on only one point there, I don't think we have enough data to assume he is drawn to large quantities of capes. After all, so far he only had hit to couples of villains that we know of. Wouldn't it be easier for him to continue hanging on E88 territory? MANY more capes there. Or at wherever Faultline's crew is located. Or hell, even Arcadia would be a better target for scouting for collection of capes. We don't know yet of a single Slenderman attack on a hero, which is another reason I don't think he was just hanging at PRT vicinity looking for capes. (+ don't forget, E88 has more capes then the entire PRT building even HAS .)
I think it's more likely he does his homework, follows them a bit, and strikes when they are not expecting it ( it's hard to find some one less prepared for a fight, then when that person is asleep in their own home in the hands of their mate, after all. )
Sooo, anyways, I think it's some chances he has some sort of stranger ability. That would fit well with the mythos thing, allow him to have a semblance of normal life ( otherwise I don't know how he can manage to not be noticed around all the time, with the tentacles and all.) AND allow him to find and follow villain capes.
I know my theory is not based on stone cold facts, but hey, it explains staff, and Stranger powers are hard to get evidence for anyway, that's the whole point.
Narved
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
I wonder if Slendy has something to do with those Chinese fellows whose name I can't even remotely remember. After all there are some rather spooky rumours around those guys and I wouldn't see them being above using foreign capes as test subjects for their new toy.

NowhereNearU (Double R)
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
If he's the real deal, he's teleporting when nobody's looking at him. Kinda like Schroedinger, he's either somewhere where you can see him, or in any place you don't see him. It's just convenient that humans don't see in the dark.

Unreal_Fraction
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
What if Slenderman is a Trump with the power to have every power people think he has, and we're making him stronger by speculating?

Charis
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Y'all have seen too many horror flicks and conspiracy thrillers. Occam's razor, people.

Slendy has a body count of what, one? So obviously not an Endbringer. Given that he's so far only targeted villains, he is obviously some kind of vigilante cape. He looks scary, maybe on purpose, maybe because his powers messed up his appearance. That doesn't make him a monster any more than any other Case 53 cape.

As for his powers, he's probably some kind of biotinker. An opposite-Panacea who can do brains or maybe Bonesaw-lite. He's not "sealing" or "stealing" powers. All he has to do is wipe out their Corona Gemma and poof! - one permanently depowered cape. He's probably still learning about his powers, which is why he didn't have tentacles before and developed it later. His tinker suit also makes sense in the same way that Bonesaw has those robo-spiders.

Fabul (Unconfirmed non-cape)
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Could be worse. We could have a cape imitating one of the various slasher franchises, from either Aleph or our own world.

Catgirl Cosmo
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Naw. That makes far too much sense. Thing that people forget about Slendy is that he's Pre-divergence. Slenderman first appeared late 1700s in Germany. There he was known as either the Tall Man or the Thin Man. His legends have popped up all across Europe over time, and I think a few times in Asia and Africa.

He prob walked and finally hit land in BB.

He's an old god. And he's tired of Scion getting all the attention and whatnot and is putting these Parahumans who have appeared following Scion in there place. Then he will reveal his own Super Humans, all those little kids he's taken over the ages, given new and terrifying abilities.
LoyalKoopa71
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
I'm just going to hope Slenderman stays away from Texas.

Unknown Shadow
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Honestly the changes we see in Slenderman might be a result of it/he/she being a Trump.

Think about it, the "powers" Slenderman has access to might scale according to some kind of "danger sense" similar to how Lung grows stronger the longer he stays in battle.

So the greater the danger it encounters the more options it has. That might be why it generally attacks "from the shadows" as it were. Whoever or whatever Slenderman is knows that it takes time to "ramp up" and is planning accordingly.

The bit with the Undersiders and Faultline's crew is because it had already reached a "higher level" due to taking care of Bakuda and that other cape.

Abellc
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Thinking on this brings up a few ideas on just what Slenderman is.
1). A parahuman with multiple powers that likes to mind fuck victims.
   A]. the mythos is based off them.
   B]. they tailored their powers some how to be like the mythos
   C]. their a creeper that got luck to have powers just like Slenderman plus power sealing.
2). A tinker that likes to fuck with people.
3). A mass hallucination that is imprinting on film.
4). Enough people believed in Slenderman and now he's real.
5). Some kind of projection.
6). bunch of squirrels in a suit.
7). bunch of octopus in a suit.
8). I DON'T KNOW!

As you can see there are a lot of possibilities its only a matter of time till we receive more clues and evidence as to the behavior and methods of the Slenderman, now can anyone add any other possibility as to just what the cape community is dealing with.

FigmentWolf
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
You ARE crazy, Kitty. ) First targets were asleep, so just rude to wake them up by laughing. And, as we seen there wss no need for tentacles with Victor and Othala. And for all we know he/she/it used the "Tentacles of Force Intrusion" spell on Oni Lee anyways.

The_Highest
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Dudes, I think I've figured out Slenderman's teleport thing! It's based on light level! He always attacks when it's dark, but in this last video, it's not very dark! And he doesn't do any teleporting except that one time when Grue hit him with darkness!

So obviously, like any good horror movie, keep to places where it's bright and you're safe. Until he cuts the power. Then you're boned.
Pandora Protector
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
All of 'Slenderman' sh*tick is obviously tinkertech bullshit. I'll bet you anything it's just a crazy tinker who've read too much shitty horror stories and is now on some ill-thought out crusade. Appearing out of nowhere? Tinkerteleport. Things done on camera? Tinkerhacking and tinkerphotoshop. Children's laughter? You don't even need to be a tinker to buy speakers. Tentacles? Tinkermechadendrites. Apparent loss of powers in victims? Tinkertech that does something to the brain that they forget how to use them or something, probably possible to relearn at any time. Or something else, it's a fucking tinker no one know how that shit works.

I'm telling you, it's just a crazy tinker with a horror-fetish, attempting to psyche you lot out. The saddest part is it seems to be working.

Fucking tinkers.

*This user has received an infraction for flaming language. Your hatred of tinkers has no place even in a theory discussion*
-Wyrm_Engineer

Day_Hunter
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
OK, that was.... scary. I mean, at first I thought this was just some new cape testing out their powers on targets nobody would miss. Now though, I'm not so sure. Because this is fitting the Mythos to a T. Hell, all we need is him asking for 20 bucks at this rate.

Of course, one thing that worries me is the way he seems to be playing up the drama now. I mean, 3 separate cameras with mics and the whole schebang? Either he's embarking on psychological warfare now, or he's got a ego bigger than most politicians.

LoyalKoopa71
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Somehow I doubt that Slenderman is fueled by the power of belief. The power of fear is much more likely.

SirTINal
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Don't you people see???
Slenderman is getting stronger!!!

Evidence:
1st Video: at 3:17 see, there's clear damage to the suit
2nd Video: at 0:21 you can see the guy shooting at him, and no damage

Also notice the lack of tentacles in the first two videos, now suddenly he has them??!! The more people believe in him the stronger he gets, you need to stop posting about him!

Melroj
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
I'm just glad that Slenderman is going after villains. I don't want to imagine what it would be like the other way around.
I had a nightmare about Slenderman joining the S9.

► **Sothoth.**
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Someone should check the list of known Earth Aleph parahumans. Slenderman is Aleph myth, right? So, it's most logical to assume that he/she/it (oh, Scion, please don't be Aleph Endbringer!) is originally from there. Has anyone contacted people who started the myths back on Aleph? Did anyone check if they were (former/potential) capes? Not that they'd tell, normally, but I bet the government could check. They do so for professional athletes, right?

► **FigmentWolf**
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Any1 read Earth Aleph fiction novels Night Watch by Lukyanenko? Cause Slenderman horribly reminds me of The Mirror from there, the Meta Mage that comes when a power balance is shifted too much towards Light or Dark, and who's power level depends on his opposition. I mean it fits, no? Look at the hero/villain ratio of BB. And it certainly looks like Slenderman changes, the more opposition he has. Look at his appearance history with this theory in mind. If it walks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck, it probably IS a duck, instead of a Nillbog treated chicken. I mean some other theories in here, come on?! Spawn of Chtulhu? Get a grip, people...

► **Beetlebrox**
Replied on May 1st, 2011:
Hasn't anyone realised that this thing started on Aleph? Slenderman can travel through dimensions. How is this not an S-class threat?

Just glad I'm not a cape.

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► **PsychoPoet**
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
And we get more baseless, unfounded, speculation made of bullshit. PHO Never Changes. Now, "Slenderman" is just a creepy careful capable cape. Not a god, not a demon, just someone new. So unless we have evidence then can we go another couple of pages without made up bullshit?

I know this is PHO, site of the infamous Birdcage Breakout Hoax that caused a banhammer nuke to be dropped in the heart of PHO, but can we please have some actual well grounded debate with actual facts? Please.

► **Hero_of_Time** (Verified Cape)
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
@PsychoPoet
No, Slenderman isn't human. Take a look at the limb movements - he's boneless. Maybe he's a Changer, but I find it hard to believe that he's that and a power-removing Trump too. Simplest explanation - he's some kind of eldritch monstrosity straight from the pit of Hell. We're boned.

► **Psycho Poet**
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
*He is Slender,*
On a Bender,  
He seals powers,  
To get flowers.

Or in this case random speculation from PHO members. Some of whom really need to have a reading comprehension test. As pissing of the mods? To quote another rhyme of mine from CrWr:

Do not trouble the Mods,  
As while they are really not Gods,  
Their powers are quite Grand,  
And can make you be Banned.

We are really going around in circles. We have a scary vid after two other vids and a little bit of rumour. For gods sake guys we know more about the Undersiders than "Slenderman." We just have a creepy cape going after villains. He's just likely a new vigilante man abomination scaring the ever lasting crap out of the BB underworld.

He is not some cosmic horror. He is not a projection. He is not a super Aleph-cape or a escaped experiment or the fear of all capes losing their powers. The "Slenderman" is a living, breathing cape. And as I look at BB I know one thing; that the remaining villains are certainly going to try and fix that.

As do you really thing Lung is going to take this lying down? He might have gone after Oni Lee, but Bakuda and that random new cape? And do you think Kaiser is going to take the loss of Othala and Victor with grace as well? And with the Merchants being basically destroyed it means every other villain will be worried about what he is going to do.

"Slenderman" is just one cape. He at the very least has an entire city of villains against him. The PRT are also going to want him, not dead but likely under their thumb. And out of town villains are going to be looking and wondering what happens if Slenderman takes out every Villain in BB.

The story of "Slenderman" will not end well. But not like in the Aleph myths, this is not an Eldritch Abomination who will bring BB to ruin. This is one vigilante trying to use their powers to clean up one of the worst cities with Cape violence in the whole US. Possibly the world.

"Slenderman" will be the one having the unhappy ending most likely. And seeing his previous targets that makes me sad, another cape who wanted to make the world a better place broken and destroyed by the horrible world we live in. So while you speculate and have idiotic fun I'm going to start to mourn.

As one person can't change a single city, let alone the world. If "Slenderman" was to work with the PRT then maybe the ending would be different. But it won't. This story has played out thousands of times over the years. Some young Cape crops up, tries to change things and dies.

So please, stop with the pointless crap and likely the stupid Vs. threads you are going to make. And show this new cape a little respect.

► Catgirl Cosmo  
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:  
No. No.  
@PsychoPoet  
No. I refuse to believe a single person cannot make a difference. Especially not someone like this
Slenderman. I refuse to believe that even a non-powered person cannot make a difference in the world. Look at BB.

The Merchants are done for, druggies and whores no longer walk the dark allyways of that city. That is progress.

Two Nazis no longer have the power or will to kill and maim and hurt those who are different. That is progress.

A demon and a mad bomber are gone, no longer threatening the people of that city. That is progress.

Slenderman is just like Panacea. Cleaning up the Cancers and sicknesses of the world, one infection at a time.

Just like Panacea it is a long, tiring, near thankless job that this being (whoever or whatever he is) is doing.

My greatest fears are not his death or defeat. They are the two greatest threats that face Panacea herself.

Too much too fast - Burning out would be horrible for either of them. Slender at the least has the ability to rest when it needs to. That poor girl at the Hospital needs to be kept there overnight every now and then and forced to rest

And looking into the Abyss - seeing the horrors of the world *shudder* I've seen my share, and I know that to a degree those same horrors have looked back into me. If that were to happen to either of these upstanding people...

I need say no more.

Goddess Rest their souls and may they have long and happy futures ahead of them.

► PsychoPoet
Replied on May 2nd, 2011:
One Word: Hero. I'd like to pretend we were still in the golden age, that we can win against all that is out there. But we are not. We are in our Göttterdammerung, Our Twilight of the "Gods". The way things are going ... even every combined cape hero or villain will not be enough to hold back the tide.

As to quote Tolkien to give you an idea on my feelings on the matter:

Wight's Chant said:

_Cold be hand and heart and bone,
and cold be sleep under stone:
nevermore to wake on stony bed,
never, till the Sun fails and the Moon is dead.
In the black wind the stars shall die,
and still on gold here let them lie,
till the dark lord lifts his hand
over dead sea and withered land._
If the entire planet can't make a difference, if every Parahuman with whatever bullshit power they have at their disposal then what can one cape do? One Vigilante against an entire city? In reality there is no hope, no light at the end of the tunnel. All things come to dust and our time is nearly over.

... I'm going to go listen to something uplifting. As I've depressed myself again. Trust me when I say this, I would like "Slenderman"* to be the start of the turning of the tide. I would love for us to start to slowly crawl back the world. But right now with an Endbringer going to pop up soon ...

Well The U.K. is an island about the same size as Japan was before Leviathan attacked. If he wants to ...

*I'm putting his name in quotation marks as I just can't take it seriously.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ... 94, 95, 96, 97

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

I looked away from the screen. I knew I shouldn't look at those threads, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to figure it, to know where everything had gone wrong in my life.

I felt like I'd never had any control over my destiny. I should have; I'd been one of the privileged few, the ones who didn’t break and simply hung on so hard that something deep answered. That should have been my ticket to glory, only it had only been a railroad to mediocrity. I barely had a few weeks where I was free, then the world fought back and leashed me. I tried my best to manage my chains and my freedom at the same time, and for a while it worked. Then he came.

Slenderman.

I still had no clue when he’d gotten to me, probably in my sleep like the Merchants, but everything went wrong then. I had to endure days of repetitive testing, hours in isolation, until the fuckers from the PRT dropped me like a hot potato. Straight here, in the Southern Boston Corrective Center, and still without my powers.

It chafed.

Here, the people in power decidedly hated me. I tried to put them in their place like I’d done before, but found out that there were people higher than me on the totem pole, and that, while I was in shape, there were other inmates here that could break me like a twig. I went through enough days in the infirmary to know. With my power, I’d have made short work of them, but now without it I was at the bottom of the pecking order.

Looking at the theories thread on the forum was the worst, but I couldn’t help but do it. Watching people discuss him like he was a god or a demon made me want to yell at them, scream that he was just another man, preying on people. I nearly posted those words a dozen times, but I knew my Internet access was watched, and I’d been told that I couldn’t contact anyone outside. Each time, I held back, and left things as they were.

Then came the latest Slenderman video.

There wasn’t a word for how I felt. Seeing the Undersiders healthy and even growing twisted my insides and made me wear down my teeth as I forced myself not to yell. I had to hold myself on the arms of my chair when I saw them escape. They were villains and they were free; I’d been a hero and I was chained like a dog. I held on to my hate, afraid that I'd start crying if I let go. There wasn't
a word in the dictionary for how I felt; it was beyond words, beyond everything. I put my hands on the side of the screen and pushed, as if I could somehow reach into the screen and strangle them.

I don't know how long I stood like that. It felt like hours, but it couldn't be. My anger left me suddenly, and I tried holding back my tears. A realization came crashing through my mind, and I had an epiphany.

I was never going to be leaving this place.

They, the guards, the inmates, the world... They would break me. The person who would leave this place wouldn't be me.

I, Sophia Hess, would never be free.

I crumbled in my chair and weakly forced my hand up toward the screen, as if I could grab back what I had just lost. My face was wet, and I could hear the laughter of the other inmates behind me. They'd wanted that, to see me weak, to see me cry, and had hadn't given them the pleasure.

And now I'd lost.

*I just wanted the be free!* I yelled inside, as if it would change something. *Was that too much***

---to ask, really?!

I saw double for an instant, as if my eyes had suddenly crossed. It took me a moment for the disorientation to pass before I felt it in my mind, in my soul, in my entire self, like something had just connected and I had been made whole.

For an instant, I remembered a similar feeling, and then that moment was gone. I didn't want to shatter that feeling that I could feel rising inside of me. I didn't want this moment to not be what I thought it was.

Hope.

I wanted to laugh and cry, but fuck that, I had more important things to do. I could feel it in me, and I knew, I knew beyond a doubt that I could be free once more.

I reached out one last time, touching the screen lovingly for once, and then I was gone.
“It’s about time!” T yelled as I stepped into my base. I’d just come from a supper at home with my father. Lisa and Sveta were at the table with T, something I hadn’t expected.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

T put her hands on her hips. “Let me guess, you didn’t look at your phone, right?”

“That would have been difficult, since I didn’t have it with me.” I replied.

T rolled her eyes while Lisa scowled. “Where were you to be out of reach like that?” Sveta asked.

“I was working on the beacons as Arsenal in his lab, which is why the phone stayed here.” I was pretty sure the Protectorate wouldn’t monitor communications from the workshop they’d provided, but there was no sense in taking risks. “What happened?”

Sveta rose from her chair. “It’s on my computer. Come see.” I followed Sveta upstairs, and the other two were right behind me.

Once there, it wasn’t long before I was up to date. “So, who is this Morris_Elk?” I asked Sveta.

“He’s…” she started, sounding uncertain. “He’s the one who helped me escape my room at the center.” She straightened and looked me in the eyes. “If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have known what to do. He gave me a map of the place and a way to stop the cameras. He’s also the one who deleted my entire profile on the PHO forums.”

I nodded. “And you trust this person enough to think this isn’t a trap?” I asked.

“I know it’s not a trap,” she said, clearly sure of herself. “That’s the first thing I verified. He’s not lying and not planning anything other than what he said. I made sure with my power. I even verified it was still working to be certain.”

My eyes went wide. “You mean your power works over the Internet?”

She nodded. “It’s one of the first things I tried, when Morris_Elk contacted me. I went over to the Slenderman visit thread and found a post that came up red. Someplace in New York. Whatever he did, he never lied to me.”

I turned to the others. T nodded in understanding, while Lisa grinned knowingly. “T here had the same reaction, and I probably wasn’t that far off.”
I nodded. After her power failed with maps even while on a machine, I’d thought she needed to directly see the area or the person involved. “Are you sure he might not have gamed your power somehow?”

Sveta shook her head. “I don’t see how. I haven’t informed him of any of my abilities. I’m pretty sure he suspects something, given that I escaped my room in the asylum, but I’m pretty sure he has no clue what.”

“So, not a trap for sure,” I said.

“The main issue with this depends on what you do, Taylor.” Lisa explained, full on serious face. “You do nothing, your identity and Sveta’s connection to you is safe, but this Paige Mcabee will end up in the Birdcage. But on the other hand, even if Sveta doesn’t respond a single word to this, you show up to take her power and Morris_Elk will have strong evidence of Sveta’s involvement.”

“Are you sure she’ll be convicted?” I asked.

Lisa nodded sadly. “I read through everything he sent while we were waiting for you, and I agree she doesn’t have much chance of getting out. There were even some trial transcripts in there, and you can see the defense isn’t going to win. She was presented bound and gagged in a chair, for fuck’s sake!” Lisa swore. “And it’s clear from the context her lawyer’s afraid of her.”

Lisa took the time to show me the relevant passages, which even included an image of the defendant in her restraints while in the courtroom, something which I was pretty sure was illegal. Still, it sold the point very well. Someone on their way to winning such a case wouldn’t have been bound by an apparatus like this one.

I turned to look at the others, only to find them staring at me. I got the meaning of those gazes very quickly.

**Decision time.**

On one hand, I’d be losing part of my anonymity, of my mystique. On the other, the life of a young woman whose only mistake was telling her ex to go fuck himself.

Only one choice to make.

“I’ll do it.” I turned to my copy. “You’re ok with that, T?”

She grinned. “Sacrificing someone for our convenience never sat well with me, and you know that.” She shrugged. “And anyway, you’re the boss.” Such a reaction didn’t surprise me in the least. T always tended toward some level of deference, though it was unnecessary. She preferred that I made the important decisions. I made sure to always have her opinion if I could anyway.

I looked around and saw that the other two weren’t surprised in the least, and with good reason. I had done to Sveta basically the same thing I was planning, and Lisa could read me like a book.

“So, what do I do about this?” Sveta asked with a little smile, pointing at the screen.

“Wait a second,” I said, and went to get my laptop. I came back up and loaded Encryptchat, a web service known for having some of the most secure chat rooms. It was the same service that T had
used to work with Kid Win on one of Bakuda’s bombs. Sveta sent the address over PM to Morris_Elk, and I didn’t have to wait long before he connected to the room.

Morris_Elk has connected.

**Slenderman:** You want to talk to Ask Someone.

**Morris_Elk:** Yes.

**Morris_Elk:** Did you get the data?

**Slenderman:** I received it.

**Morris_Elk:** Did you go through it?

**Slenderman:** I have.

**Morris_Elk:** The woman in court, Paige Mcabee, is innocent of anything other than making a horrid mistake.

**Morris_Elk:** It is clear the court is not judging her fairly, based on her powers.

**Morris_Elk:** Should her power be removed, there might be a change in ruling.

**Morris_Elk:** She would also be imprisoned outside the Birdcage, which would at the very least allow her a retrial.

**Slenderman:** Is this information accurate at all times?

**The wait was a moment longer than usual.**

**Morris_Elk:** No.

**Slenderman:** Give me evidence.

There was about a minute before she came back to the chat room.

**Morris_Elk:** [link]

**Morris_Elk:** That is everything.

**Slenderman:** Any viruses?

**Slenderman:** iS tHiS iNforMaNt aLI tHA tY oU haVe

I released a deep breath. “Is it normal that this was more stressful than visiting Victor was?” I asked everyone.

Nods all around answered me. “Not surprising,” Lisa added. “Since this is unexplored territory.” She smiled. “You did good. As far as I can tell, he was sincere about what he said. Desperate, also. You were clearly his last choice for a solution.”

I had no issue with that. It was understandable that someone would try every option before reaching out to a cape like Slenderman.

“No risk of your identity becoming public, no traps and no lies.” Sveta said. “Everything’s clear.”

“Any viruses?” I asked Sveta.
She shook her head. “Nothing I can see, but I’ve never used it that way, so I can’t be sure.”

A quick visit to a popular torrent site proved that, yes, Sveta could read for viruses, back doors and the like. Morris_Elk’s data was clean, at least to Sveta’s eyes. So I downloaded the (very large) zip file.

And there was a lot of information in it.

I actually could not think of anything more I could have needed. It went from the blueprints of the courtroom to the entire court case on tape, including the number of Paige's cell and guard patterns. It was a lot more than I expected.

It reminded me of something, actually.

“He’s a parahuman,” I said halfway through everything.

Everyone turned to me. I could see the gears turning in Lisa's head. “You're right. How did you get that?” Lisa asked.

“This is too much data to be otherwise,” I explained. “It makes me think of whenever you send me information, actually.” It reminded me of what I’d received when Lisa had pointed me toward this base of mine, and all the details she had included. “It also explains pretty well why he would be concerned about someone going into the Birdcage. All capes fear the Birdcage, and since I’m pretty sure a good part of what he gave me is illegally acquired, he would have good reason to be wary of the law.”

“That would explain a lot, actually,” Sveta added. “When I escaped the center, he caught me online in less than a minute.”

Lisa nodded. “That fits with what I have.” She finally said. “Ninety percent sure. Only other way he could do all that would be if he was top PRT or Protectorate brass, and I can’t see one of them helping an inmate escape.”

“So, a Thinker like you?” T asked.

“Or a Tinker specialized in computers, or even a talented Stranger who could get physical access to all that data,” Lisa added.

The discussion tapered off after that, and we went back to the data. Once that was done the lot of us sat down and planned an infiltration mission to be performed in four days. There would be work to be done before I left for Boston, where the trial was taking place, and T would have to do double duty as Arsenal while I was gone. Still, with all that we had and what the pair of us could build, this visit was quite doable.

It was now official, Slenderman was going nationwide.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_
[Dragon]

The court session on Thursday began and Slenderman still hadn’t showed. I knew because I’d performed extensive checks on Paige Mcabee every day ever since contacting him. In a way, I wasn’t surprised; I didn’t expect him to go and steal her power right from under the noses of the entire Boston Protectorate. He seemed like a person who chose his battlefields carefully.

The courtroom seemed a better option, especially with the sense of showmanship he seemed to have. It was also less secure, more easily available than a cell three levels under the ground guarded by dozens of PRT members and more than fifteen capes.

If he was true to the pattern I’d noticed, he’d appear somewhere clearly visible to everyone, probably right behind the defense's table. He’d take Paige’s power while everyone was trying to escape, close in or get a good attack vector. There were four capes in the room, all members of the Boston Protectorate: Herald, Odyssey, Scyther and White Mirror. All were present in case of an escape attempt, regardless of the current state of the accused.

I estimated ten to eighteen seconds before the Protectorate capes could mount an attack. The main question was if Slenderman would remain present while they struck, as he did against the Undersiders, or simply vanish once his goal was complete. He seemed to have abilities that allowed him to either resist or cancel other capes’ abilities, judging by the results of the Undersiders’ actions.

I hoped that this was where he struck, as there were not going to be many opportunities after this one. The trucks leading to the Birdcage was the only possibility if he skipped the courtroom, and the results of an attack there were difficult to predict because of the long distance involved.

The members of the jury came out of the deliberation room and I started planning to respond to an attack on the trucks when I noticed someone coming out from under the table at the witness stand. It was empty at this time, and no one paid attention to it, intent as they were on the jurors.

Slenderman.

An idle thought started a background process counting the time since he’d appeared. It would be a good indicator of the Boston Protectorate’s reaction time, regardless of the rest of the proceedings.

He sat down in the witness chair for a moment, looking around the room as the jurors read their verdict. Paige dodged attempted murder, but was convicted of both assault and sexual assault with a parahuman ability, which the judge would clearly use to send her to the Birdcage, regardless of the
'three strikes' law.

Slenderman rose out of his chair as the judge turned to her. He stepped out of the witness box, passing less than two meters from the court reporter and as he went to stand straight in front of the defense table. He made no sound I could detect as he did so.

Still, nobody reacted. Why? Some form of Stranger ability, unseen until now?

*-*-*-*-*-*-*

[Paige Mcabee]

I was in shock.

Assault? Sexual Assault? It wasn’t fair! It wasn’t anything like that! I yelled inside.

The judge called my name, and I turned my attention toward him. I was surprised to find that I couldn’t look directly at him, as a tall shape in a business suit blocked my line of sight. I had no difficulty recognizing him, not after how much attention he’d been getting in the Media. I still managed to get infrequent newspapers even while in holding, and the troubles in Brockton Bay had made national news. I’d even seen a grainy photo of him holding up two parahumans from tentacle-like limbs.

It was Slenderman.

With the hood he wore, I couldn’t see his face, but I could feel his eyes on me. He took off the glove hiding his right hand, and fingers similar to tentacles appeared from under the cloth. He extended his hand simply, like a man asking a woman to a dance, and I understood his message clearly.

He was offering to remove my power.

It didn’t take long for me to think it over. I was not fond of my abilities, outside of the fact that they made me a great singer. I found controlling people like I’d unwillingly done to my ex morally reprehensible, and wanted no part of it. Had I known then what I knew now, I’d never have bought them, even if they’d been free.

My restraints did not have much give built into them, but they had enough. I stared straight toward the hood and nodded, trying to be as clear as possible. I ignored everything else, including the judge who was clearly trying to talk to me.

He started moving once again as soon as my head started nodding, and I found I couldn’t follow his steps. He went around the defense table and I quickly felt him arrive at my back. His bizarre fingers appeared from above, and I braced myself in preparation for the removal.

Regardless of their shape, his fingers were cool on my forehead. I had my eyes closed, expecting pain, but none came. Three, four, five seconds passed, and still I felt nothing. He then brushed the strands of hair that had obscured my face behind my ears, and I had the most bizarre feeling that he was trying to tell me that everything was going to be fine.

That was when the laughter started.

*-*-*-*-*-*-*

[Dragon]
My timer indicated that sixty seven seconds had passed since his arrival, but no one had done anything. He was in clear view of everyone, yet nothing happened.

As usual, I had a dozen different video analysis programs running in the background, and one of them finally gave some form of result.

Eye movements from a member of the media whose view of the judge was obscured by Slenderman’s presence indicated that he was still following the movements of the judge.

*I concluded. He wasn’t bending the light, as both the cameras and Paige could clearly see him. Illusions then, or perception manipulation and the like.*

“Miss Mcabee, are you paying attention to me?” the judge said. I tuned him out as I realized that, up until now, every single instance of Slenderman’s presence had been on video. Outside the E88 capes, Faultline’s crew and the Undersiders, all of which were parahumans fitting the criterion of targets, no one had ever seen Slenderman in action live.

This ability explained a lot of things. How he’d been able to take down the non-powered ABB gang members without any indication of battle, how he got right next to the Merchants while they were asleep without them noticing.

It even explained Oni Lee. The teleporter must have noticed his presence somehow, yet couldn’t target him reliably. As such, he went and filled the room he was in with as many explosions as he could in hopes of catching his target. The criminal had probably died when Slenderman removed his power and he didn’t notice, continuing to toss grenade after grenade. He was ready to toss one when he found his power gone, and in his surprise failed to throw it in time.

The scenario seemed viable, and fit with all the data I had. What he’d been trying to write had probably been ‘invisibility’ in chinese, only he’d perished before finishing even the first ideogram.

It was the sound of children laughing that brought my attention back to the courtroom. Slenderman was by now right behind Paige, barely two meters in front of Herald, leader of the Boston Protectorate. The Protectorate cape was clearly not seeing the Trump, moving his head around to find the source of the noise. He wasn’t the only one. One thing was clear from the microphones in the room, the sound wasn’t coming directly from him. I could detect four different sources, all over the room.

Only then did I see the reaction I’d been expecting.

Eyes went wide all through the crowd, and people started running for the exits. Herald, who was closest, reacted near instantly, sending one of his concentrated sonic yells right toward Slenderman, who didn’t move an inch. I saw the air ripple on the cameras, but Slenderman didn’t seem affected in the least. Even Paige, who was close to the line of fire, showed no effect on her person.

The Protectorate parahumans reacted as I’d expected them to. White Mirror joined his leader, preparing to use one of his signature forcefields while Scyther and Odyssey, close range capes, focused on getting the civilians out of the room as quickly as orderly as they could.

I ignored a message from Arsenal in Brockton Bay, dedicating a simple background process to message him my unavailability. Instead I focused on the events in the courtroom.
I saw Herald prepare another attack, only to stop when Slenderman turned his head - and only his head - towards the man. A full 180 degree turn without twisting his torso in the slightest and Slenderman was now looking directly at Boston's head cape. The sight of his head doing a half-turn to stare at them made the two capes step back, then back yet again as Slenderman’s body slowly rotated in their direction, his head not moving a single inch.

By now, only the capes and Paige were still in the room. Tentacles sprouted from within Slenderman’s suit, and his laughter grew ever louder. At that very second I started seeing the room’s lights fail one by one in random order, and the cameras weren’t long to follow suite. The interference didn’t last long, barely ten seconds, but when the cameras restarted everything was back to normal, and Slenderman was gone.

I made a copy of the videos from the entire time he’d been in the room, and went over it in detail. I still paid attention to the courtroom, to Paige and the four capes still present, while I typed a message for Chevalier, the head of the Philadelphia Protectorate, requesting his presence in Boston due to an incident and specifying that I would pick him up. I then uploaded myself into one of my suits that could transport passengers, and started on my way toward Philadelphia.

Slenderman had held up his part of the bargain. *Time to do my part of the work.*

---

[Lung]

I was defined by vengeance.

This was something I knew, something I accepted. Engraved in the very core of my self was a list, names of people who had slighted me enough that their actions needed reprisal. It was a very short list, as there weren’t many who I couldn’t take care of easily.

*The woman in the suit, the Yàngbǎn, Slenderman.*

Only three.

One had made me, and in doing so had destroyed everything I had. One had tried breaking me, tried molding me into a slave. And one had taken what was mine and needed to suffer for it.

Still, I had learned much from my time as leader of the ABB. The gang had always been a means to an end, and I could gather another in some other place if I wanted. I would need to avenge it later, but Slenderman was the real target of my actions. I’d hoped to draw him out of hiding with the bombing spree, yet he still hid, and only faced my lieutenants.

Luckily, he was somewhat predictable. He attacked those who went against innocents in some way, so escalating was the way to attract his attention.

And there was a target perfect for that.

*Arsenal. A rogue Tinker.*

I had to admit that Tian Yan had made herself useful by finding a way to buy powers for herself. She could track only three people at the time, but tracking Arm'master, Kaiser and Coil made for full knowledge of my enemies’ plans. Along with a wealth of other information.
Such as the location of this rogue tinker’s new workshop. One thing I had learned from Bakuda was the versatility of Tinkers, and how much power their tools could grant. Forcing this ‘personal equipment’ Tinker build devices for me would be quite worthwhile, and if a Tinker specialized in explosives couldn’t fight me, I doubted that one talented in less destructive items would pose a challenge.

And if he could, all the better.

The Protectorate would probably retaliate, but I could handle them. I’d sent them packing with their tails between their legs once, and I could do it again.

I walked forward, intent on the workshop. I’d wait for him there with an ultimatum.

*I hope this Arsenal doesn’t take it.*

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_
Executive Search 8.2

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to Essex, MilkHornets, Robo Jesus, Mysterius, gamebrain89, Warhammer651, wkz, Ph’nglui mglw’nafh, RCA, Where’sMySword?, BlankSlate & hance1986 for their help on this part. Each of them gets the Dust-powered weapon of their choice, courtesy of Beacon Academy. Note: While supplies last. No copy of Penny's Swords remains, as I took the last one. They're mine, I tell you!

[T]

Contrary to our usual schedule, Taylor had created me a little after one this morning. This let her go to Boston and do her stuff without my body turning to ash while she was gone.

My job while she was away was simple: I was to take up the role of Arsenal. I had been given the task of finishing the pair of beacons the two of us had been working on. I was also going to be in a power-boosting zone from one in the afternoon until she gave me the OK. We’d modified both the Slenderman costume and Arsenal’s power suit with a simple text-based message system along with voice-to-text commands. That feature was the only newly added one for Arsenal this time, as we’d spent the rest of the previous few days working on the Slenderman outfit. I’d mainly worked on a sound-nullification system while Taylor had made a few modifications to the actual frame of the suit, along with the installation of a remote voice projection system.

I made sure to be inside Arsenal’s lab before seven in the morning, as I had a plan. Given a good four hours of work, I was pretty sure I could finish the beacons, and that would allow me time to work on what I really wanted.

A flight system.

As such, I tackled the work like a woman possessed, and managed to finish the two healing devices before the clock struck eleven. I’d even made some improvements on the things; as they were now, they’d require only thirty minutes downtime every four hours, a noticeable step up from the two hours up, one hour down of our original blueprint.

Then I hit the drawing board and started designing a flight module.

I could have easily gone with a design similar to Kid Win’s, especially with all the videos of him in action and the few hints he’d given me, but a hover board didn’t interest me. I wanted something I could keep on me at all times, something that could not get stolen, especially in mid-air. Death might not be as permanent to me as it would be to others, but dying from a fall of all things held no interest to me.

I was surprised to find it was past two-thirty when Taylor messaged me. She was starting her ‘visit’, as she called it. I sent back a simple ‘Good luck’ and slid over to my computer (making sure to stay inside my zone) to write Dragon an e-mail. I made sure to wait until I felt a new power in the back of my mind before pressing the ‘Send’ button.
There ended up being two new powers, which meant Paige Mcabee had been a bronze cape. I’d have to see Sveta to drop another Human spark, then.

It was only a few seconds before I received an answer, and it wasn’t the one I expected.

I’m sorry, but I’m dealing with an emergency at the moment. I’ll contact you a little later regarding the beacons, but my current issue requires all my attention.

Be talking to you later,

Dragon.

I wondered what issue that was. It couldn’t be an Endbringer, as Dragon would have simply transferred me to someone else. The only other possibility I could think of was Taylor’s ‘Visit’, and I hoped Dragon wouldn’t involve herself. It was a known fact that she wore sealed power suits, which meant that our perception manipulation wouldn’t work due to cameras, and stealing or negating her power would be impractical. It also wouldn't stop her from going after Taylor. I was pretty sure she could deal with our shadow abilities, so Tentacle was our only usable ability, and not something that could compete with the world’s greatest Tinker.

I waited for some very long minutes, my tinkering completely forgotten as I hoped for a response from Taylor saying she was OK. Unfortunately, Dragon replied first.

Arsenal, this is Dragon. Can I connect to your machine?

The computer I was on was set up for such an eventuality, and as such contained nothing incriminating. Not even some of my blueprints, which went directly into the suit’s onboard systems.

Go ahead.

A window opened on the screen, a little less than half its size. Dragon’s face appeared in it, with the background that could have been just about any computer room in the country. The view was almost exactly the same as the only known picture of her (taken two years ago) to the point where it was a little eerie. It was a surprisingly normal face, coming from one of the top capes in the world. Brown hair, amber eyes. It could have fit on any American woman around her thirties.

“Sorry for the wait,” the Canadian woman’s voice rang from my speakers.

“No prob,” I said, voice gruff. “Mind telling me what the issue was?”

There was a second's pause. “As numerous members of the media were present, there shouldn’t be any issue with me telling you. Slenderman attacked Paige Mcabee’s trial a few minutes ago.”

I tried my best not to reveal anything. Luckily, a power suit helped quite a bit in hiding body language. “The singer, right?” She nodded. “Was he caught?” I thanked the stars that I remembered to say ‘he’.

“No,” she replied, sighing. “There were only a small number of Protectorate personnel there, mainly placed in case of Miss Mcabee’s escape, and they weren’t prepared or able to deal with him.”

I internally sighed in relief while remaining outwardly stoic. “Better luck next time, I suppose.”
“Indeed.” She smiled a little. “Now, what did you want to talk to me about?”

I stepped to the side, grabbed the two beacons and brought them before the camera. “I was just wondering where I should deliver these.”

Her eyes grew somewhat wider. “Two?!”

“Well, you did say you needed some as soon as possible, and for a good number of components making two isn’t much more work than making one.” That wasn’t the complete truth, though it wasn’t entirely false either. The main reason was that both Taylor and I worked in tandem, and it was rare that we could work on the same beacon at the same time. Two Tinkers meant two beacons, naturally.

“I’m not complaining,” she replied with a nod and a smile, then looked to the side for a second. “Would you be able to pass by the Brockton Bay PRT today?”

“Depends. What time?”

“Give me a second,” she said, then typed what I supposed was a message to someone other than me. “Would four-fifteen be good?”

I was about to ask for a later time when Taylor responded. She was finished and I was to drop off Human to Sveta as soon as possible. “Four-fifteen will be fine,” I ended up replying.

“See you then,” Dragon said, and her window closed itself.

Four-fifteen meant I had a little over an hour and a half before the meeting. That was enough time to see Sveta and even grab some lunch before arriving at the PRT. I had snacked while waiting, but a good meal couldn’t do anything but help.

*-*-*-*-*-*

[T]

It was past eight when I finally left the PRT building. Armsmaster had wasted no time in conducting rigorous testing on my beacons, running separate tests on each, and it had taken more than three hours before he was satisfied. I was actually glad I had two, since I estimated it would have taken more than five hours to go through every test with a single device. I was also glad for my late lunch.

By now, Taylor was on her way back from Boston. Dusk had fallen and the shadows were lengthening on the ground, which meant that Shadow movement was now a viable means of getting from one place to another. From what I understood she’d already done a good part of the trip home before sundown while hidden under a bus, but that only meant I had no real clue on when exactly she’d be arriving.

And I was gonna tinker until she did. I had a few good designs, now I just needed to go over them one last time.

Stepping into Arsenal’s lab, I went directly to my workbench, flipping on the lights along the way, and scanned over the various plans I had once again. One version seemed the most promising, though I’d have to work something out for the control mechanism. Implanting a chip in the back of my head wasn’t something I was keen on doing or even feasible with my clone nature.
“Good evening, Tinker,” came a rumbling voice from behind me. I spun around to see the last person I would have expected here.

Lung.

His dragon tattoos shimmered in the low light, and he was wearing his dragon mask. His body language was silent about his emotions. His eyes were boring into me.

“You know who I am, Tinker, and I can see by your reaction you know what I’ve done.” He rose slowly from his seat. “You will build your devices for me, or you will fight me and die, like many before you.” I could hear the smirk in the last part. “Make your choice.”

My mind went into overdrive as I desperately considered all the possibilities. Working for him wasn’t an option; I had only five or so hours left anyway, too little time to actually build something impressive enough to placate him. If he even could be placated. Taylor would be back before that point arrived, but neither of us wanted any link between Slenderman and Arsenal.

Escape was a possibility, but it carried some costs. Arsenal’s suit was solid, but it wasn’t made for speed; I doubted I could outrun Lung, especially while dodging his pyrokinesis. Shadow form was always an option, but that would compromise Arsenal’s identity.

Fighting him with everything I had was also an option, but it carried the same sort of risks. Unless I killed Lung (something I wasn’t prepared for), information about my other powers would come out. Sure, I could try to pass them off as Tinker devices, but with Armsmaster and Dragon interested in me I doubted that would fly.

So, fighting solely as Arsenal was the only option I had that could allow this identity to remain intact. I had an ace in the hole, so to say, though how long it would work against someone of Lung’s caliber was not certain.

It would be enough for a holding action though.

I switched the external speakers off, then used voice commands to send text messages. The first was to Taylor, explaining the situation. It wouldn’t do for her to appear unprepared in the middle of combat.

I wasn’t going to send a message from my suit to Dragon. She seemed like a perfectly good person, but I was not going to trust that she wouldn’t track my suit, which was often in my real base. I didn’t have the Protectorate line memorized, something I would have to fix, so I went with the next best thing.

Under attack. Lung @ 4047 Lincoln. Please help.

I sent the message to Kid Win.

Now that I had backup coming, I switched the external speakers back on. “No,” I said. “You will get nothing from me.”

I could feel the smile in his voice. “So you will fight, Tinker?” He flexed his fingers as if they were claws.
I didn’t answer him. “Lucifer, battle start,” I invoked.

“Acknowledged.” A handle shot out of the back of my suit and into my waiting hand, a metal ball covered in spikes landing on its end not a moment later. I wasted no time, firing said ball between the still open doors of the workshop, then purposefully failed to brace myself as I allowed the line to reel me out into the street.

“Are you fleeing, little Tinker?” Lung roared, his voice even more grave than before.

“Come and get me!” I yelled back from the center of the road. “Lucifer, Disable Brute Restrictions.”

“Disabled,” it answered. I didn’t wait for a second, detaching the end once more and swinging it to build momentum. Then I sent the offensive part of my device forward. It rocketed ahead, its propulsion coming online at the touch of a button.

The physics behind most weapons are simple. In terms of math, there was no difference between a punch and a bullet. Of course, the latter had much greater speed and affected a much smaller area, which meant that the results were different. But, in the end, the kinetic energy of both was mass times velocity squared divided by two.

Lucifer was no different. Only it worked on a higher level.

The hard end of my weapon hit Lung just as he came out of the building. He somehow dodged part of it, a surprise since Lucifer was moving just short of mach one. Still, the impact launched him into a spiraling tumble to my right, and I was surprised to see scales already present all over his body, hiding his tattoos.

Wasn’t he supposed to ramp up slowly?! I screamed inside. Still, I continued the motion I had started, and swung Lucifer around for another pass, this time aiming for his legs.

Now prepared, he jumped over my weapon as it approached, only for me to reverse its flight barely a meter after having passed under him. I clipped him in the knee, this time with less than half of the force due to lack of time to build momentum. Still, he flipped in the air and fell face first to the ground.

I kept the business end of Lucifer spinning above me as Lung rose. I was buying time, and I was sure he would dodge if I tried to hit him while he was down. He was smiling as he stood, a great wide grin. His mask had fallen off. “I will break you, Tinker,” he snarled, and the rumble in his voice was even more prominent.

“Big words,” I said, aiming to goad him into a charge. “You haven’t done anything yet.”

He didn’t rise to the bait. “I will outlast you still.”

“Then come.”

He did, charging straight at me, hands trailing flame. I twisted and swung my morningstar straight at him, and battle was joined again.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_
Executive Search Interlude: Kid Win

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to Essex, MilkHornets, Mysterius, Lionhead Bookends, RCa, RedPockets, Requiem_Jeer, hance1986, Logos, BeaconHill, Shader, Suryn & zergloli for their toil on this part. I gift each of them with a one use ticket to the next Hunter Exam. Warning: Does not guarantee success. Hisoka may be present. Good luck.

[Kid Win]

I was alone and deep in tinkering when my phone indicated I had a message.

That’s surprising, I noted. I don’t tend to get many messages. Not on my personal phone at least.

Like most Wards, I had two phones. One was my official phone given to me by the Protectorate, the other a personal one for things one didn’t want the higher-ups to see.

That phone didn’t see much use. I wasn’t much of a social person, outside the Wards, and barely anyone had my number. Still, I went and checked it. It wouldn’t be the first time Dennis sent me a funny caption or picture that he didn’t want Piggot to know about.

Under attack. Lung @ 4047 Lincoln. Please help.

That… That’s not Dennis, I quickly realized, helped by the fact it wasn’t a number I knew. A message like that from a Ward would have gone on my official phone, if not on the intercom. It couldn’t be my parents, either, since both of them were old-fashioned folks who never texted.

Taylor, I deduced. It can only be her.

Then I blanched, realizing what that meant.

I reacted instantly, without thinking. I already had most of my suit on, as I used it for tinkering, so I just strapped my helmet on and put on my gloves before grabbing my hoverboard and leaping through the open window.

I was already a good distance away from base when I realized that might not have been the best idea. I hadn’t even informed the others.

I tapped my earbud. “Console, this is Kid Win. Come in.”

“Hey, Kid, what’s up?” came Browbeat’s voice over the line.

I could already see flames from afar. “I’m at the corner of Lincoln and Arlington. Lung is here, fighting someone,” I said even though I was still two blocks away.

I could hear the surprise in Browbeat’s voice. “I’m transferring you to the main line.”
I repeated my statement, and Armスマスター responded. “Kid Win, your patrol isn’t for another hour. What are you doing outside at this time?” he asked, his tone suspicious.

“Uhh, I decided to go early?” I answered lamely, and the sound the Protectorate leader made in response clearly said he didn’t believe me one bit. Then I stopped in the air as I arrived at the location Taylor had specified.

Lung was there, as the message had said, fighting someone in a power suit. The gang leader was already deep into his dragon transformation, as tall as most trucks and scaled all over. His mask had already come loose, and his face had started to shift. Fire was covering his arms from hand to neck.

His opponent was still fighting, but looked to be in worse shape. Part of the suit’s surface had melted, and the Tinker was clearly fighting defensively. Still, the cape swung his mace at the charging Lung and the spiked end shot forward, breaking the sound barrier not long after being launched. It hit the dragon-man straight in the shoulder, and with how much he was pushed back I could guess there was more to the weapon than could easily be seen.

I wasn’t fooled by the armor’s male lines. It was clearly Taylor down there. I recognized some of the things we’d discussed the last time we’d talked together, before Bakuda’s bombing rampage closed the school. She’d even spoken of a weight manipulation system, which was probably how her mace could fly so fast and hit so hard.

“Velocity, Battery, Assault, be ready for deployment. Miss Militia, go to the armory and get the package we discussed,” Armスマスター finally spoke. “Kid Win, back to base. The Wards will hold the fort until we come back.”

Not happening, I said to myself. “Sir, you can’t be serious. Are you telling me to abandon someone to Lung’s mercy?” I tried making it clear in my tone that I didn’t believe the ABB leader had any.

“A Ward has no place on this battlefield,” he replied, and I could tell he was getting irritated. “We’ll be on site in five minutes.”

Five minutes?! I yelled inside. Was he stupid?

“You’re expecting someone alone to last five more minutes against Lung?” I said, trying and failing to keep all of my anger out of my voice. “When he’s already taller than a building?”

“That was an order, Kid Win.” His voice was cold as ice, a clear indicator that he was furious. “You are to come back to base immediately.”

Taylor dodged another blast of flame coming from the ABB leader, and I decided I didn’t have time to argue. I shut off my earbud and sheathed my laser gun, since it probably wouldn’t do any good.

Besides, I had something much better to fight with.

I pressed a few buttons on my arm, and my greatest work yet started appearing before me, piece by piece. My Alternator Cannon, the result of days of work under the only drug I tried that had an effect. It still needed a good fifteen seconds to finish arriving, much too long, and I crossed my fingers that Taylor would survive until it did.

She managed to, though her left arm had lost most of its mobility, the armor there having partially melted. I remembered her telling me she used boron alloys, which tended to be quite heat resistant. I
didn’t want to guess how hot Lung’s flame was, by now.

The normal setting of my cannon would be useless, being heat generation, so I switched it smoothly to the cryogenic setting as I aimed, and pulled the trigger. Lung dodged somehow, even thought he’d shown no indication of noticing I was there, but my shot still extinguished all the flames in a region larger than the width of the street on impact.

The dragon turned to look directly at me, and I had to admit that was the scariest thing I’d seen as of that moment. It lasted barely a second, but I’ll remember it my whole life.

It was worth it, though, since Taylor used the opening to bounce that spiked ball of hers right in the back of his skull.

It seemed like Lung was too solid to be taken down at this point, since the supersonic weapon just made him stumble forward, but it gave me the opportunity for another shot.

Then another.

And another.

Taylor and I fell into a rhythm quite naturally, hitting and shooting. My Alternator Cannon was strong enough to freeze Lung for a moment with a direct hit, which gave enough time for Taylor to get another strike in. She never focused on a single part of him, attacking legs, face and shoulders with no pattern, but it was enough to make him stumble or fall each time.

With each passing second, however, Lung was still growing. His flames were getting hotter and hotter, I realized, as my cannon started having less and less of an effect. Taylor’s attacks grew faster and faster, but even there it seemed like they weren’t doing enough. Wing sprouted from his back as he kept growing, nearly reaching two stories high by now.

Time was our enemy here, and it seemed it was catching up to us.

Then he managed to jump over one of her attacks, turning toward me at the same time. Her attack twisted in mid-air to catch him anyway, but it seemed like it had lost too much momentum as he toughed it out. I wasted no time and fired straight at him, but he intercepted the shot with a blast of flame more focused than any before. The beam punched through his fire, cancelling it, but it was weakened enough that it didn’t slow down Lung as he took flight.

He was charging right at me, so I pushed my board to the side, evading him. Then I twisted around only to see a curtain of flame coming straight at me.

I tried shooting to the side, really I did, but there was no time. My costume took the worst of the hit, melting on my skin in dozens of places, but my board fared worse. It wasn’t rated for extreme temperatures, so it stopped working near-instantly. My Alternator Cannon shared the same fate, falling to the ground.

I was lucky enough not to fall all the way to the street, my momentum carrying me to the roof of a nearby building. I rolled as I landed, my nerves raw and screaming from the burns, and turned towards where the ABB leader was banking through the air, glowing like an angry comet.

Taylor had clearly gone straight for his head, hoping to distract him, but he’d expected the attack and caught the spiked ball in his oversized hand, not letting go.
We were screwed.

Worse was that Lung knew it, releasing a great laugh that could probably be heard six blocks away.

Then his head was consumed in a burst of electric blue light, lightning crackling all over him. I was blinded for a second, and when I could see again Lung was on the ground, his wings and scales receding.

“How!?” he yelled.

Armsmaster stepped out of an alley. “Seems like Bakuda didn’t trust you so much, Lung. That was one of hers, tailor-made to shut down a parahuman’s powers. Just the thing if you wanted to make sure a Brute died in a blast, actually. Doesn’t last very long, but works perfectly otherwise.”

I could hear more grenades landing around the ABB leader, and he was soon covered in yellow containment foam. I raised my head and saw Miss Militia on another rooftop, on the other side of the street, a grenade launcher in her hands.

“Arsenal, is everything fine?” Armsmaster asked, turning to Taylor.

“It’s gonna be a lot of work fixing everything, but otherwise all’s good,” she replied, and it came out as a gruff, male voice. I belatedly realized that I hadn’t even heard her speak before, and that I hadn’t known her codename until Armsmaster said it.

“I’ll have to thank that Ward of yours,” she continued. “Kid Win, was it? Without him, I’d have been toast a good while ago.”

“Yes,” the Protectorate leader said, and I could hear the undercurrent of anger in his tone. I suspected I was going to hear about this, once we got back to base.

I also understood Taylor’s unspoken message. She didn’t know me and I didn’t know her, not while she was in costume. It didn’t surprise me, not with what she’d said about the Protectorate. I also knew she valued her anonymity highly.

On my side, I grabbed the remains of my board and made my way down the fire escape. The action for the night was done, now came the fallout.

I just hoped it wouldn't hurt too much.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

[Lung]

I had lost.

I had wondered why the Tinker hadn’t run when it was clear he wasn’t up to size. He’d known the Protectorate had been ready for me.

It had been a trap.

There was no one left that would come rescue me.
I wasn’t afraid. I had escaped the Yāngbǎn’s prison, and I would survive this one as well.

And I would remember, and avenge this defeat.

The lights in the truck suddenly went out, and it stopped barely a moment later. I knew very well from the distance that we weren’t yet at the PRT building, so I wondered if some ABB remnants hadn’t managed something useful for once.

Then the laughter started.

*No, no, no!* I screamed inside. *Not now!*

A figure stepped right before me, and I could see inside the hood of my sworn foe, at the blank face there. No nose, no eyes. Nothing but white skin.

“Why must you come now?!” I yelled at him. “I tried to get your attention for weeks, to get to fight you, and still you didn’t come! Why now?!”

He said nothing. Numerous limbs fell on my face, the only skin not covered in foam. I tried blasting fire at him, but my powers had barely recovered, and the thin flame didn’t even mark his face.

Then I felt my power disappear.

“No! Kill me instead!” I yelled. “Anything but that!”

He stepped back, the sound of laughter increasing for a moment, then he was gone.

I cried right then, like I had never done before. I was still crying when the PRT members opened the back of the truck to transfer me to jail.

I couldn’t even bring myself to care. I was defeated for good, this time.
I was at my original base late Friday morning when I received a message from Lisa.

I’ll B @ base for 12. Bring lunch?

I had a good idea what she wanted to talk about, and I had no issue with her presence. She probably would be able to help. Even if she didn’t, seeing her is always nice.

Fugly Bob?

She replied in less than a second.

Sure. You, T, Sveta?

Sveta was out, meeting with someone from Brockton Bay she knew on the net. She’d been in contact with him for over a year, from what I understood. With her abilities, I was pretty sure she’d be safe. Also, more social contact might not be bad for her.

Only me & T.

Lisa appeared at the door minutes after twelve, carrying a pair of paper bags. I quickly took one as we exchanged greetings, and the both of us made our way to what I used as a dinner table. “T, lunchtime!” I yelled, then turned back to Lisa. “I recommend staying on that end of the table,” I pointed out.

It took a second before she caught on. “Boosting zone, correct?”

I nodded. “I’m testing my new abilities, so I’m over my normal power count.”

T came and grabbed her lunch to go. “Hello,” she said, face serious. “If you don’t mind, I’ll eat in the workshop. I’ve got a lot to do.”

“Sure,” Lisa said as I nodded. “She okay?” Lisa asked as T went out of sight, looking somewhat concerned.

“She is, but yesterday’s battle revealed a few issues with both Lucifer and Arsenal’s armor, and she’s working on them. Since it seems like school will restart any day now, she doesn’t want to waste any time.” I then took a bite of my burger.
“Good work on that, actually,” Lisa replied, giving me a thumbs up. “Two in a day including Lung, that’ll make waves.”

I nodded again, frowning. “I’m sure.”

My morose look didn’t escape Lisa’s attention. “Something happened.”

“Lung said I’m the reason he bombed the city,” I explained. “He wanted to grab my attention. I…”

“You did nothing wrong,” Lisa interrupted, looking straight into my eyes. “Lung’s a bully, just like Kaiser, the ABB and E88, and that’s what they do. They hurt people, just to prove that they’re stronger, as if that proved they were superior. If you hadn’t done anything, it would have still happened.” She smirked. “With someone like Bakuda on their side, it’s not like they could have stayed silent and peaceful.”

I’m pretty sure she had a point there, but I still had to ask. “You sure?”

“Positive. The ABB wasn’t going to stay on the sidelines for long, and with Bakuda’s personality massive explosions were pretty much a given,” she explained. “She didn’t seem like someone who could hold their impulses back. Don’t stress on it.”

I smiled. Her words had lifted a good part of the guilt from my shoulders. “Thank you.”

She returned it. “Now, changing the subject… Powers.” She smirked, and I could hear the excitation in her voice. “I suppose you have three or four more, one of them another Human, correct?”

“Yes, three,” I answered. “How did you know?”

“At this point, I shouldn’t be surprised,” I told myself.

“Up to now, every single cape with physical changes has been a bronze aura,” Lisa explained, the smirk not leaving her face. “While Paige Mcabee was more human-looking than Gregor or Newter, those feathers of hers sure weren’t normal. I was pretty sure she was a bronze from the very moment you started thinking about meeting her. What about the other two?”

“Music from Paige, and Wyrm from Lung,” I replied. “I’d hoped for something like his growth powers, but no such luck.”

“Music, really?” Lisa asked, curious.

“It’s more like rhythmic vibrations of air, but Music is still a good summary. And Wyrm is the concept of a dragon, I simply call it that way so I don’t confuse it with the Tinker.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” she replied. “Found out anything already?”

“I’ve mainly worked with Wyrm so far, and this is what it does by itself.” I pressed my hand to the ground and activated the power. When I lifted my hand back up, a small dragon-like construct made out of concrete flowed out of the floor, hanging right under my palm.

“Nice,” she commented. “Is it stuck like that under your hand? Do you use your hands to control it?”

“No,” I said, and I made the dragon fly up then land on the table while my arm fell back at my side. “I control it with my mind, and it’s like gravity doesn’t affect it. I can make it slither up or down pretty much at will.”
“Do you… see through its eyes, or anything like that?”

I shook my head. “No. I can tell where it is in relation to me, but outside of that I get nothing from it.”

“Anything else?”

“I could have made it bigger or smaller, and made more of them. Total mass seems to be my limit. I can also make them sink back into the ground with just a thought.”

“I can see this one is made out of concrete. Are you limited to that?” She added. “Could you have made one big enough to ride on?”

“See for yourself.” I dipped a finger inside my glass, and a miniature dragon made out of Cola slithered upward around my fingers to arrive right before her face. I even made its wings beat. Then I stood and walked a few steps backwards, pressing my hands to the ground. I was quickly lifted up by a draconic neck the width of my body, and the rest of its body rose behind me.

“An impressive Master power, then.” she said, eyes wide. “What about Music?”

I scowled, making both of my dragons sink back to where they came from. “Music is another one with requirements, it seems. A lot like Area. Activating it makes it flash on for an instant, then shut itself down.”

“Show me,” she asked.

I did so, activating it three times in rapid succession. Up and down it went, staying active for barely half a second. “See?” I said afterwards.

She shook her head. “I get nothing. What have you tried?”

“Not much,” I answered. “When it didn’t work, I turned to Wyrm.”

“Any combinations?”

“Wyrm works with Shadow, with or without Tentacle, and as usual Music combines with Area,” I said, explaining. “The latter combo seems to work more like Music, as it doesn’t activate on the ground anymore. I did learn something else, though.”

“What is it?”

“Paige had Music and Human, and they combined properly in her. It doesn’t do the same now that I have them. Also, unlike Sveta, leaving her with only Human didn’t remove her abnormal features.”

Lisa nodded. “It confirms what I thought. When Sveta turned back into human form, she had Danger and Human combined, true?”

“True,” I confirmed.

“I’m pretty certain that Sveta's Changer power was what turned her back into human shape and not the fact that her Human spark was now working properly. The Human spark alone must give Paige a
different sort of power, which is why she didn’t turn back,” Lisa explained. “As for the combination thing, I am not surprised. Since sparks have different effects in different people, it wouldn’t be surprising that two sparks that you can match together would be incompatible in someone else.”

“Makes sense,” I replied.

“You said Wyrm works with Shadow and Tentacle, right?” I nodded. “What does it do?”

“This,” I said, and turned into shadow state. I dashed to a darker corner of the room, making sure Lisa could still see me, before I pushed myself back out into three dimensions, but without turning back to human form. I unfolded, taking the shape of a dragon in the darkness, wings unfurled to the sides.

“Most impressive,” Lisa said. “Any use?”

“I can affect physical stuff in this form, and even take it back with me if I return to being two dimensional,” I explained. My voice was different in this form, as if it was an echo of a distant but enormous sound. “I can also fly, but only in shadowy places.” I did so as an example.

“Talking is a bonus too,” Lisa pointed out. “What happens with only Shadow and Wyrm.”

“I lose the ability to affect physical stuff, and to drag them with me. No tactile sense, either.”

Lisa was pensive. “And I suppose Wyrm works with nothing else?”

I shook my head. “No.”

She handed me her hand. “Try it with mine?”

I did so. Wyrm and Read, which was the name I had for her spark, didn’t fit together. Music did, however.

“Only music works with yours,” I replied, giving her back her spark. “Wyrm doesn’t.”

“Shame,” she said. “Want to try figuring out Music?”

“Sure. You have any ideas?”

She grinned. “Have you tried… singing?”

I wanted to hit myself for not thinking of that. Paige Mcabee had been a singer, and her power had worked through her music. The fact that it could be the same for me wasn’t far-fetched enough to dismiss out of hand.

“You sure you want me to try that? I mean, it’s not like I have a good singing voice.” It was another thing I shared with my father. ‘A chorus of screeching wounded cats’ had been my mother’s description of the pair of us. Personally, I think I sounded like a cowbell.

Her lips curled in a smile. “Hit me with your best shot.”

Her funeral. I took a deep breath, then started singing ‘Ode to Joy’, which was the first thing that came to mind. I had been forced to learn it by heart in elementary school, and I still remembered it
I activated Music as soon as I reached the second word, and I could feel it staying active this time. I sang for barely a minute without any reaction from Lisa, then stopped for her reaction. “So?”

She blinked after a second as if she’d just realized I’d spoken. “Whoa!”

“What?”

“I couldn’t move,” she said. “Couldn’t do anything but listen. I won’t say it was well sung, but I couldn’t focus my attention anywhere else.”

I scowled. “Not something I’d mind losing.”

“Can I try?” she asked, holding out her hand.

“Suit yourself.” I grabbed her power and handed it back combined with Music. Her face went blank as soon as she received it, and she turned from left to right as if she was tracking things. Her smile went wider and wider as the seconds passed.

“It’s…” she started, then a phone rang. I checked my own, but I wasn’t the one receiving a call. Lisa was.

“Lisa here. Yes. Yes.” She rose from her chair, and went in a corner to have more privacy. I went back to the food, letting her finish her conversation in peace.

She talked for a good ten minutes, which gave me enough time to make good headway in my meal. She looked anxious when she came back to her seat. “So?” I asked.

“That was the boss,” she replied. “He has a new job for us.”

“I meant with the power,” I specified.

“Oh,” she said, and her smile came back to her face. “It... enhances my hearing. It’s like having a pair of ears for each sound that comes up, and hearing them all separately. There is so much I can tell from it all it’s somewhat dizzying.”

“Like?”

“I could name the tools T’s using in her workshop, simply by the sounds they make. I can tell there’s a computer upstairs by the slight sound of a fan. I could name the few birds we can hear from outside. I could read so much from the boss’ words on the phone.”

“What about your original power?” I asked.

“Still there,” she smirked. “Better, even, since I have more data to work from.”

“Good for you,” I said. “What’s the job?”

“There’s gonna be an event this weekend, a fundraiser by the Protectorate,” Lisa explained. “With the heroes’ takedown of Lung, they want to capitalize on the event to show that it’s the good guys who did the important stuff, not the villains. The Boss wants us, and I quote, to ‘embarrass’ them.”
“What?”

“He want us to show the people that the heroes aren’t to be relied on. There will be a number of them at the event, along with the upper crust of Brockton Bay, and he wants us to prove to the mayor and the other invitees that the heroes can’t protect them.”

“That’s…” I had to search for words for a second. “Insane. Suicidal, even. Are you sure the Boss doesn’t want us to fail somehow?”

“No,” Lisa replied instantly. “I could hear it in his words, in his tone. He really wants us to hit the Protectorate in their pride.”

“Does he have another plan running in the background? You know, like last time?” I asked.

Lisa shook her head. “I didn’t feel anything like that. From what I can tell, this is what he wants. Not a diversion.”

I took a deep breath and started thinking. “I don’t get it.”

“What do you mean?” Lisa asked.

“The image I have of Coil is someone who doesn’t waste any time or opportunity, someone who’s always reaching for his goals and nothing else. Right?” Lisa nodded. “So it means embarrassing the Protectorate somehow advances his goals.”

“Thing is, he doesn’t look like someone who’s hung up on reputation, on pride. I could see Lung, or even Kaiser, hurting the heroes just to show he can, but not Coil. He needs to get something tangible out of it.”

“It could simply be a test,” Lisa pointed out.

“No,” I replied. “Even in a test, he’d gain something. I don’t see him doing a test simply for the test’s sake. He’d gain something else, like hurting an opponent or getting data out of it at the same time.”

Lisa thought for a good minute. “It fits,” she finally replied. “I can’t see anything wrong about that train of thought. So, you’re against it?”

I nodded. “Unless he brings the one thing I want to the table, I’m not going forward with this.”

“And that is?” she asked.

“A face to face meeting with our ‘mysterious boss’” I made finger quotes. “And you know why.”

“Yes,” she said somberly, then rose. “I’ll talk to the others, and to the Boss. I’ll see what I can do.” She started walking, then turned back. “Yeah, about Music…” she started.

“Keep it.” I waved my hand dismissively. “I’m not about to sing my enemies into submission. I’d die of shame and end up in jail, defeated by the first deaf person I found. No thanks.”

She smiled and waved, and I did the same until she closed the door behind her. Then I rose myself and turned toward the workshop. T could use some help, and doing something with my hands would
feel good.

No sense in wasting time.
Coil’s request was still trotting in my head the next morning at breakfast. What we'd been asked to do made no sense. It didn’t fit with what I’d read online and in the papers about Coil, nor did it fit with what I heard from the other members of the Undersiders, let along what info I had gleaned from Lisa.

There had to be something I was missing somewhere. Some as of yet unknown context that made the situation make some sort of sense.

“Penny for your thoughts, Taylor,” my father said with a hint of worry. I nearly jumped out of my chair; I hadn’t noticed him coming down and getting his own breakfast.

“You startled me,” I admitted in embarrassment as I forced my heart to calm down. “Just some cape stuff, dad.”

His face darkened. “Another job?”

I nearly said no automatically, before catching myself. “Yes and no. We’ve gotten a new request, but I’m not accepting it, and I don’t think the others will either.”

“Which is?”

“Attacking a Protectorate event.” His eyes instantly went wide. “Yeah, that was my reaction too.”

There was a good amount of anger in my Dad’s voice this time. “That’s basically suicide! What is he after?”

“That’s the million dollar question, actually,” I replied, sighing. “Lisa’s the one who’s in contact with him, and she says he wants us to embarrass the Protectorate.”

“Oh…” he said. “I was afraid of worse.”

I could guess what he’d been thinking of, maiming or murder. Picking a fight with the Protectorate without a good reason was simply stupid; the heroes played for keeps, so one didn’t risk the Birdcage or worse on a simple whim. Then something came to mind. “Why would someone want to embarrass the Protectorate?” I lost nothing by asking.

My father was silent for a good two minutes, clearly thinking it over. I used the time to make headway in my cereal. I was putting my dishes in the sink when he drained his coffee and turned to
“Now, I don’t know about capes and the like, but there’s really only one thing that comes to mind,” he answered. “Whether in business or government, people sometimes attempt power plays like this one. They are mainly done for hierarchy purposes. You’re trying to get someone demoted, fired or removed from consideration, most of the time to open a path for yourself or to protect your position.”

I almost said this couldn’t apply in this case, but suddenly remembered that Coil had very good access to Protectorate information. Who was to say that Coil wasn’t a PRT or Protectorate member?

“Is that any help?” Danny asked.

I smiled. “It just might be, thank you.”

“Glad to help.” He pointed at the clock. “Time for you to go, I think.”

I checked and nodded. “Right. See you tonight.”

“Have fun kiddo,” he said. “Knock’em dead.”

“You too, Dad.” I ran out the door, waving behind me.

I’d have to discuss this with Lisa later.

*-*-*-*-*-*

It was two PM when Lisa finally got back to me. The afternoon reply meant she’d probably been working all night again. By now, I was in my PRT-given workshop as Arsenal, finishing the latest touches on my male identity’s armor. T and I had done enough work yesterday that I didn’t fear going out in public. What work was left could be done anywhere without revealing who I was underneath.

“’lo Taylor,” Lisa said on the phone, which was redirected inside my armor’s helmet. “You wanted to talk?”

“Afternoon Lisa, and yes,” I replied, my voice carrying a smile. “I was curious about what the rest of the team thought about the latest job.”

“Pretty much the same as you, actually,” she sighed. “Brian was clearly against, and Alec didn’t see the use, even with the payout on the line. Rachel was the one closest to saying yes, and that was simply because she didn’t like the implication that she was weak.”

“I’m not surprised.” I had a good idea this was how it would go, especially in Brian’s case. “And I suppose you talked to the boss?” I asked.

“Indeed,” she answered. “And I transmitted your request. He said he would think about it.”

She usually got more out of her conversations with him. “Nothing more?”

“No,” she replied, and I could hear a note of anger in her voice. “It was a very short conversation, not much more than a minute. Only thing I can say is that he wasn’t happy with the answer.”
I didn’t like the sound of that. “Will that carry risk for the Undersiders?”

“I doubt it, but it’s a possibility. We’ve already refused jobs before, back when it was only the four of us, and nothing came out of it,” she explained. “He’ll probably come with a different offer soon enough. He tends to keep us busy.” The both of us were silent for a moment. “That wasn’t the only thing you wanted to discuss, correct?”

“No, it wasn’t,” I replied. “Do you know how the boss gets his information from the Protectorate?”

“I know he has spies in the ranks of the PRT for sure, but I don’t know how he gets everything,” she said. “Why are you asking?”

“I discussed the job some with my dad this morning, and he pointed out that it looked similar to promotion and demotion ploys in the workplace. That’s when I realized I had no clue what he was outside his identity as Coil. You think he might be part of the Protectorate?”

There was silence for a moment. “My gut says no,” Lisa finally said. “But I can’t say I’m sure about it. He does contact us at all hours of the day, which would imply an irregular schedule, but that may be simply another one of his ploys. Your cape sight doesn’t work through cameras, right?”

“Right.” I had the proof just two days ago, when Lung and T met. Through the visor, Lung didn’t show as a cape, even when he obviously was one. “No such luck.”

“Damn,” she swore. “That would have made it easy finding him if he was PRT.”

“You have access to the PRT cameras, right?” I seemed to remember Lisa mentioning that.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t help much in this case,” she replied. “It’s still looking for a needle in a haystack. And that’s only if your idea’s correct.”

“Still that’s at least…” I started, then was interrupted by an alarm flag in my helmet.

It was my new security system, the one that I’d just installed this morning. It was the first time I’d worked on something outside my specialty, and it showed. Compared to what I usually did, it was a kludge and a disaster. Still, it worked, and that was the most important part. It was however nothing better than a normal alarm system.

A quick check at the camera I’d installed showed who it was. “I’ll have to go,” I said to Lisa. “I have Armsmaster at the door. Catch you later.”

“You too,” she replied. “Good luck with the Tinker.”

“Thanks,” I replied, and hung up.

I went to the door, absently noting that I’d need something more secure in the future, and threw it open. “G’day, Armsmaster,” I said, and it came out with the gruff voice of my male identity.

“Arsenal,” he replied, nodding respectfully.

“What can I do for the Protectorate today?”

“Just two things, and I’ll leave you to your tinkering,” he said with a slight smile. He was a Tinker
too, so he understood that one did not keep someone from his workshop. “First is I simply wanted to make sure you were fine. You seemed alright after that business with Lung, but I know from experience that some injuries aren’t noticed until hours afterwards.”

“Nothing some time under a beacon can’t fix,” I ruefully replied. “As for the armor, you can see for yourself.” There were still parts which had been deformed by the heat, and some others where the metal plates had been removed. “A day or two of work, and I’ll be back to one hundred percent.”

He nodded. “That’s good to hear.” A panel in his armor opened, and he withdrew a letter from it. “This is the second point.” He handed it to me.

I opened it with my screwdriver finger attachment, and read it quickly. “What?” I said, surprised.

“The powers that be,” he said, and I could clearly hear the irritation in his tone, “have decided to do a fundraiser now that the ABB issue has been buried, some form of PR move.” He was scowling, I realized. “Given your work in the battle against Lung, the PRT heads would like to have you there.”

“What work? I just held my ground, that’s all.”

“And against Lung, that’s a lot. How long did you manage?” Armsmaster asked.

“I don’t know, seven, eight minutes?” Seven minutes forty-three seconds, actually, between sending the message to Kid Win and Lung getting foamed. T had noted the end of the battle, and the calculation wasn’t difficult to make. “And I had help.” I wasn’t denying the fact that Kid Win was the only reason T had lasted that long.

“The only time the Protectorate managed that well against Lung, there were seven people fighting him, all capes,” Armsmaster replied. “That two people did that well is impressive.”

I looked again at the invitation. “I don’t see why I should go.”

“Well, I won’t force you, I’d sure prefer to stay in my workshop myself,” he pointed out. If he wanted me there, he sure wasn’t doing anything to sell it. “I hope you do come; it’d be good to have someone to talk Tinker stuff with.” He did a move that made me think he was looking at something inside his armor. “I have to return to my patrol. Talk to you another time.”

I nodded. “Thank for the check-up.”

“Happy to see you’re fine.” He waved and stepped out.

I didn’t know what to think. I’d just dodged this particular shindig from the other side, only for this to drop in my lap. Having a world renowned Tinker wanting my presence still had an effect, though. I was over most of my hero worship after what happened, but some still lingered. And he’d been the one who’d saved Kid Win and T’s bacon.

“I’ll have to think about it.”

I went back to the workbench. Regardless of what I chose, I’d need the armor fixed as soon as possible.
Executive Search Interlude: Coil

Chapter Notes

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[Coil]

I was in my Prius on the way to work on one side, while I was going over the reports of my moles in the PRT on the other.

I had confirmation from one of said spies that Lung had met Slenderman and had been depowered. Official data this time, not gossip.

Good.

The three ABB members were soon to be transferred to prisons outside the state. I made sure my undercover employees knew that I wanted to know where they would end up, as I owed them a painful prison life.

They'd gotten closer to stopping my plans than any before.

I didn't know which of Lung, Bakuda or Tian Yan had given the specific orders, but the ABB had made sure to target well known members of the public.

People in the running for mayor, for example.

I rose from my desk, directing myself to an isolated corner of my base. Only Mr. Pitter and I had access to this specific room, and only through my office.

The place itself would be in the running for the best hospital room in the country, and every device there was top of the line. All for a single person.

Dinah Alcott.

Even after a week in my care, she was still clearly injured. She had numerous bruises, dozens of stitches, burns in great quantity along with both a broken arm and a leg. I had to be even more careful with her dosages, as the drugs might interfere with her healing. While I had no issue with her being stuck in a bed, dying from her wounds would be a horrible setback.

She, and I by extension, had been lucky. She'd been on the second floor when the ABB device triggered. This one emitted plasma in great quantities, but did so only horizontally. There was
nothing left of every other member of her family that had been present, uncles and aunts included. The only family member she had left was a cousin who was at work at that very moment.

I had a pair of soldiers on lookout over Dinah's house at all times, and their reactions had been exemplary. The two of them had managed to extract and spirit Dinah away before the authorities arrived on the scene.

I sent them on a suicide mission against the ABB the next day, and made sure they didn't make it. It was quite a loss to have them both killed, but they knew too much.

I stopped beside Dinah and took a deep breath. The past was the past, it was the future that was important now.

“Up you go, pet,” I said at Dinah’s bedside. “It’s morning.”

Her eyes opened blearily and turned to look at me. “Already?”

I nodded. “My usual morning questions, please?” I would ask again later after I canceled this reality. I didn’t rise to the position I was in without double-checking everything.

She sighed. “One point zero zero eight percent chance there’s any problems here in the next hour. Four point three seven seven percent chance there’s any problems before lunchtime,” she announced. “Candy?”

I shrugged. “Not yet. Chance my grand plan succeeds without using my power?” I followed.

“Seventy three point four two two percent.”

A difference of point three percent, I noted. Now to get to the day’s real questions.

“Probability of my plan’s success if I accept the Undersiders’ request for a face-to-face meeting?” I asked.

“Twelve point zero zero nine percent.”

My eyebrows rose while my lips twisted in a grimace. That’s not normal, I thought.

“Probability the Undersiders will work against me provided I do not go against them?” I had to be specific with the questions I used, I’d learned earlier. If I didn’t add the second part of the question, the percentages would be skewed.

“Seven point six four nine percent.”

Not that then. “Chance at least one member of the Undersiders does in the same case?”

Dinah’s face scrunched in pain. “Sixteen point eight seven three one percent,” she forced out. “It hurts. Can I have my candy now?”

I didn’t reply, ending this reality instead. My other self was by now at the computer back in my office checking over events, while Dinah was still asleep. I split realities again and left once more to wake Dinah up while I kept checking events in my other self.
I asked the usual questions along with the last one once more, just as a verification, and got the very same answers in return. Nearly seventeen percent chance of an Undersider working against me didn’t match a difference of sixty percent in my plan’s success. So it meant someone else, and I had a good idea who.

“Chance Slenderman removes my power in the next week?” I asked.

“Thirty-five point four three eight percent,” Dinah answered.

“Chance Slenderman removes my power in the next week if I meet with the Undersiders personally?”

“Eighty-six point three three nine percent.”

*Just as I thought.*

“Chance Slenderman removes the power of at least one Undersider in the next week?” I continued.

“Ninety-six point nine four zero two percent,” Dinah said, and there was an undercurrent of pain in her words.

I killed that reality as soon as I had the answer. Another split and I got the answer as to which Undersider was Slenderman’s target. Or were, as it turned out.

Both Grue and Tattletale had a beyond eighty percent chance of losing their power in the week that followed, with Tattletale being a full ten percent higher than her leader. The rest had a much lower incidence of falling prey to him, with Apparition being the lowest at less than a percent. Informing them of this didn’t change their chances one bit and nothing I could think of affected the probabilities greatly, so I decided to keep mum on the subject.

It seemed like the Undersiders were Slenderman’s next target, and that they’d draw his attention on me if I met them. A meeting with them was off the table, then. I stopped my main reality and split another timeline from my backup.

This time, I focused more on the fundraiser the PRT was planning. It took three sets of questions before I had enough data to commit to a plan.

Hitting the fundraiser did improve my master plan’s chances, but the actual impact depended upon who did so. The Undersiders were the best both in impact and chance of success, but the price for that was much too high. The Travelers were second best, with less impact but a similar success rate. The rest of my mercenaries, powered and unpowered, all fell below the two groups. I asked about the Travelers meeting Slenderman, but it seemed he was focusing on the Undersiders based on the percentages.

*The Travelers it would be, then.*

I created a final split, asking only my usual questions, with no real difference from when I did so nearly an hour before. I instructed Mr. Pitter to give Dinah a light dose, then retreated back to my office to think.

Thinking about the PRT fundraiser was put on hold when I received a reply from the PIs I’d put on ferreting out the identities of the E88 capes. They were the main opposition I had to total control of
Brockton Bay’s criminal activities. Even with every cape I could access, my forces couldn’t match the Empire’s numbers.

This would be perfect to change the odds.

As such, it was 3 PM before I could find time to answer Tattletale.

“Lisa here,” she answered in her usual knowing tone.

“It’s the Boss,” I didn’t use my name in the conversations I had with her, just in case she taped them. “I’m sorry to say I have to refuse your invitation for a face-to-face meeting.”

I could read her well enough, and I could tell this wasn’t the reply she’d hoped for. “I’m sad to hear that.” There was no hint of sadness in her tone, and I was sure she’d expected such an answer. “Any reason why?”

“An important and urgent matter just fell into my hands.” Which was true, if not the whole truth. “And I’m sorry to say my attention will be focused on it for the next few days.”

“Think it would be possible to schedule a meeting afterwards? Our latest recruits aren’t too happy to be working under an unknown, and it’s probably going to be the same with whatever candidates we find.”

“I can’t promise anything, but I’ll see next week once the current matter has been put to rest.” Permanently, if I could arrange it. And if Slenderman did visit the Undersiders, meeting them would lose all usefulness. “I may actually have work for your group during the coming week.”

“A different Protectorate attack?” she asked.

“No. The Protectorate is a target of opportunity,” I replied. “Based on the work your teammates did against the ABB, I don’t foresee any issue with what I might ask.”

I could hear the smile coming back in her voice. “Any details?”

“None as of this moment,” I said. “This fell into my lap not four hours ago, and there are still things to analyze before any real plans are made.”

She sighed. “Keep me posted, then.”

I didn’t answer, just hung up as usual.

A few presses on my keyboard and the maps of my planned Brockton Bay takeover loaded onto my computer screen. I had many versions, mainly due to the uncertainty regarding which capes would be at my side when I succeeded; I had planned for the Undersiders to account for the central part of the city, along with some of the more wild areas, but it seemed like I’d have to adjust my proposal. While Slenderman had been a great help in eliminating the competition, it looked like he’d finally turned his head toward the groups under my control. I suspected this was due to Bakuda’s capture, but I had no way to be sure.

The Travelers alone wouldn’t be enough to cover the entire city, so others would be needed for best results. Hopefully there would be a few members of the Undersiders left after Slenderman went after them to account for other parts of the city. I had other options, but I’d prefer not to use them. I still
owed Cauldron a favor, and I didn’t want to be indebted to them any more than I was now.

I rose from my chair after splitting timelines once again as I always did before going to see Dinah. I had a few more questions to ask regarding my plans for the E88, and for the Undersiders’ future. Better not to waste any time and have the information as soon as possible; I didn’t want to do anything before I verified it wouldn’t be my undoing. I’d dodged a big bullet this morning, as the Undersiders had seemed ready for meeting with me before I'd gone over things with Dinah.

I wasn’t going to make a mistake like that, not if I could help it.
“Afternoon, Lisa,” I said as I answered the phone inside my suit.

“‘Lo Taylor, or should I say Arsenal?” I could hear the smirk in her voice.

I was always surprised at what she could pick up. “How could you tell?”

“I can hear the echoes and hydraulics that make it clear you’re in your Arsenal suit,” she answered seriously. “Though I am surprised to find you there on a Saturday.”

“School is restarting on Monday, and T decided to monopolize my base’s workshop. Working as Arsenal seemed the best use of my time.” I stopped for a second to think. “I suppose you’re calling with the Boss’ reply?”

“Right in one,” she replied. “The Boss has declined the demand for a meeting and preferred not going forward with having us attack the fundraiser.”

“That doesn’t fit with what I know of Coil,” I said. “Did he try to haggle something?”

“No, and you’re not the only one who found that bizarre,” Lisa pointed out. “I expected a long discussion with him, but it ended up being a clear no along with a possible future mission that he said we wouldn’t find offensive.”

“Which is?” I asked.

“He didn’t say anything, but from what I picked up it’s striking at other gangs or something similar. Probably the E88,” she said.

I had to say I preferred that quite a bit to striking at the Protectorate. “If it is that, much better. Anything else you picked up?”

“A lot, but not much that’s useful,” she pointed out. “One thing I got is that either he’s the best liar there is, or every word he said was the truth.”

“You can detect lies, even through the phone?!” I exclaimed. I wouldn't be surprised if she could do so live, but through a phone line?
“I can hear people’s heartbeat and reactions, so yes,” she explained. “I’m not one hundred percent sure I have it down, but I didn’t pick up anything even ambiguous from him.”

“What else?” I asked.

“He’s got some form of advisor or something of the kind. That’s the only reason I can get for why he would have waited so long to reply, and not answer directly when I called when I could hear that he wasn’t doing anything urgent. Fits the change of methodology, too,” she explained. “More importantly, he’s expecting something to happen to the Undersiders within the week.”

“What?!” I exclaimed, surprised.

“I didn't react audibly to the Boss, but that's how I felt too,” she replied, and I could see her face tense in my mind’s eye. “He said he’d see about a meeting next week, but what I could read into his words and tone said that something would happen during that time that would make a meeting useless. I’m pretty sure it’s because he’s heard rumors of something planned.”

“Could he be planning something against us?” I asked.

“I didn’t get that feeling. There was actually an undercurrent of sadness in his words, as if he was unhappy over losing a good resource.”

I took a moment to think and my eyes fell on the invitation Armsmaster had brought. “I have a ticket to the fundraiser as Arsenal. Think I should go?”

“It's really your choice, but you might pick up a clue regarding the Boss' plan if you do. More information would always be welcome, and that would only help your Arsenal persona’s identity.”

I’d already given quite a bit of thought earlier about going, and finding what Coil was up to was yet another reason to go. Thanking Kid Win officially might help his career as a cape, and I (and T) owed him that much. Getting closer to the Protectorate could only help the worth of my Arsenal identity as an alibi.

I opened my mouth to say something, only for Lisa to speak. “So you’ll be going.” She had her smirking tone on. “If you could tape everything, that would be best. Feel free to edit out anything you feel is too personal.”

“You know that this ability of yours can be horribly annoying, right? You get that clearly?” I growled at low volume.

If anything, I would have bet that her smirk increased. “I’m still getting an undercurrent of laughter anyway…” she said in a sing-song voice.

I sighed. “See if I lend you another spark anytime soon.”

“Oh, no! What will I do?!” she replied theatrically, then started laughing. I tried to hang on to my annoyance, but I started snickering before ten seconds had passed.

“Anyway, that’s pretty much everything. Remember to add something for eating and drinking to your suit if you want to enjoy the party.” One could still hear the smile in her voice.

“Will do!” I said with a similar tone. “Catch you later.”
“Toodles!” She then hung up.

I turned back to my work bench and started planning. I didn’t have that much time before the fundraiser, and there was quite a bit of work to be done. I withdrew a metal saw and a welding torch, and got busy.

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My presence was somewhat conspicuous in the line leading to the Forsberg Gallery. Around me were people in expensive dresses and tuxedos, and while my armor had been cleaned, repaired and polished, I still felt out of place with all these visibly rich men and women around me.

“I’m sorry, you’re Arsenal, correct?” a young woman asked, stepping in front of me from somewhere before me in the line.

“Well,” I said gruffly, getting into my Arsenal persona. “And you?”

She curtsied a little. “Amy Dallon. Panacea.”

I thanked the fact that the armor hid most of my reactions. Panacea was big. While Armoasmaster was somewhat famous in Tinker circles, Panacea was the one cape from Brockton Bay that was known worldwide. The best healer in the world, it was said (not that she had much competition).

I recognized her now, from the Bank Job. She hadn’t been wearing a dress at that time, but the cut and color of her hair along with the shape of her body made the resemblance clear. I was glad to see she seemed in good health. Bakuda’s bombings must have ran her ragged.

I forced myself to bow only a little to maintain character, not that I could do much while in the line, and spoke. “Greetings. What can I do for you then?”

“I’ve heard rumors about your beacons, and even seen one,” she replied. “Could I have more information about what they do?”

What could she need to know? Is she worried about her own health? I thought to myself. “Sure, but mind if I ask why?”

She sighed. “My efforts are barely a drop in the bucket even with the hours I put in, and in emergencies I have to deal with multiple patients where every second counts. Knowing how your beacons work and what they can or cannot cure means better triage when time is short. That way I can focus my efforts more efficiently on wounds and sicknesses your beacons cannot deal with.”

Valid reasons, I thought, though there was something that didn’t feel right in there. Still, I answered. “Mainly, it’s a powerful booster to cellular regeneration.”

“How does it work?” she asked.

I was surprised to see she could follow even when I descended into Tinker speak, and she brought up good points over possible improvements. We segued from there to a discussion about sicknesses and the like, and with her help there were quite a few ideas I wrote down in my suit’s integrated computer. Not everything could be cured (the only real cure for cancer was complete modification of the human body at the cellular level, and that sickness was one thing my beacons could make worse),
but some of the most common issues could be fixed. It’d need a better lab than I have now (nanotech is quite touchy to build), but with that and some help we had a good plan for fixing coronary artery disease.

By that time we were finally through the door and in the gallery proper, and I was surprised to find Armsmaster covering the exit, seemingly at guard. I could see his lips curl upward somewhat as he saw me.

“Arsenal!” He spoke. “Good to see you.” His eyes fell on the screen I still had out. “Working, I see.”

I nodded. “Miss Dallon was a great help while we were discussing finding solutions for various sicknesses.”

Armsmaster turned toward my conversation partner. “Panacea,” he said, and bowed more respectfully than I’d expected of him. I’d noticed he tended to be curt, most of the time. She curtsied somewhat in return.

“I’m surprised to see you waiting at the door,” I said.

He moved as if he was about to say something, then stopped and indicated my onboard computer with a movement of his head. “Address?” he asked.

A few clicks opened a port for simple communications. I made sure that it was protected as well as I could. I doubted he’d do anything, not here with the most important people in the city present, but no sense taking risks. I then gave him the address.

Instantly a message popped up.

**Armsmaster:** I’m the local Protectorate leader, and everyone wants to meet me. I just had the most inane conversation about patrols and deployments with the current mayor’s wife, and she wasn’t done. I’m watching the door just to get out of it. Please tell me you can act like you need me to look over something.

A quick look to the side revealed that, yes, there was a somewhat overweight woman looking in our direction from right beside the mayor.

I smiled inside my suit. Building credit with Armsmaster was exactly what I wanted from the fundraiser. “Miss Dallon and I were talking about the plan for a device to purify blood in major arteries. Mind if I ask for your expertise as a Tinker?” I made sure that my voice could reach far enough for the woman to hear.

“I could look at it,” he said, waving at Velocity to take his place. The three of us then moved to a table deeper in the room. There was a couple there for a moment, but they quickly went back to chatting with the guests when we started discussing machines.

**Armsmaster:** Thank you.

This didn’t stop us from being interrupted numerous times though, but the guests were nice enough not to take too much of our time.

I was surprised to find out that the Protectorate leader wasn’t the only one people wanted to meet. Panacea had a few people who came her way to offer thanks for whatever miraculous healing she
did, and even I attracted a few guests.

It seemed that my fight against Lung was known by more than just the Protectorate, and that some wanted to know how it felt to face the ABB leader. Answering the same questions over and over was annoying and most conversations were boring, but nothing compared to my old school life. I could deal with it.

I went with the personality I’d decided for Arsenal, that is quick and direct, and pointed out that in a suit like mine outrunning someone with long range attacks wasn’t conducive to long-term survival. Fighting head on until reinforcements came had been the only way to have a chance at winning, and I gave most of the credit to Kid Win and the Protectorate.

Speaking of Kid Win… I thought.

I took a good look around, and couldn’t find him. Surprising, I thought to myself.

I then turned to Armsmaster. “Do you know where Kid Win might be?” I asked. “I wanted to thank him officially for my rescue.”

The man’s lips turned into a frown, and he tensed. “He’s busy at the console today.”

“Why?” I asked. “He was instrumental in Lung’s defeat. Surely he deserves to be here today.” I pointed toward Gallant, who was standing near Amy’s sister, which wasn’t in costume. “I’m pretty sure he contributed as much as any of the Wards that are here today.”

His scowl deepened. “There were other factors that meant he would not be here today.”

I had a flash of Armsmaster’s look to Kid Win that I had seen after Lung’s battle, and put two and two together. “You mean…” I started, only to be interrupted by the Mayor as he spoke to the crowd from the podium, the microphones droning out most of the conversations.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, welcome to the Forsberg Gallery,” he spoke out loud, and the entire room fell into silence at his words. “Thank you all for being here.”

“We citizens of Brockton Bay have faced harsh times recently. I know that there are those among us that have lost children, family and friends to the explosions. A moment of silence, please, for those who are no longer among us.”

Everyone bowed their heads in silence, and I was no different. I hadn’t lost anybody, but I could remember the rest of the Undersiders stepping into my base covered in blood. We had been lucky, and there were others that hadn’t been.

A minute passed while silence reigned.

The mayor was the one to break the calm. “The ABB had long been a blight on our fair city. There was no gutter to which they would not stoop, no crime too low for them. There had been a period of silence after the fall of one of the ABB lieutenants, and I, like many, hoped that the Asian gang had finally crumbled before the pressure our own heroes and soldiers had applied.”

“We were wrong,” he exclaimed, and everyone could see sadness and rage in his eyes. “The ABB launched the worst criminal attack in the history of the city, worse than the visit of the Slaugtherhouse Nine, years earlier. Billions in damages, nearly a thousand dead and ten times that
number wounded.”

“But this city fought back,” he continued, rising his fist. “Bakuda, the Mad Bomber, was in Protectorate custody as of last week, and just Thursday an ambush by the ABB leader Lung was turned back on him. The ABB is now gone, a thing of the past, and the city survives!”

He took a glass of wine from a desk beside him. “Please join me in raising a glass in honor of those who fought, both heroes…” He turned his head toward the table where most of the capes were stationed. “and rogues…” This time, he inclined his head after looking to where Panacea and I were placed. “Who fought hard for our freedom. To you all!”

“To you all!” most of everyone in the room echoed.

Then a single voice rang from the back. “And what about the villains?”

I turned, as did everyone, to find a trio of capes walking from the back of the room, where the window was. All wore red and black, and I recognized them.

The Travelers.

Weren’t there guards there before? I wondered. I thought I’d seen some, but I couldn’t be sure.

“My team and I, we fought Lung more than a dozen times in the past week. How many times did the Protectorate face him?” the apparent leader, a man in a black and red suit with a top hat, asked. Trickster, I remembered.

A snippet of conversation came back to me. ‘Embarrass them’, Lisa had quoted. I realized just now why Coil had given up so easily. He had another team to do the job. The seat Trickster had taken right beside Coil at the meeting now had a much better explanation.

I looked from one side to the other. Armsmaster was tense, Panacea, scared. And there were dozens of bystanders all around me, prime targets for a teleporter who could swap things between locations.

A large gargoyle-like creature flew down to the balcony right then, landing heavily. Genesis. The only member of the Travelers whose power I didn't know.

I saw Armsmaster reach toward his back for the Halberd folded there.

This is going to get ugly.
I wasn’t sure what to do. The Travelers were a powerful group, with abilities I knew could be lethal, but not doing anything meant leaving them free to do whatever they wanted.

The mayor, who was still at the podium, took offense at their presence. “This is a private party!” he ground out in restrained anger, and his words echoed in the silence. “You are not welcome here!”

I could see Trickster smile at these words, and he instantly switched with one of the mayor's assistants hanging at the back of the podium. He then put one hand around the mayor's shoulder as if he was a close friend and reached inside a pocket with the other.

I tensed, expecting a weapon, and I wasn't the only one. But the item he withdrew was simply one of the tickets for the event. A look to the other side of the room revealed the rest of his team presenting theirs, and Ballistic had a hand on the assistant's shoulder.

This was now a hostage situation, and the tension in the room tripled in an instant.

“Now, what was I saying…” The leader of the Travelers continued as if nothing had happened. “Ah, yes. The Protectorate… What did they do? They reacted, that’s what. They tried to contain the damage, to limit the casualties. They didn’t do so bad, sure, but they let the ABB dictate how things would go.”

“The protection of civilians is and will always be the first priority of the Protectorate,” Armsmaster replied, and I could clearly hear him trying to contain his anger.

“That’s just an excuse, and the public is intelligent enough to see through it. Fact is, it’s the villains who took the fight to the ABB, who forced them on the defensive. They’re the ones who really had an impact.” His gaze swept over the whole crowd, and I saw everyone going rigid, hoping to pass unnoticed. “And that’s not even taking into account the leaders. The Undersiders were the ones who took out Bakuda and Tian Yan, leaving them trussed up like turkeys outside the PRT building. The only thing the so-called heroes did was provide the cells.”

“They’re the ones who took down Lung!” Someone in the crowd yelled. He instantly went quiet as Trickster turned his attention in that direction.

Trickster’s smile didn’t budge an inch. “Sure they did… when someone else gave them a golden opportunity. If Arsenal here…” The villainous leader inclined his head in mock deference, “hadn’t held for minutes when most people would struggle to last seconds, the Protectorate would still be sitting on their thumbs, waiting for someone else to give them a chance. All the while, we villains
were grinding the ABB’s businesses down one by one, leaving them nowhere to run or hide.”

The Protectorate leader said nothing this time, standing completely rigid.

Trickster looked right at the unmoving Armsmaster. “Was it any surprise that Lung did something foolish, like trying to capture a Tinker?” He thumped his fist on his chest. “We’re the ones who pushed him far enough that attacking a Tinker in his lair seemed a good idea.” His eyes went wide. “Are those tempura shrimp?”

He vanished for a second, replaced by a heavyset man in his forties. Then he switched back beside his teammates with a plate from the buffet in his hands. He wasted no time in eating a pair, then offered some to his compatriots.

I was distracted from the scene by a beep in my armor. It took a few voice commands, but I managed to bring up the message without a sound chiming outside.

**Armsmaster:** Can you take Genesis?

Nice to see he’d at least been planning, and I understood why he gave me this particular assignment. The only heroic flier in the room was Glory Girl, and Armsmaster wasn’t the type to send young people into possibly deadly combat, especially not when they weren’t even part of the Wards. But he’d seen me fighting Lung even when he was in the air, and Genesis wasn’t on that level, as far as I knew.

I could take it.

Anyway, Genesis might very well be my best match. I doubted I could tag Trickster as just ‘Arsenal’, my armor couldn't take the flames of Sundancer's miniature suns, and Ballistic might be able to redirect every single one of my strikes. So Genesis it would be.

I gave Armsmaster the slightest nod I could make while Trickster was handing the plate to Ballistic.

**Armsmaster:** Confirmed. Thank you; wait for my signal.

Trickster turned back to the frightened crowd, then switched directly with the mayor this time. The politician now found himself trapped even worse than earlier, with a cape beside each of his shoulders. “So, Mr. Protectorate leader,” Trickster said from his new position at the podium. “How many attacks did the ‘Good Guys’…” One could hear the quotes. “Make on the ABB since the bombings started?”

“The operational specifics of ongoing Protectorate deployments are classified information,” Armsmaster answered with a growl.

“Do you think that will satisfy the public?” He put his hand behind his ear as if he was straining to hear. “I don't think…” He started.

Then all hell broke loose.

There were four Protectorate capes in the room, and two of them were speedsters. Both rushed forward, Velocity toward the teleporter while Battery barreled towards Sundancer. This didn’t give the expected result as Trickster did another switch, and the two heroes found themselves colliding with each other. The crowd screamed and tried running anywhere away from the villains, and I saw
from the corner my eye Gallant trying to put some order to the stampede.

He didn't have much success.

I ignored Armsmaster dashing for Ballistic, focusing on my own target. Luckily, it would be free of teleportation shenanigans, as I knew Trickster was limited by volume and Genesis was the largest object here by a good margin.

I didn’t waste time, drawing Lucifer from my back as I charged and activating the mace as soon as I could. My foe was prepared and easily dodged, taking to the air.

Just as expected.

The business end of my weapon turned in the air, and Genesis turned with it. The spikes passed much closer to it this time, flashing less than an inch from my enemy’s skin.

Then the cable trailing behind the spiked ball caught behind Genesis’ wing.

That was one of the ways I could use my weapon, using the wire as an entangling tool. I hadn’t against Lung, since I was unsure if he could just melt his way through, but against my current opponent it was perfect. Especially since I didn’t know how solid it was or how its powers worked. I didn’t want to kill it by mistake.

It dodged twice more, something which only trapped it more. A few more and I would have it trussed up like a rodeo steer.

In response, it turned toward me, took a deep breath, and screamed.

The sound hit like a physical force, and I found myself pushed back, falling to my knees. The external pick-ups I used for hearing shorted out instantly, which was the only thing that prevented me from blacking out then and there. Worse, I lost control of Lucifer for a moment, and the chain retracted as it was programmed to. Genesis took some hits as it did, but the flier was now completely free.

*Note,* I thought. *Add a copy of the sonic nullifier to the Arsenal Suit.*

Getting up, I found myself on shaky ground. Genesis’ scream had done a number on my surroundings, and I didn’t trust the place to take many more hits. I thanked whoever was listening that there hadn't been anyone close, as they quite probably wouldn't have made it. Above, Genesis held position as if waiting for something.

I took the time to think. I could retreat to get off the balcony, but that wouldn’t help much. Unless Glory Girl joined the fight, there wasn’t anyone able to efficiently take on a flier with a ranged attack. Getting back inside would only limit my vision, and wouldn’t impair it at all. Not to mention that would put other people in the line of fire.

*I can’t hold back anymore,* I thought. “Lucifer, disable Brute Restrictions.”

“Acknowledged,” my suit answered.

Seeing that I wasn’t running away, Genesis shook its head and breathed in again.
My weapon barely left my hand when it released its attack, only for the blow to be interrupted by Lucifer breaking the sound barrier multiple times. That punched right through its scream.

Genesis clearly hadn’t expected that, and Lucifer struck it right at shoulder level. I saw something there break, and the spikes also twisted its wing as they cleared its body.

I prepared myself to catch it with Lucifer if I needed to, but its shoulder started bleeding smoke. I kept ready for another attack, but it didn’t come. Instead, Genesis burst like a smog-filled balloon.

I released a breath I’d been holding. Lisa and I had theorized a number of possible powers for Genesis, and one of them was that the form we saw was a puppet, and that the real Genesis was a Master. The quickly disappearing vapors pointed in that direction, instead of being a Tinker’s robot or a modified (unpowered) human.

I waited until Genesis dispersed, then turned back to the rest of the fight, which was becoming a warzone.

Armsmaster and Ballistic were still engaged, the latter keeping the other at a distance. Velocity was in the middle of the room, his foot stuck in containment foam. Glory Girl was in a similar predicament, only she was covered up to neck level.

Miss Militia was clearly trying to evacuate the civilians, but Trickster kept switching them (and the capes, and himself) all over. Battery was nowhere to be seen. I could see people doing their best to remain out of sight, and a few were trying to crawl out of the place. With my mics destroyed, I couldn't hear anything, and I was suddenly glad for the fact as I could see a man screaming in fear.

I decide to engage the only Traveler that wasn’t occupied: Sundancer. “Lucifer, restore Brute Restrictions.” I spoke inside my suit as I ran forward.

“Restored.”

I went for a pincer attack, the spiked end of Lucifer on one side and myself on the other. Sundancer, outside her Blaster ability, was a normal human, and my suit had an integrated taser. One good hit was all I needed.

I didn’t even get that.

Ballistic suddenly appeared in Sundancer’s place, and he put a hand on my armor before I could do the same. The next second I was flying back, courtesy of his power. I managed to halt my momentum using Lucifer before I hit the wall, but by then Ballistic had been switched again.

I looked around for something useful to do. Trickster was the main issue, but unless I went with supersonic attacks, I wasn’t going to accomplish much, and I couldn’t take such a risk. Ballistic was once again keeping Armsmaster busy with Sundancer at his side.

I couldn’t see anything good I could do in the chaos.

A look to the side revealed a human-shaped form made out of smoke entering from the balcony. Lightning could be seen running within what was surely a construct.

I didn’t need two guesses to know who it was. “Ahh, come on!” I yelled inside my suit.
My armor wasn’t lightning proofed, so engaging the latest form of Genesis wasn’t a smart idea.

“Well, this is getting boring,” Trickster said, microphone in hand, having reappeared at the podium. “I see that the great Protectorate heroes are being as efficient as usual.” I saw Miss Militia raise her gun, only for Trickster to smile and swap her with an especially large potted plant.

“Thing is, it’s getting late, and we have an early day tomorrow.” Armsmaster appeared at the podium, the Mover having taken his place. “See you another time, people!” he said from the other side of the room.

Miss Militia shot as soon as Trickster’s back was turned, but only hit a storefront mannequin. Sundancer and Ballistic were next, replaced with more mannequins. Genesis was last, and it simply lost cohesion and dissipated.

The Protectorate was left with half a dozen civilians, most of them cowering in corners or trying to hide, a damaged building and nothing to show for it.

*This was a fiasco*, I thought, and I was pretty sure I wasn’t the only one thinking it.
Executive Search 8.7

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to Andrew5073, Butterfingers, Draconomial, jderig, Prezombie, Scify & wkz for their great help with this part. All of them get their choice of Kaiju in a pokeball. Note: may be difficult to control. No Mothra near Skitter, for the love of god!

I was ignored by the majority of the Protectorate heroes for a good twenty minutes after the Travelers’ departure. Armsmaster was the only exception, giving me a once-over from a distance, clearly checking if everything was OK. I answered him with a nod. He then turned to the rest of his team and the civilians still present.

I didn’t disagree with being left alone because I had work to do. I currently couldn’t hear a single spoken word, and while the official heroes were right now otherwise occupied, they wouldn’t be so for the whole night. As such, I needed to fix a few of my built-in microphones as soon as possible.

Luckily, my suit had integrated tools.

By the time Armsmaster came to stand beside me, I’d fixed three of my electronic ears. Of course, I had to cannibalize a half-dozen others to do that much, along with a few other sensors. I stopped working on the fourth to face him as soon as he reached me.

“Thank you for your help,” he said. It sounded forced.

I could hear the tension in his voice, so I didn’t push. “Didn’t do much,” I pointed out, “nothing that worked anyhow.”

Armsmaster’s mouth moved as if he was about to say something, then closed. He turned around halfway to look behind him at the rest of the room.

By now, the place was just about empty. There were only a few PRT troopers left, along with Miss Militia. They were extinguishing small fires with foam guns the size of leafblowers.

Armsmaster dragged a chair over and sat. “I know how you feel. This was a disaster.”

I could only nod. “Worse thing is I get the feeling they held back. A lot, even.” It wasn’t a feeling. I knew for certain that, if the Travelers had gone all-out, this place would be a smoking hole in the ground. Even during my fight with Genesis, there were moments where she waited for my reaction, as if she had no problem taking her time.

“They did,” Armsmaster replied. “I went over the Travelers’ files as soon as I heard they were taking part in the counterattacks against the ABB, and we got off lightly. The only civilian injuries were from the stampede out, and Panacea was on hand to make sure that those were fixed as soon as possible. A few bruises here and there…” Armsmaster rotated his shoulder, and I could note some stiffness there. “But nothing that could keep someone down.” He looked straight at me. “Everything fine on your side? Panacea is still below, last I heard.”
I shook my head. “Nothing that can’t be fixed by some time in the workshop. Genesis’ sonic scream did a number on my sensors, but nothing I can’t replace.” Even if I was wounded, I wasn’t going to ask for Amy Dallon’s help. With a single touch, she’d know it was a girl inside the armor, and I was pretty sure she could guess my age. I wasn’t going to risk anyone else connecting Arsenal to Taylor unless my life was at risk.

“Good,” he said with a tired smile. “Send the bill for the repairs to the PRT, and I’ll make sure it’ll get through.” I nodded in thanks.

The two of us stewed in silence for a moment, then something occured to me. “Mind if I ask a question?” I asked.

“Go on.”

“Why start the fight at that moment?” I asked. “Sure, Trickster was on his soapbox, but starting a fight didn’t help the Protectorate’s cause.”

Armsmaster sighed. “PRT regulations state that all Protectorate members must engage assailants in case of a possible kidnapping attempt, especially when the targets are members of the government.”

This time I was the one who opened and closed their mouth while saying nothing. Sure, I’d known that kidnapping wasn’t part of the Travelers’ plans, but that was only because I had inside information. What the Travelers ended up doing was much more embarrassing to the Protectorate than something serious like a kidnapping would have been, and that was their sole goal.

But the Protectorate didn’t know that.

With the mayor flanked on each side by one of the Travelers, Armsmaster probably thought he had no choice but to engage. Only, by doing so, he walked right into their trap.

Looking at the Tinker now, he probably knew he’d been played. He didn’t look like a hero right then, more like a tired man after a particularly unfruitful day’s work. Most of the time he walked around like he was invincible or untouchable. Now, he just looked spent.

Miss Militia caught Armsmaster’s attention with a few handsigns in his direction, and the Protectorate leader rose. “Duty calls,” he said. “We’re closing this place. After the damage this floor took, it probably won’t be open for a while. You gonna be okay getting back to your place?”

I nodded.

“Thanks again for tonight, especially the first part.” It sounded a lot less forced this time.

“My pleasure,” I replied with a slight smile inside my suit. At least today had helped build Arsenal’s cover.

It wasn’t a total loss that way.

*_*-_*-_*-_*-_*-

I didn’t stay long in the suit. I ducked into the first alleyway I could spot, found a dark corner, and turned into shadow state as soon as I confirmed I was out of sight. I went straight to Arsenal’s
workshop, dropped the suit, then headed right back to base.

I was simply tired.

“So, how did it go?” T asked just as I changed back to human form at the base.

“Bad,” I replied, tiredness evident in my voice. “The Travelers were there, and they embarrassed us worse than I believed possible. It felt like we were the bad guys in a Looney Tunes cartoon.”

T cringed. “That’s rough.”

I looked around at what T was working on. Whatever it was, there were two of them, as I could see two exactly identical pieces, one aside the other. I let my tinker spark come to the fore as I looked at the various components.

*That’s a control module… sensors… power supply…* I noted mentally. Then I came onto the last part and smiled. *I should have known. But why two?* I thought. *A backup, maybe?*

My musings were interrupted by a chime. T quickly grabbed her phone, looked at the received text, and then handed it to me. “Lisa wants to talk to you.”

That sure hadn’t taken long, I noted. Still, I rang her a moment later.

“Judging by what I’m hearing on the PRT channels, the fundraiser didn’t go so well,” Lisa said as soon as she answered the phone. “You OK?”

“Hello to you too, Lisa,” I said sarcastically, then sighed. “Yes, I’m fine. What do you know?”

“Not much. I’m not tapped into the Protectorate channels, so I have a bare minimum of information. Plenty of guesses, but nothing concrete.” She was silent for a moment. “What happened?”

“The Travelers happened, and they played us like a drum,” I explained. “If the Boss wanted embarrassing, he sure got it. And since the press were present, how ineffective the Protectorate was is sure to be front page news tomorrow.”

“Shit!” She swore. “I was ninety-five percent sure the Boss had other capes in his roster, but not a group like Trickster and his gang.” She paused for a second as I heard objects moving in the background. “Give me the details,” Lisa said in complete seriousness.

I went over everything from the moment I arrived at the Gallery to the instant I left. I didn’t spare the details, explaining everything I noticed along with every theory I had. I even sent my camera footage to an address she gave me right then and there.

“I’ll go over it before tomorrow,” she said as she received the data.

“Anything your power tells you?” I asked. I’d gone over everything in my head more than once, and it still didn’t make sense.

“Well…” Lisa said, sounding unsure. This wasn’t something I was used to. “If the goal was really to embarrass someone, I can think of only two targets: either the Protectorate or the mayor. And it seems very heavy-handed against the mayor. He’s already behind in the polls, and the Boss could fabricate a scandal easily enough without going for something this direct.”
I boggled. “You think he’s trying something against the Protectorate? That he's trying to get Armsmaster replaced by someone else?” That's the only reason I could think of.

“That’s what seems to make the most sense, except it doesn’t really do that,” Lisa replied. “I don’t see how he could have a way of getting a mole anywhere important among the Protectorate. Miss Militia is next in line for command, and I’d bet my power against a toaster before I believe she is in the Boss’ pockets. Assault and Battery are married, and the former villain had to have his contacts and loyalty gone over a dozen times. Not to mention that I don’t see either of them as the next Protectorate leader. Velocity’s not management material, and the others lack seniority for a post like this one. Unless they bring someone from outside the city, I don’t see how the Boss could have his hooks in someone.”

“What about blackmail?” I replied.

“Not very effective at that level, especially considering the PRT’s Master/Stranger protocols,” she continued. “The discrepancy would be noted, and someone of that rank has more than enough power to go after threats like that. I don't see a ploy like that working.”

I let the words sink for a moment. “So…?” I finally asked.

“I hate admitting it, but I have no idea,” she finally replied. “I’m even starting to doubt my previous conclusions. Maybe I was wrong and this was a decoy, or this is something else completely that we don’t even have a clue about.” She sighed again. “I’ll go over the videos as soon as I hang up. Maybe there’s something there that’ll give me a hint.”

“Hopefully.”

“I’ll be getting on it, then,” Lisa said. “Catch you tomorrow.”

“Good luck. I suppose I won’t hear from you before two, right?” I said with a smirk.

“That’s a safe bet,” She replied, and I could hear something of a smile in her voice. “Toodles!” She said and disconnected.

I put the phone back on T’s work desk, then rolled up my sleeves. After the night I had, doing a little tinkering to boost my mood was exactly what I needed. I grabbed a soldering iron and went to work.
“Thank you all for coming, especially this early on a Monday,” I said right as the clock struck eight. Most people were barely starting off their day, if they were awake. Villains waited for no hero, unfortunately.

At least I could conduct this meeting from my office using video conferencing. Even though I could be on the other side of the continent in less than an hour using my powers, gathering the heads of every Protectorate regional office on the east coast would be a scheduling nightmare, even without accounting for the others currently connected.

“As of now, I’m pretty sure all of you have either read or heard the news,” I continued, looking straight at the camera on my screen. “Last Thursday, the cape known as Slenderman hit Paige Mcabee’s trial right as the sentence was being delivered, stole said woman’s power right in front of the entire courtroom, then vanished without a trace.”

“There wasn’t anything we could have done,” Herald, who had been in the courtroom, countered. His pride was clearly wounded.

I shook my head. “No one is claiming otherwise. The Boston team was selected for the possibility of Paige escaping, not dealing with a power nullifier. Two close-range capes to knock her out quickly, a shield generator to protect possible hostages, and yourself to nullify her song with your sonic abilities. Perfect for a Master like Miss Mcabee, but not against a Trump like Slenderman.”

There were a few mutters along with some nods, but no one pushed the issue.

“This was the first time he struck outside Brockton Bay, and as such everyone was unprepared for his appearance. That is the reason for this meeting.” I took a sip from my coffee cup. “Slenderman has shown that he isn’t going to limit himself to what seems to be his home city, and every Protectorate team has to be prepared to deal with him.”

“Brockton Bay should…” one of them started, only to be drowned out by a half-dozen other barely-intelligible comments. Linker’s voice overwhelmed everyone else’s, however. “How is he rated?” the second-in-command in Washington asked.

A valid question, at least, I thought. “Armsmaster?” I replied, ceding the floor to the Brockton Bay leader.

“Difficult to say, especially since he seems to be deliberately holding back. High-level
Trump/Striker, that’s for sure, along with both Mover abilities and either Brute solidity or Breaker-type immunities. And his last appearance implies Stranger abilities.”

“Stranger abilities?” Revel, the Buffalo Protectorate leader, repeated.

“For those who haven’t yet seen the Protectorate footage, Slenderman did not teleport behind Paige Mcabee to steal her power as the newspapers reported,” Dragon interjected. She was the one on top of the conference’s security, and such meetings were only possible with her help. “He appeared in the room before sentencing and took a spot in the witness chair, then waited there for the judge to render his verdict. Only then did he move, crossing the line of sight of more than a dozen bystanders without provoking a reaction.”

There was a moment of uneasy silence. I had seen the footage, and even now the simple reminder made me shiver. An invisible power negator? Slenderman deserved his unofficial status as a boogie man.

The idea that Arthur or Keith could find themselves in front of that man made me want to hunt him down right now. Instead, I forced the feeling back. For the moment, Slenderman hadn't even been seen by anyone who wasn't a parahuman.

“How many capes have had their powers removed as of now?” Chevalier asked as I purposely calmed myself.

“Eight confirmed along with two more as near-certain possibles,” Dragon replied instantly.

“Can you go over them all chronologically?” Herald asked.

Armsmaster nodded. “Dragon?”

“The first, unconfirmed, victim was Shadow Stalker of the Brockton Bay Wards. Given the last confirmed use of her power, she would have to have been attacked on February 4 or 5. By the evening of the fifth, it was found she had lost her powers. As Slenderman’s existence and abilities were still unknown at the time, dozens of medical and psychological evaluations were performed with no results.” An image of said Ward appeared on the computer screen, then shrank to place itself on a timeline.

“The first confirmed sighting of Slenderman was very early on Valentine’s Day, based on available timestamps. The Trump struck Skidmark and Squealer, a pair of parahuman drug dealers and gang leaders.” Pictures of both Merchants joined the timeline. “Two videos were uploaded to the net, the first showing the attack and the second the results. This was the last time the two of them were seen in Brockton Bay.”

The branch heads waited expectantly as Dragon paused for a breath before continuing.

“Slenderman was then silent for nearly a month, only to reappear on March 12, striking at two parahuman members of the Empire 88 gang.” I saw a number of nods in response. The Empire was well known to those on the east coast, having been a thorn in the Protectorate’s side for more than a decade. “He was again seen on video. The interrogation of his victims, Othala and Victor, revealed that he was struck by a number of high-caliber bullets at close range without flinching.”

“Not that uncommon…” Someone whispered. I didn’t catch who.
“The second unconfirmed victim came next, only five days later on March 17. Oni Lee, a member of the ABB, was found deceased in a large room that had visibly suffered numerous grenade detonations.” Oni Lee’s masked face appeared on the screen. “The villain left a message as he died, the Chinese character for ‘slender’, which seems to imply the Trump’s presence, along with another incomplete ideogram. If he was correct that Slenderman was the attacker, he is the only person known to have fought against him for an extended period of time.”

“Any idea how the fight went?” Alexandria quickly asked. She was the only Protectorate leader present from the west coast.

*How unsurprising,* I thought with a slight smile. She always went after how people thought and fought.

“Very little,” Dragon replied. “The explosive patterns suggest that Oni Lee was having difficulty getting a bead on his opponent. Whether this was due to his Mover or Stranger abilities is unknown, though.”

The Triumvirate member nodded in response, and I indicated that Dragon should continue.

“Whether Oni Lee’s death precipitated events or not, the ABB started a bombing rampage across Brockton Bay with the help of Bakuda, their newest recruit. Slenderman mostly faded from public scrutiny in the face of the deaths and the damages done to the city.” I scowled. I’d seen pictures of some of the explosion sites, and it reminded me unfavorably of the passings of the Slaughterhouse Nine.

The images of two women appeared on the screen. “Early on April 29, Slenderman interrupted a battle between the Undersiders, a somewhat new villain group, and Faultline’s mercenaries, carrying the two parahumans currently on the screen, Tian Yan and Bakuda. He seemingly went after the Undersiders, who retreated with Slenderman’s two captives, now de-powered. Faultline’s crew also escaped without any losses. Again, Slenderman’s performance was captured on video, this time on the store cameras.”

“They managed to recover people from an enemy like that?” Revel asked. By the looks of the others, she wasn’t the only one pondering this.

“No,” the female Tinker replied. “Slenderman used the two former villains as projectiles against the Undersiders. The group simply escaped with them.”

I’d seen the video. It was clear that, without powers, the ABB members meant nothing to him. He’d tossed them away as if they were trash.

“Him being seen on video is starting to be a pattern.” Hermitage, second-in-command in Norfolk, pointed out. The Protectorate leader for that region was currently in the hospital following a hold-up gone bad. I’d heard good things about his second.

Someone muttered “You think?” in the background, and was ignored.

“Indeed.” Dragon replied before continuing. “The seventh target we discussed earlier. Slenderman appeared at Paige Mcabee’s trial on Thursday, waited until the verdict was rendered, then stole her power. Chevalier, you have confirmation?”

The Philadelphia leader nodded. “I do. For those who do not know, my power includes a weak
Thinker aspect that provides me with limited insight into a cape's powers.” I was glad he didn’t explain further. Testing when Chevalier was only a Ward revealed he saw glimpses of trigger events, and those were intensely personal. What he saw wasn’t much different for Cauldron capes such as myself, though the images tended to be much less traumatizing. “She was no different from any non-parahuman. Were it not for her feathers, I wouldn’t be able to differentiate her from any other woman.”

“All that time for nothing,” Herald grumbled.

“She still went through the same battery of tests that Shadow Stalker went through,” Dragon added as if the Boston leader had said nothing. “From a medical point of view, there is no appreciable difference between Paige Mcabee after Slenderman de-powered her and her state when she last had a medical checkup.”

“We’re still missing one,” Herald said, and others echoed him. “Wasn’t Canary the last one?”

Dragon shook her head as a photograph of a wide-shouldered Asian man appeared on screen. “The eighth and last confirmed target was Lung, again on last Thursday.”

Eyes went wide. “Wasn’t he taken into custody that very same day?” Hermitage asked.

“Indeed,” Armsmaster replied.

“You mean Slenderman struck at Lung, inside the Protectorate building, only hours after his imprisonment?” the man from Norfolk continued. The surprise was clear in his voice, and the others’ whispers could be heard in the background.

“No,” the Brockton Bay leader replied. “He struck Lung as he was being carried from the site of his capture to the Protectorate’s jail.”

“How long a drive is that?” Alexandria asked, eyes serious, speaking over two others who probably were about to ask the same question.

I wasn’t surprised. That had been the same question I’d had when I read the report.

“Less than ten minutes. Lung had been in custody for six minutes when Slenderman struck.”

“And I suppose we once again have him attacking Lung on camera, correct?” Hermitage asked.

“Correct,” Armsmaster answered.

“However he does it, this Slenderman is disturbingly well-informed,” Alexandria said, cutting off everyone. I could see the gears turning in her head. “From what I see, each of the targets he struck was either in a place they considered safe, or otherwise incapacitated. The reports indicate that he quite likely struck Shadow Stalker in her civilian identity, and that without her realizing. Both the Merchants and the members of the Empire were attacked in their very homes. All this may be explained by his Stranger ability.”

“Yeah, but…” another started.

“But others aren’t,” she continued, ignoring the interruption. “Unless he was already present on the scene of the attack, a Stranger ability would have been of no help getting to Lung. The report on
Bakuda’s capture says that she and her compatriot had been escaping when they were hit, which points toward exact timing. With the abilities he has, he would have had no issue getting to her long before had he been aware of her presence.”

“He may have been tailing the Undersiders when they found the ABB hideout,” Dragon pointed out.

The female member of the Triumvirate nodded. “Possible. He also managed to attack Oni Lee in his resting place, and a teleporter is notoriously difficult to track, even for another such.”

“Especially when said teleporter is also a duplicator,” Armsmaster added, clearly speaking from experience.

“Quite,” Alexandria confirmed with a smirk. “Only Paige Mcabee was in a public place when attacked. And all of this is not including the leak the PRT had regarding some of Slenderman’s videos.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone digested that. “Let’s come back to security later,” Alexandria continued. “Are there other rumors of parahumans losing their abilities?”

Dragon sighed. “There are a number of people saying they have been attacked by Slenderman, but none with any sort of real proof. Most of these do not fit with what little is known of Slenderman, and in most cases those propagating these rumours are not known to have had powers at any time.”

That didn’t surprise me in the least, even if I hadn’t known about it beforehand. We had the same problem with all the high-ranked threats, and without Dragon sifting through the dross with her systems, we wouldn’t be getting anywhere. We’d had that issue in the beginning of the Protectorate. The amount of false reports was staggering.

“Are there any physiological or psychological effects of power loss? Long-term or short-term?” Chevalier asked. “This might make it easier to separate real instances from charlatans.”

“In the short-term, the reactions of the victims vary greatly. They range from calm to anger, from long-lasting denial to quick acceptance with no common denominator. On the physiological level, there were no details noticed that might flag someone having been attacked by Slenderman.” Dragon explained, then looked to the side for a moment. “As for the long-term, there isn’t anything yet proven, but there is one common link between all the earlier victims.”

“Which is?” I asked.

“All are missing or dead,” Armsmaster replied gruffly.

“What?” Three different people exclaimed at the same time. He had everyone’s attention, including mine.

“Out of the ten victims above, only two are known to be still alive: Paige Mcabee and Lung,” the male Tinker continued.

“How long has this been known?” Alexandria asked as leaders whispered amongst themselves.

“This trend was only noticed this weekend,” Dragon said. “Shadow Stalker vanished from confinement at the South Boston Correctional Facility on May second, but the rest of the data was only found in the last few days. Adam Mustain and Sherrel Bailey, the former Merchants, overdosed
in early March while in Tampa Bay. This wasn’t seen as abnormal, as they had been heavy drug
users all their known lives. Victor is known to have died during the ABB bombing, and his wife
Othala hasn’t been seen since the first detonation. Oni Lee died the day he met Slenderman. As for
the other two ABB lieutenants, Tian Yan committed suicide early on Friday, and Bakuda was found
dead in her cell the next day. Bakuda’s death, however, isn’t believed to be a suicide but retribution
for her actions.”

“That’s a little bit much for a coincidence,” I said after a moment of silence.

“True, but outside the Merchants no two died the same way, and even the two who vanished did so
under much different circumstances,” Dragon pointed out.

I shook my head. “Still, no chance on taking risks. Have the two watched day and night if
necessary.”

All nodded.

I was interrupted for a moment by someone at my door, and by the time I came back to my desk, the
meeting had turned toward security measures. It was clear from the discussion that even a good
number of the Protectorate leaders were afraid of what could happen. Paranoia was rampant, and the
measures suggested reflected that state of mind. The only ones who seemed in complete control of
their emotions were Chevalier, Dragon, Armymaster and Alexandria.

I won’t say there wasn’t a knot of fear deep within me, especially at the idea of him in my home, but
I didn’t see this Slenderman as a current threat. He’d struck fewer than a dozen targets in three
months, and outside the first all were villains.

And that’s if you consider Shadow Stalker as a Ward. Her file had been particularly illuminating as
to why she might have been targeted.

I wasn’t going to say he wasn’t dangerous, but there were simply more important issues at hand.
There was an Endbringer coming in the next few weeks. Other issues paled compared to that.

After a fruitless hour of debate, I closed the meeting and let everyone get back to their regular work.
It was clear that further discussion wouldn’t improve things.

All save Dragon and Armymaster, actually. The three of us discussed the matter alone, and after not
even fifteen minutes we had the first draft of a valid counter-Slenderman protocol. It wouldn’t fix
everything, which I doubted was possible, but it was a good first step.

I’d make sure to have it improved in the future.
Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to Essex, hance1986, Ignis fatuus & Logos for their help fixing on this part. I give each of them the one book they prefer. Note: The Book of Clow hasn't been returned, so that one's out.

[T]

I sat down at my desk with a huff. After weeks without school, getting back into class felt like a waste of time. I could do so much more on the workbench than I could at a desk.

Even worse, not all the teachers had returned after Bakuda’s rampage. There had been very few losses, but a number were still wounded and others had left for greener pastures. And not all courses had replacement teachers yet.

That meant that I had two classes cancelled today, and of course not the first or the last one but those in between. Sure, I could use Shadow to rush back and forth, but that wasn’t the same thing. Having to watch the clock and interrupt my tinkering every few hours made it difficult to advance properly.

I would have gone for another sigh, but Chris came in right at that moment. One of the only silver linings was that school brought me back in contact with him. And I still owed him one.

“Hey Chris,” I said. “How’s it going?”

He waved half-heartedly in my direction, then crumbled in the seat beside mine.

That doesn’t sound good.

It didn’t look good either. Chris didn’t seem wounded, but he had bags under his eyes, and not like those he usually had when he tinkered late.

“You okay?” I asked.

He turned toward me, eyes half-closed. “I did a four hour patrol starting at two this morning.”

I cringed. “That’s rough.”

“That’s not the only thing,” he started. “I…” he was interrupted by the teacher arriving and taking roll call.

I didn’t have much a chance to continue the conversation during class, as the number of days missed meant this was a condensed lecture class with only note taking.

I did, however, manage to catch up to him as we left class. “You have a class to go to?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“You should go get some sleep, then.”
“Can’t,” Chris answered. “I’m to stay at school on call.” I cringed again at that.

We moved to a table in one of the least frequented areas of the school, in an unused classroom once used for Economics. I did grab him a coffee from a vending machine on the way, because he really looked like he needed it.

“So, what happened?” I asked.

“I’m basically on punishment detail,” Chris said after drinking half his coffee in one shot. “I get the unwanted shifts no one wants, I’m being retested on Protectorate procedures relentlessly the rest of the time, and worst is I’m cut off from my workshop until further notice.”

That’s just mean, I thought. The best way for a Tinker to relax was through tinkering, so cutting one from using his powers hurt. “That’s a little much for simply going against orders.” That’s at least what I understood was the cause of Kid’s suffering.

He sighed. “There’s more than that. The weapon I deployed against Lung hadn’t gone through the official testing process, so when Armsmaster found that particular detail out he was livid. That added an extra five days of late patrols, along with the retesting.”

I lowered my head. “Sorry about that.” It was my fault he had been there.

“Don’t be,” he reassured me with more energy than before. “Armsmaster wanted me to abandon someone to Lung’s nonexistent mercy. I wouldn’t have been to live with myself if I’d followed those orders.” He gave me a slight smile. “Now, let’s talk about something more interesting. Anything new in tinkering?”

I verified with Perception that Chris was the only one watching me, then reached into my bag and withdrew a rectangular box.

“What’s that?” he asked with growing enthusiasm.

“A gift,” I replied. “Something to replace your broken board.”

“You didn’t need to,” he countered. Still, he opened the box with evident curiosity and withdrew the contents. First came eight bracer-like objects about six inches long, then something similar to a choker. Finally, he took out a heavy sheaf of notes.

Unsurprisingly, he immediately dove into the notes instead of looking at the rest. Typical Tinker behavior, I thought. I’d have done the same.

He didn’t come out for ten minutes. “A thought-controlled flight system? Through gravity manipulation?” he asked when he did.

I nodded with a smile. “Like it?”

“For sure I do!” he exclaimed. “I mean, I had to do my latest patrols on the ground, and four hours of walking was way more than my feet can agree with.”

“Glad to hear it,” I answered. “Anything there giving you ideas?” Chris had told me his specialization was laser guns, but he didn’t sound so sure. It didn’t fit with what he used, also.

“Well…” He started, somewhat unsure. “I can’t help but notice the only thing your thought reading device does is direct the various bracelets.” I nodded. “If it could be made somewhat larger, processing power could be improved, along with ports for other devices. Drones, weapons… there
could be a lot we could add to this.”

My eyes went wide. Plug and play? I thought. Why didn’t I think about that? It wouldn’t be so
difficult to add, and the possibilities were endless.

I smirked. “I like the way you’re thinking!” I exclaimed. Once again I verified we were alone, then I
withdrew pen and paper from my schoolbag. “Let’s get cracking, then.”

A similar smile was on Chris’ face. “Well, first off is replacing this chip. It’s good enough, but a
quad setup would provide more versatility. Eight would prove even better for redundancy.” I noted
said details as he continued. “Ports would go here, and…”

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[Taylor]

While T was in school, I was working on Arsenal’s armor. Fixing my remaining mics along with the
rest of the damage inflicted by Genesis had taken a few hours this morning, and I could now work
on adding new systems.

Which is what I was doing. While the battle against Lung had probably gone as well as it could, the
fundraiser had revealed numerous deficiencies in my suit’s capabilities. I went directly from
knocking out normal people in close combat to Brute-level damage at range with nothing in between,
an oversight which had to be fixed. I could benefit from a defense against Movers in general, and
teleporters in particular.

And I had to figure out something against attacks that could go through or ignore my armor. Luckily,
I already had an idea about how to handle that.

I was hard at work when the phone line in my suit indicated a call. Early afternoon, so it didn’t take
much to guess who it was. “Hello Lisa,” I answered.

“Hi Taylor,” she replied. “Mind coming over? We have the details of the Boss’ latest request, and I’d
like you present when we go over it.”

“Only me?”

“Sveta is on her way and the rest are already present,” Lisa answered.

I would have rather continued tinkering, but it seemed that work was calling. “On my way.”

Using Shadow, I was in the new Undersiders base a dozen minutes later, with Arsenal’s armor safety
tucked away at home. “Good day Undersiders,” I said as I turned back into human shape right beside
my chair. I was a little disappointed that the only reaction to that was Regent swearing and handing a
smirking Lisa a roll of bills.

“No that we’re all here, here’s the Boss’ latest.” She unrolled a map of the city, then marked a
dozen spots. “The Boss want us to hit these places, all of which belong to the E88.”

“What kind of places are they?” Brian asked.

“Safe-houses mainly from what I can see,” Lisa replied. “One or two weapon depots and a mustering
place, but the rest are all hidey-holes.”

“And the reward?” Regent asked.
“A thousand per person per place we hit, plus whatever cash we find as usual.”

“Nice,” the Master said with a smile. “I could use a payout like that.”

“Only that?” I asked. I wasn’t talking about the money, and Lisa knew it.

It seemed too little for Coil’s latest plans.

“He’s also paying the same for every other Empire place we hit after these are done,” Lisa added. “Which is the reason I wanted everyone here. I know some of us scouted other places the Empire’s working from, and I wanted to add them so we can do everything correctly.”

Lisa had me in her sight when she said that, and with good reason. I quickly added half a dozen places I remembered from my earlier explorations. I wasn’t the only one; Brian added two and Regent added another. Then Bitch took the pen and grimly added a whole seven more.

I wasn’t the only one surprised. “What are those?” Sveta asked.

“Dogfighting ring,” she answered with a growl.

I scowled, and even Regent whistled at that. “Anybody against hitting those places right after the Boss’ locations are cleared?” I asked, voice tight.

Brian looked from side to side. Nobody was disagreeing with me. “Motion carried,” he confirmed. “We’ll need a place to evacuate those dogs. You have anywhere in mind?”

Bitch looked at him straight in the eyes for a moment, then nodded. “Perfect.” Brian replied.

“I’ll make sure I have a healing beacon ready in case it’s needed.” I added. Bitch simply nodded once more.

“So we’re going out tonight, then?” Regent said. “Blondie, I’ll need that taser back.”

“Not tonight,” Lisa countered while I went and unlatched Regent’s scepter from my leg. “The Boss wants us to wait and hit those spots after seven AM, tomorrow.”

“That’s not an issue, but any reason why?” Brian asked.

“I don’t know exactly, but info points toward the Boss running something before seven tomorrow,” Tattletale explained. “Something that makes him expect those safehouses will be occupied.”

“Any clue what?” I asked.

Lisa shook her head. “Nothing concrete. The only thing I could tell you is that it’ll hurt the Empire bad.”

“Any danger for the Undersiders from that plot of his?” Brian asked.

“Not that I can tell.”

Brian rose. “Then, in seventeen hours, we’re hitting those safe-houses. Everyone get some good sleep tonight, because tomorrow’s gonna be a busy day. Undersiders, meeting adjourned.”

I handed Regent his scepter as Brian left. “Here’s what you asked for.”

“Nice.” He twirled it in his hand to test the weight. “Anything special I should know, Blondie?”
I ignored the nickname. “Just remember to plug it for at least three hours whenever the light here…” I pointed at hidden light near the middle. “Goes red.” I then showed how to extend the plug.

“Glad to know I won’t have to deal with batteries anymore,” Regent replied. “How long should it last before needing a recharge?”

“Power supply’s good for around a hundred shots. The light turns red when it hits twenty percent charge.”

Regent’s eyes went wide. “Nice,” he said with a whistle. He then twirled it out again. “Can’t wait to try it out.”

The boy then left, leaving me with only Lisa and Sveta. I went back to my chair.

“You don’t have any issue with this mission, I suppose?” Lisa asked.

“I was already hitting the Empire when I worked alone, so I don’t have anything against doing so with the rest of the team behind me,” I replied.

“Good,” Lisa replied, the turned to Sveta. “We safe from being overheard?”

Sveta visibly focused for a second. “At least for the next thirty minutes.”

“Thank you.” Tattletale turned to me. “To answer the question you wanted to ask, no I didn’t get anything more about Coil’s plans from the footage you gave me.” She stopped for a second, then continued. “And I can’t tell you anything about whatever he’s going to do before our mission tomorrow.”

I took a deep breath to center myself. It was annoying when Lisa did that, and she knew it.

“Anything you can say?”

“Not much,” she answered. “Whatever it is, it’s big. From Coil’s words, I could get an undercurrent that this might actually destroy the Empire, all alone. We Undersiders are just there to hammer it in.”

I thought for a moment about what that could be, but nothing came to mind. The Empire 88 was big both in capes and in general numbers, well supplied, and had a big enough hold on the city that taking them out had failed multiple times. They’d survived even the Slaughterhouse Nine while most gangs around them folded.

I couldn’t see what could do that much damage.

“We’ll have to see,” I was forced to admit after a minute of contemplation with no results.

I couldn’t help but have a bad feeling about it, though.
Special thanks go to Essex, MilkHornets, Robo Jesus, Aires Drake, Magnive, LordsFire, Ridtom, SpiralAK, Swimmingly, Amplified & catlover2011 for their work on this part. It wouldn't have been as good without them. I have a stand arrow I can lend the group of them. Note: May be deadly. May also make one fabulous.

“You have something going on today, don’t you?” Dad asked as I moved my cereal around.

I turned to him, shocked, as my spoon fell with a clack in my bowl. “What? How did…”

“I’m not blind,” my father replied. “It’s clear you have something on your mind. You know that if you need to talk, I’ll listen.”

I thought for a moment, but there was nothing planned today that I couldn’t talk about. Nothing worse than the bank or the various attacks on ABB locations, at least. “We have another job today from our boss,” I finally said.

“Anything… questionable?” he said, clearly choosing his words carefully.

“No, not like that,” I replied. “He gave us a list of Empire safehouses and mustering points, asking us to hit them starting after seven this morning.”

I saw some of the tension leave his shoulders. I knew he didn’t like the idea of me fighting, but he preferred it when the targets were at least deserving, like the E88. “What has you so worked up, then? You told me of dozens of buildings like those that you’ve already hit, some of them even alone. What’s so special about this time?”

That was the million dollar question. “I don’t know, actually. It’s just this bad feeling I have for some reason.” Said feeling hadn’t left since yesterday, and had even gotten worse as time went on. “There’s something sketchy about this one, and the Boss has another plot running that we know nothing about.”

I was about to continue the conversation when my alarm rang. “I have to go,” I said. I was really in a hurry today, with how close I was cutting it between regenerating T and rushing to the Undersiders' base.

“Knock'em dead…” Dad said with a smile. “Figuratively, of course,” he added a second later as he waved.

I smiled at his antics. “See you tonight.” I then turned into shadow and dashed for the sewers.

I was the last one to enter the Undersiders' meeting room/kitchen, unsurprisingly. I appeared in my chair without more than a twitch of the eyes from everyone.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said. I wasn’t that late, just three minutes. I’d probably beaten my own speed.
record for this distance.

“Glad you’re finally present, sleeping beauty,” Regent drawled. “We were about to start without you.”

I ignored him and turned to Brian. “Anything I should know before we leave?”

Surprisingly, it wasn’t Grue who answered but Sveta. “There’s an incoming danger in the next few days. Tomorrow at the earliest.”

“What?” I asked. Judging by the others’ reaction they’d already been told. “What type of danger?”

“We don’t know,” Lisa said. “We only know what it isn’t.”

“It isn’t capes, explosives, humans, natural disasters, plagues, radiation…” Sveta listed.

“Zombie hordes, rampant AIs, dogs…” Regent added with a smirk, only to get glared at by Bitch.

“I even tested for the living and the dead, and it isn’t even that,” Sveta concluded.

“Basically, it isn’t anything we’ve thought of,” Lisa added. “It’s not anything today, either. From what Sveta can tell it won’t hit today, but starting tomorrow there’s a slight danger of whatever it is happening.”

“Is it… based on what we do today?”

“No, it isn’t,” Brian answered. “We already verified that. That’s why we’ll hit everything today. We don’t know what’s coming or how to stop it, so we’ll do as much as we can today and go to ground tomorrow.”

“Don’t like it,” Rachel added, clearly not happy. “Feels like running.”

“I don’t like it either, but until we know more I’m not about to borrow trouble,” Brian countered. “After today, we’ll be flush with the boss’ latest payoff and ready to handle anything that comes.”

He looked around. “Anybody have anything to add?”

I didn’t, and the others kept silent as well.

Brian grabbed his helmet from the table and put it on. “Let’s go then, Undersiders.”

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Hitting the first few safe-houses went without a hitch. A couple of guards there in each, and nothing more. Regent was happy with the easy money, but it only made me stress more. Six thousand dollars for hitting an empty house? There had to be a catch.

I didn’t have an opportunity to talk to Tattletale about it until we’d already hit five different places.

“I’m liking this less and less,” I told her as she drove. Unsurprisingly, she had a driver’s permit.

“You’re not the only one,” she replied as she turned, following the van before her. The rest of the team was in that one, while we had two of Bitch’s dogs. “There’s not enough reason for this. He could have sent regular guys inside instead of us, and gotten the same results. There’s something else going on, something I can’t put my finger on. And it’s driving me mad.” That could easily be seen in her face: jaw muscles tense and no trace of her usual knowing smile. I could practically hear her teeth grinding against each other.
“Yeah,” I confirmed. We’d just hit the mustering point, and outside twenty or so racists, there hadn’t been anything there. I’d expected at least a cape or two, but no such thing.

Lisa stopped the van in an alley, right behind the one driven by Grue. The place was the second weapons depot, and after that the rest were safe-houses.

Grue stepped out, followed by Alarm and Regent. Bitch was last, and she instantly whistled as she came out. We’d opened the side doors beforehand, and both Brutus and Judas ran straight to her.

“So, Alarm, danger from Empire capes?” Grue asked. He’d done so before every attack, and she’d nailed it every time.

But this time was different. Instead of quickly answering, she turned, looking toward the docks, and even walked a few steps. “What’s that?” she asked, pointing at something flying in the distance.

Tattletale was the one who answered, her hand above her eyes. “Purity, I think.”

Her words were confirmed barely a second later when a double helix of light shot down from the figure. Even at this distance, we could hear the sound of a building crumbling.

“What?” I said, and I wasn’t the only one. Grue was clearly surprised, Alarm the same, and even Regent looked somewhat shocked.

Lisa quickly withdrew her cellphone and started typing. Before long, she had a video up, one put on the web a few minutes earlier. “Undersiders, Protectorate. Take note,” a female voice said, her shining form on camera. Purity. “Because of you, the most important thing I have was taken from me. Until she’s back, this won’t stop.” Another beam lanced out, cutting an apartment building at its foundation. It fell behind her a few seconds later. “We will kill anyone who gets in our way. White, Black, Asian... I no longer care. If you aren’t already with us, you are against us.” She pointed to the side. “Night, Fog, demonstrate.”

The six of us then had front row seats to the horrid execution of a white man. Fog turned into his namesake, covering the man, then Night went in and ripped him to shreds as he screamed. The man Changer took human form again, and only Night was left. Of the white man, only long bloody marks remained.

It was clear she and her group were playing hardball.

“What do we…” Sveta started as Lisa stopped the video, only to be cut off by Grue.

“Call the Boss,” he said, voice flat, the kind that told you someone was angry because of how forced it sounded.

“Doing it now,” the Thinker replied. The phone started ringing a second later, still on speaker. It rang and rang and rang, but no one picked up. After the twelfth ring, Tattletale hung up.


“Family,” Lisa replied. “Something happened to Purity’s family, that’s the ‘she’ Purity was talking about. Something happened, something she’s blaming on us, and the Protectorate got involved. No clue what it is, not yet.” She went back to her phone. “Give me a few seconds.”

It barely took that.

“Fuck!” she yelled, and handed Grue the phone. Whatever was on it, I could see the surprise in his
body language. He read for a few seconds, then handed the phone to me.

What was on it was a news site, an article with the header ‘E88 identities leaked!’. I looked quickly, and everyone was there: all the capes from top to bottom, with real names, addresses and families. Even some non-capes.

Kaiser was Medhall's CEO all along, and that's where all those drugs came from, I suddenly realized. He'd been powerful even outside his gang. I feared what his riches had brought, and how many people were in the E88's pockets without even knowing.

“The Boss did that?” Grue exclaimed while I was reading. A quick look at the time of publication indicated we'd already struck three places when it went online.

Lisa nodded. “99% sure. He was planning something big against the Empire, something he felt could destroy them. I got a reading off him that he thought something to happen to us, but nothing that pointed to a play like this one. This is way beyond the unwritten rules.”

I nodded at that. I didn't follow said rules completely as Slenderman, but I'd at least made sure never to put innocents in danger. Coil knew the consequences of releasing this information, and he did it anyway.

Grue glared down at her. “Why is the first time I hear of this?”

“No proof,” the Thinker explained. “Just a hunch, nothing I could explain or that made sense. I was checking into it, but I didn’t expect anything this soon. I half expected it to be some kind of fallout from this job.”

“We’re burned, then,” Regent said.

“What?” I asked, turning myself from the phone.

“He's cutting us off, putting us in a situation where we'll be eliminated without him lifting a finger. Classic villain plan to deal with people not trusted,” he explained. He didn’t seem very surprised as he said it.

Grue looked around at the group. “Anyone here worked against the Boss?” he asked with a growl.

I shook my head, as did everyone else. I might have been planning things, but nothing had gotten to the action phase. “Hell no,” Regent replied. “I’m not gonna risk a cushy job like this one.” Bitch simply growled as she shook, her dogs imitating her. “Knew he couldn't be trusted,” she then added.

I said nothing. Knowing who the Boss was, something like this didn't surprise me in the least. A look at Tattletale showed that she felt the same.

“Damn it!” Brian cursed, punching the wall once more. There was then a moment of silence. “Now what?” he finally inquired.

“We fight,” Rachel said simply.

Brian turned to said girl. “You crazy?”

“I’m with her,” I said. Grue turned toward me and I had the impression that he thought I’d been replaced by an imposter.

My reasons were mostly pragmatic. First was the fact that she was doing incredible damage to the
docks, and as someone out to defeat the gangs, staying away felt wrong.

Second was that she was targeting the actual docks.

I had no clue if my dad was down there or not, but I wasn’t going to take the risk. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to him because of my choices. If taking on Purity and her group was the price, I’d pay it gladly.

Sveta stepped beside me and nodded. “I’m going.”

“You all wanna take a Blaster in mid-air?” Grue replied, looking from one of us to the other.

“We don’t have much choice,” Lisa added, having taken back her phone. “The whole E88 is on the warpath, and they’re not holding back anymore. This has the potential to become worse than the ABB bombings,” she explained. “The Protectorate have already taken the field, but I don’t think they’ll manage much. There’s a whole block already destroyed, and she’s been at it for less than an hour. The longer we wait, the more damage there’ll be, and who knows who might end up in the crossfire. And that’s not counting what’ll happen if the Empire’s non-powered forces join the field.”

I instantly got what she was pointing out. Brian’s sister, whose name I just realized I didn’t know. She was a prime target for the E88, and her security was his main goal.

He stepped back as if struck, then was silent for a moment. Clearly, he couldn’t refute what had just been said. “Cheap shot,” Regent pointed out.

She smiled a little. “Doesn’t make it less true.”

“Yeah,” Grue said, gathering himself. “Still not the kind of fight I like getting into.”

“Hopefully she’ll listen to reason,” Tattletale said, though her body language indicated she believed otherwise.

“Undersiders, back in the vans,” he ordered, pointing. “No use getting hammered on the way. We’re riding closer before we make contact.”

We didn’t get far. Barely two streets over, Grue’s van swerved to a stop on the curb, and Tattletale had to brake suddenly not to ram them. A second later, a chunk of concrete fell right where his van would have been.

“Well, well, well… Look what we have here…” a grave male voice rang, coming from the opposite side of the street. A muscled man in a wolf mask stepped into the light a second later, hooks already bursting out of his skin. Behind him, two more Empire capes followed, along with another pair stepping into view on the roof of the building beside him.

“Spread out!” Grue yelled as he abandoned the van, covering the E88 capes with his shadow at the same time. Hookwolf charged out of that darkness not even a second later, clearly intent on carnage.
I had to give Rachel her due credit; however difficult she might be to deal with, when in a fight she fought without hesitation. Angelica, the dog she’d kept with her, grew to huge proportions at high speed and tackled the incoming Hookwolf.

“GO!” Tattletale yelled beside me, unhooking her safety belt. I ignored my own, turning to shadow and flowing through the glass.

I’d barely returned to human form when one of the E88 capes blew a five-meter wide hole in Grue’s mist. The cape’s distinctive look allowed me to identify him quickly.

Stormtiger. His trick was aerokinesis, which was one of those powers that could have a variety of uses. From what I’d read he was mainly a close range fighter, though I personally wouldn’t bet on that at the moment.

The bare-chested cape tried lunging forward to rejoin Hookwolf in the front lines after his failed attack, only to stumble and fall. I didn’t even have to turn and look to know that Regent was smirking at his misfortune.

A series of growls signaled Judas and Brutus’ entry to the fray, courtesy of Tattletale. They’d already been somewhat bulked up while in the van, but once more they grew as they joined Bitch’s other dog against Hookwolf with a whistle from their mistress.

I shadow-dashed to the roof of the closest building to get a good view of the action, and found myself opposite a floating flatbed trailer full of steel girders, with two capes standing there. The first, Rune, I recognized instantly, being the youngest cape in the Empire’s roster, but it took a moment before I identified the second as Krieg.

I mainly realized this due to the strange resistance the Shaker brought to the air. It was as if something akin to the wind or to gravity was fighting our every move, making us slower to react. The effect could easily be seen in the battle between the three dogs and the E88 Changer; the canines’ attacks seemed slow and unsure compared to previous battles, while Hookwolf had no problem capitalizing on their sluggishness. I couldn’t tell for the rest of the enemy team, as Grue kept engulfing Stormtiger and his surroundings with shadows, but Hookwolf seemed faster than the few videos I’d seen of the man.

The Empire Shaker needed to go, pronto.

The problem was getting to him. Their floating platform was well outside jumping range, and my
only flying ability was useless in this light. None of the Undersiders save Bitch’s dogs could attack something that high, and outside of them we were helpless against Hookwolf.

Leaving that platform free, though, would end with us hammered to the ground. I needed to find a counter quickly or we were done for.

Our opponents, however, weren't going to let us catch our breath. Stormtiger blew a larger hole in the black mists, more than twenty meters wide this time. For a moment I saw Cricket, the last member of the Empire team, before another wave of darkness from Grue hid her and Stormtiger once more. She and Alarm were going head to head, and it seemed like the Nazi couldn’t manage to land a blow, something that was visibly frustrating her.

That was when Rune made her entry into the fray. Seven girders shot forward at speeds greater than I’d expected, exploding into noise that left my ears ringing as they struck the ground with torturous shrieks. Both of our trucks were instantly totaled, glass and metal spraying across the asphalt. A pair of steel girders swept into Bitch's dogs with cannonball force, brutally knocking them aside. Hookwolf didn’t miss the opportunity and skipped past the canines holding him back.

Two shots didn’t, however, have the expected results. One went right for what I thought was Grue, only for it to turn out to be a duplicate he’d shaped out of shadow, while the other went straight for Sveta. Cricket jumped before the girder came close to her position, and Alarm didn’t miss the opportunity that presented itself. She grabbed the female Nazi by the ankle as she dodged the incoming projectile, twirled around once for momentum then threw the E88 member into the darkness at something. Whatever happened, Cricket didn’t show up again.

The last girder was aimed at my head.

I turned back to shadow right as it clipped the edge of the roof, and rode the girder back to ground level. While it looked like Cricket and possibly Stormtiger were out, we were still in a bad position. The Nazi’s floating artillery position was keeping the dogs busy, and while Regent was trying to keep Hookwolf from reaching him, he was clearly having difficulty. If he closed to melee with any of us, we were going to get mauled.

And there wasn’t much I could do against the Changer. My armor was solid, but not enough to face a melee specialist like him face to face. He'd slice me apart in an instant.

It was Alarm that finally gave me the inspiration I needed. She grabbed the girder that had been launched at her, and hurled it back at the floating capes. Between Krieg’s and Rune’s powers, it was intercepted before even hitting them, but it sparked an idea. I dashed straight for her position while the two floating capes peppered the area with attacks.

I ended up having to drag Alarm out of Grue’s cloud of darkness to explain my plan, but she understood quickly. She grabbed the closest projectile she could find (a sewer grate) and tossed it at the floating platform at even greater speed than her first throw. This time Rune levitated her trailer higher, and the grate struck the bottom rather ineffectually.

I did, however, manage to slither out from under the grate and into the shadows beneath the platform. A second later, I turned back to human form right behind the teenage Nazi and struck at her with two tasing hands. She dodged the first, but the second nailed her in the kidney, and she crumpled a second later.

And the three of us were now in free fall as Rune's power lost its effect.

Krieg reacted quickly, grabbing his stunned comrade and slowing their combined fall while giving
me a telekinetic push off the trailer at the same time. I turned into shadow as soon as I reached the ground, negating my fall and hiding in the shadow of the descending trailer. The steel mass hit the road like a giant bell, scattering girders all around, and people the other side of the city probably heard the impact.

Luckily for me, Grue had seen my maneuver. A patch of darkness two meters wide appeared around the Nazi Shaker, with my usual inch at the bottom. It took a few seconds for me to find Krieg’s back, but once I did he went down in an instant. I then ran out of the shadowy spot.

“Krieg down!” I yelled. And saw that Judas and Angelica had finally managed to dogpile Hookwolf, bare meters from Bitch’s position. The Changer still moved, trying to free himself, but the dogs were now large enough that he didn’t reach anything vital. Alarm had come out of Grue’s shadow close to the rest of the team, and only Tattletale was out of sight.

We had this fight under control, finally.

“Good job people!” Grue said. “Now we’ll…” he started, only to be interrupted by a yell from Alarm. “Down!” she cried out, jumping to knock Regent aside roughly.

And everything went right to hell.

A foot wide beam of light sliced through the darkness. It missed Regent by inches, then continued on to strike at the canine pile, where it blasted the parties all over the place while throwing dust in the air.

I didn’t catch the rest with my sight blocked. I simply heard Grue cry out in pain, and turned in that direction.

And in the next moment, I was flying through the air.

I hit the wall so fast I didn’t even have time to turn to shadow. I just slid to the ground, dazed and hoping the cracking sound I heard wasn’t my own skull.

The air quickly cleared, and I found a hooded woman in a black cloak standing where I had previously been. It took me a moment to focus enough on the newcomer before I realized who she was.

Night. One of the E88 capes I knew the least about; there were no videos of her powers, only speculation. Rumors had it that she’d left the Empire’s employ, but it seemed she was back at least for this crisis.

She rushed me once more, grabbing something under her cloak, and I didn’t take any chances. I turned to shadow near-instantly and shot up the side of a building.

I found there that the situation had gotten completely upended while I’d been tossed around. Grue was jumping on one foot as translucent blades crisscrossed the pavement like shark fins breaking the water's surface, Regent was trying and failing to keep Hookwolf down for more than a second while the Changer advanced on four legs, Alarm was constantly backing away from an advancing cloud of mist, and Purity kept blasting any dog that came too close to any Empire member, along with taking potshots at Bitch.

And me, as soon as she noticed my presence.

I jumped to the side, turning to shadow at the same time. Purity was the worst opponent for a group like ours: she was fast, flying, had long-range attacks, and had light-based abilities to boot.
Things were going south very quickly.

Night rushed in, going straight for Bitch. Alarm twisted around and ran right for the Empire cape, dodging the canister the woman threw. Smoke rushed out of it in great volume, and that section of the battlefield was instantly shrouded from sight.

Only then did I notice Tattletale, and only because she’d come out of the alley she’d been hiding in. She had her phone in hand, and used her other hand to amplify her voice. “Ride out!” she yelled, then whistled sharply. Brutus ran straight for her, and she climbed on.

Seconds later she rode west out of sight, and the rest of the Undersiders did similarly on the other dogs. Bitch and Alarm escaped east on Angelica, while Grue and Regent dashed north clinging to Judas’ back. Purity didn’t hesitate for a second, going straight for Tattletale, while a number of ghostly figures rose from the ground to head north after the two male members of the Undersiders, grabbing a man in armor along the way.

And I was left behind.
It hurt to watch the Undersiders flee, I had to admit. I could understand the logic behind the action since we had nothing that could do more than annoy Purity. The fact was I could easily escape on my own, but being left behind like that reminded me of Emma’s abandonment. And that was painful.

Nevertheless, I moved to get a better vantage point over the remaining Empire capes. I barely caught Night and Fog leaving, the female Nazi dashing through Fog’s form without a care in the world. They left through the same alley Fog had originally arrived from, leaving Hookwolf behind.

The Empire Changer scowled visibly as the pair departed. I’d seen Hookwolf start after Bitch and Alarm earlier, only to abandon pursuit not ten meters later. He probably couldn’t match the dogs’ agility and jumping strength.

Instead, he went to examine the fallen E88 capes. Now that Grue’s darkness was dissipating, I could see that Stormtiger and Cricket had both been taken down by Alarm. Only the woman was conscious, and the way she held her arm clearly showed that it was broken. She was also swearing like a sailor.

That meant that, with Rune and Krieg still down and the rest chasing after the others, Hookwolf was the only combat capable cape here. I thought about trying to take him out for a moment, then gave up on the idea. He still seemed fresh enough to fight me off and, outside of showing up as Slenderman, I didn’t have anything that gave me a reasonable chance of taking him down. By the time I could return here in my other costume, the Empire parahumans would probably be gone.

But that didn’t mean I couldn’t call the PRT on them.

I snuck out of sight, turned back to human shape and withdrew my cellphone from within my suit.

That’s when I realized I had four messages waiting, all in the last few minutes. And the lot of them from Lisa.

Corner dale & emerson

PRT safehouse

Deliver them safe

Escape is decoy

I smiled as I read, realizing I hadn’t been abandoned. I simply hadn't been in on the plan. It was true
that the Undersiders’ escape had the feeling of something rehearsed, and Bitch had been the one to grab Alarm as she left.

I noted the address, then returned to my other form. While I didn’t have the entire sewer system mapped, I was starting to get used to travelling in it. Exiting in an alley here and there to get my bearings, I quickly made my way through the city and found the house Tattletale had indicated.

It was a perfectly normal place, quite similar to my father’s house if the latter had been in better repair. Normal one-story house with basement, with a van in the driveway. The only detail that attracted some attention was that all the curtains were closed.

I snuck into said basement through a window, bypassing the curtains easily before doing a quick survey of the place. I was helped by the fact that every room was abandoned. All save one.

The main bedroom was occupied with the door sealed shut. There was clearly light on the other side and the sound of voices, with a baby crying in the background.

I caught on to Tattletale’s plan instantly. Purity had a daughter with Kaiser, and was also raising his son. With her name revealed for all to see, some idiot had the idea of using those two kids as leverage. That had be the ‘she’ that Purity had demanded on camera.

Despicable. I didn't think much of the PRT, but I thought them above using innocents.

Well, I wasn’t going to let this pass. Going against a cape’s family wasn’t something I agreed with, from either heroes or villains. While the idea of killing people for leverage equally disgusted me, I couldn't say to what levels I might fall if someone went after my father to get at me. Just thinking about it gave me shivers running down my back.

Still, hurting law enforcement officers didn’t feel right to me, especially since they might just be following orders from above.

So, I needed a different plan. And I had just the thing.

Slipping back below, I went straight for the fuse box and knocked out the power. Then I dashed right back up and snuck into the room.

The PRT troopers had been well equipped, and were already fumbling for flashlights as I entered the room. Which was exactly what I wanted.

When the first trooper managed to activate his light, I assumed three dimensions. Not as a human, but as a dragon half the size of the room. And right in the path of the beam.

The man stumbled back in shock, and even dropped his flashlight. Of course, the noise drew the other members’ attention, and three more beams of light turned in my direction.

I roared in response.

I’d never done so before, and I was surprised at the effect. My voice as a dragon sounded like an echo of an enormous, distant sound, and my roar was even more so. My cry sounded like it came from all directions, and the very walls of the room shook.

The reactions were varied. Two of the troopers backed away, and only the one with a foam
dispenser took a shot at me. A flap of my left wing blew the foam grenade back, and it burst in a corner of the room, far from anyone else.

The last, who’d been the closest, fell right on his ass, and started backing up as if he’d just seen the devil.

I roared again, louder, and this time the PRT members ran. The one on the floor went first, battering through the window, and the others quickly followed his example. I heard the van in the driveway start a moment later amidst shouts and curses.

With the cops gone, I took a better look at the place, and found both of Purity’s children. The youngest was in a crib in a corner of the room, crying even harder, while the boy was tied to a chair, and clearly trying to move toward his half-sister.

He had guts, at least. He was looking straight at me and not flinching back.

I changed back into a human right behind his chair, and quickly had him untied. This clearly wasn’t what he’d expected, and I could read it on his face. I then bent down to look at him mask to face. “Theodore, was it?” the boy nodded. “Mind taking care of…” I tried remembering the baby’s name, and failed.

“Aster,” Theodore replied, looking at me sharply. “And I go by Theo. What do you want with us?”

Straight to the point, I thought. I could deal with that. “I’m getting you back to your mother.”

“How?” he said, surprise flashing on his face. “Aren’t you one of the Undersiders?”

I nodded. “Call me Apparition.”

“Weren’t you the ones who caused this?” he asked, indicating the rest of the room.

I shook my head. “You heard about the unwritten rules?” He nodded. “Well, my group and I abide with them. This here’s the kind of thing that shouldn’t be done, especially against people who aren’t adults yet.”

“Who did, then?” he asked, clearly disbelieving, as he turned toward Aster’s crib.

I simply shook my head in silence. I might know who caused this disaster, but I wasn’t going to risk that information becoming known.

It didn’t take long for Theo to have Aster calmed. I used that time to contact Tattletale by text.

Hostages rescued

I didn’t have to wait long for an answer.

Meet up @ emerson & first

Bring hostages

“So…” Theo said, having noticed me on my phone. He had Aster held close against him, and she’d calmed down. “What now?”
We go down to First Avenue,” I replied, pointing. “My teammates are leading your mother there.”

“And I suppose you’ll tie me up if I try escaping?” he said morosely.

I smiled under my mask. “You won’t,” I replied. “I’ll be right behind you.” I then turned back into my other form and hid inside Theo’s shadow.

Theo walked straight out the door, then looked around as if he was searching for a place to hide. I waved a tentacle out of my hiding place, and he blanched, realizing he literally could not escape me.

After that, Theo did as he’d been asked and walked right down the street in the direction of the First Avenue. He kept silent and walked somewhat fast, but not enough so as to look out of place. It seemed like he didn’t want to draw attention to himself either.

That is, until we actually arrived near our designated rendezvous.

“Eh… There’s a problem,” he said as he stopped.

I retook human shape right behind him, and saw what he meant. Right where the two streets met was a ten foot high cube of shadowy mist, courtesy of Grue’s power. Around it were at least a dozen ghostly shapes who surged back and forth from the darkness, trying to catch the people within.

I didn’t even have time to say anything before a double helix made out of pure light punched through the top part of the cube, shearing it off. Brutus, I think, smashed down beside me a second later, Tattletale on his back. She’d seen better days, one of her arms hanging limply to the side.

Purity appeared an instant later above the building by the corner, shining brighter than the sun. She was clearly preparing another of those beams of hers but, luckily for us, someone reacted faster.

“Kayden!” Theo yelled, throwing his free arm up. “Down here!”

The light didn’t die off, but Purity slowly came down. “Crusader, stand down,” she shouted as she reached the ground. The Master’s ghosts stopped their attack runs, but didn’t disappear.

Theo walked forward toward his stepmother. “Aster’s okay, Kayden. We’re not hurt,” he explained, handing Purity her daughter.

Said cape cradled her like her life depended on it. She then turned her face to glare at us. “That changes nothing of what you’ve done,” she spat.

Tattletale shook her head beside me. “Whoever released your names wasn’t a member of the Undersiders. What would we gain by that? It isn’t like this is going to take the Empire off the map, and we wouldn’t last long with every E88 cape having a bone to pick with us.”

“But Kaiser…” Purity started, only for Tattletale to interrupt her.

“Who says Kaiser knows? He simply pointed you toward his biggest remaining enemy. Tell me, outside of the Undersiders, what gangs still remain in Brockton Bay?”

“Faultline and Coil,” the Blaster said after a moment’s thought, a scowl still on her face.

“You forgot the Travelers,” the Thinker pointed out. “Anyway, Faultline’s crew are out of the city
and mercenaries anyway, the Travelers are nomads and Coil is only one man with a handful of non-
powered operatives. The Undersiders are the biggest remaining group of villains after his own. And
that’s not saying Kaiser couldn’t something like this again by implicating someone else. Sounds like
him, doesn’t it?” Tattletale smiled one of her usual grins, and Purity swore.

I knew right then that Tattletale had convinced her.

The Blaster grabbed Theo with her other arm, and slowly rose in the air. “Crusader, we’re leaving,”
she ordered, and the Master rose beside her, the fact that he was unhappy clearly visible on his face.
One of the ghosts grabbed Theo from Kayden's arms, and followed behind the two capes.

And then they were gone.

Judas walked out of Grue’s cloud of darkness, with both the skull-faced Undersider and Regent on
his back. Angelica stepped out of an alley with the two other Undersiders riding, having clearly just
arrived.

“Everyone fine?” Grue asked, one arm holding the other.

We clearly weren’t. Alarm and I might have gone unscathed, but we were the only ones. Grue was
clearly favoring his left foot which had been sliced through by one of Crusader’s ghosts. Regent had
cuts and abrasions here and there, blood soaking all over his costume, while Tattletale’s arm was
visibly broken. Bitch simply had a bleeding wound on her face.

That meant half our number weren’t in any condition to fight. “Does it look like we’re fine, jock?
Really?” Regent replied with a scowl.

“Where’s that doctor of yours, Tattletale?” I asked.

She shook her head. “It’s the boss’ doctor,” she replied, and I nodded. This wasn’t the time to turn to
Coil with anything.

“Can you get your beacon ready at your place?” Grue asked.

I nodded, the meaning clear. Seems like I’ll be hosting the rest of the Undersiders once more, I
thought. Not that I didn’t understand his position; their base was Coil’s property, and it wasn’t the
time to take risks. “I can have it powered up in a minute.”

“Do that,” Grue ordered. “We’re not in any shape to do more today, and we have a lot to think
about.”

That was an understatement. The today's events might very well spell the end of the Undersiders.
Corporate Relations Interlude: Conversations

Chapter Notes

Special thanks go to Essex, jderig, Robo Jesus, LordsFire, Heart of the Star, Mark-aren, jadecore, WaltzBurgNacht, ChaoticSky, Shujin & boomslang for their help with this part. I have for each of them an Elder Tale account ready and prepaid. The next patch is coming soon, however.

[Colin Wallis]

I threw off my helmet as soon as the door closed behind me, letting it clatter in a corner. Another day full of pointless battles; the E88 had managed to rampage nearly unopposed for most of the day and we hadn't managed to capture a single powered member of theirs.

I fell into my chair, sidestepping over two different halberd prototypes I’d left on the floor my earlier hurry to leave. It was only then that I noticed the red light on top of my screen. “Hello, Dragon,” I called out, wincing as a muscle in my neck pulled.

“Good evening, Colin. How did you know?” The Canadian woman asked with a slight smile as her face appeared on the screen.

“With the number of security programs I have running on this machine, you’re the only person who could connect here while I’m gone,” I pointed out.

“I’m pretty sure there’s at least a few Tinkers or Thinkers who could manage such a thing,” Dragon replied with a slight grin.

I shook my head. “And how long would it take before you found them and kicked them out?” I countered with a raised eyebrow. I then exhaled loudly. “Hopefully, your day has been better than mine,” I sighed tiredly in remembrance.

Dragon shook her head on the screen. “Nothing special on my side. Hansel died today in the Birdcage, but that’s been expected for a while now and nothing could have prevented Bloodwolf from taking revenge. Outside that, with an Endbringer expected any day, things tend to be calm. How about you? Anything in the workshop?”

I shook my head as I stretched into my chair. “A few ideas, but nothing concrete,” I answered simply.

“Anything you want to discuss?”

Once again, I replied negatively. “Not now; there’s work to be done. I suppose you’ve heard what happened?”

“I have,” Dragon nodded. “I’ve was briefed when I was asked to help investigate how this situation happened.”
“You know more than me, then. I’ve been in the field since early this morning, and I didn’t have the time to keep up with what was happening. Any clue who our instigator is?” I asked, holding back a yawn.

Dragon still caught it. She shook her head, concern evident on her face. “You should be resting, Colin. I’ve seen footage of your battles; you haven’t had a half-hour’s downtime since this morning. It can wait.”

“No, it can’t. I can rest later,” I intoned, focusing. “The Empire clearly won’t be sleeping after this, and we need to be ready.” I reached to the side where I kept my personal supply of energy drinks, and quickly downed one. “Give it to me straight.”

“Between the methodology and the cause of Purity’s rampage, all signs point toward Coil being the source,” the Canadian Tinker explained after a moment. “The Undersiders were also considered at first, but were removed from suspicion when the circumstances behind Purity’s actions were discovered.”

I smiled at her explanation. That was one of the things I liked about working with Dragon, she respected other people’s desire to help. Many times, people above me had used whatever power they had to force things their way, regardless of what I wanted. Dragon might disagree, but she never hindered me.

“It’s not their usual MO, that’s for sure.” I replied, then launched a few commands and removed my armguards. Normally, I kept them on day and night, but between the hits they’d taken and my current lack of combat efficiency, I had no reason to keep wearing them. “They do hit and run, that’s all. Something like this would bring too much heat on them, and they can’t handle the entire Empire. Not their style.”

“Agreed,” Dragon seconded with a smile. “Still, Tattletale is one of the foremost Thinkers in the bay, so it merited thought. Have you heard about Purity’s actions?”

“Not much. Something about killing a man on camera?” I’d been on patrol when the call came, and it only ended less than an hour ago. “Doesn’t sound like her.” Or most of the Empire actually, I added mentally. Kaiser faked civility, and generally was good at following the unwritten rules. Hookwolf or another member of his group would not have been so surprising, but Purity was generally good at keeping bystanders unharmed.

“I’m forwarding you a file. It should explain everything,” Dragon replied, and a second later the face on my screen was replaced by a document, a dispatch order for PRT troops.

I moved forward and read quickly. “Undercover mission… Aster Anders… Possible kidnapping attempt… also present, Theodore Anders, teenage E88 recruit… possible trigger risk… safehouse…” The last item on the page was Emily Piggot’s signature.

“Wait a minute…” I said out loud as something came to mind. “Anders, isn’t that…”

“Kaiser’s real name?” Dragon said as her face came back to the fore. “Yes. Specifically, Aster Anders is Purity’s daughter, with Theodore being Kaiser’s older child.”

I scowled, disgusted. “You mean Piggot ordered the kidnapping of a cape’s children? What was she thinking?”
“She didn’t,” Dragon countered, face serious. “While her name is on the orders and no trace of manipulation can be found on the document, I was able to track its path backward to its source.” A video came up, showing a man withdrawing an envelope from his suitcase. The next few seconds had him removing the original document from there, with a quick zoom that proved it was the very same.

“Perry McAndrews,” I intoned clearly. I remembered the man; he was an ex-mercenary, and was suspected as one of Coil’s plants in the building. “How did he manage that?” This particular worker was watched closely due to his status as a likely mole.

Dragon played the whole segment between Perry’s taking out the document and the PRT dispatcher receiving it. I had to give the man points; without someone watching specifically for it, one couldn’t track it. The file went through six pairs of hands before getting to its destination.

“Note the timestamp,” Dragon pointed out. “The orders came out before the identities were released, with less than an hour between the two.”

“A setup, then,” I exclaimed, growling. “But for who? The Empire, the Protectorate, the PRT?”

The female Tinker shook her head. “You can add the Undersiders to the list. Based on police information, they were out hitting Empire safehouses earlier today, right around the time the news came out. And the Empire didn’t hesitate to strike directly at them.”

I made a face, and Dragon caught the meaning instantly. “Yes, something’s fishy about all of this. Every important cape group still present in the city save the Travelers being on the field at the same time? Not a coincidence. More points toward Coil being a Thinker.” That was one of the issues in dealing with Coil. The man was elusive if nothing else, and barely any information was available about his power. The main theories were either a Thinker with Tinker support or an actual Tinker who fought like a Thinker. And both were pains to deal with.

And he’d chosen his moment well. With the early hour, the members of the Wards had just gotten to school, and the public nature of the combat made it difficult for them to get away without arousing suspicion. Add to that New Wave being out of the city, with Panacea on the west coast along with her father and sister while Lady Photon and Brandish were up north for the latter’s law practice.

No, timing like that couldn’t be a coincidence.

“Do you have any data on the movements of E88 troops?” I asked, shoving what was left of my fatigue to the back of my mind. I might not be combat effective, but this was work I could do. “The Undersiders also, if you have them.”

A map of the city appeared on the screen, with a timestamp at the top. Icons quickly appeared, indicating the relative forces present. For several long minutes I watched the various movements as they’d happened in the city. Dragon was as thorough as usual; her program indicated even the non-powered E88 forces, as they hadn’t sat idle.

My eyes rose back to the camera as the timestamp hit 9PM; there wasn’t an icon left on the screen. “How accurate is this?” I asked, just to confirm.

In response, arrows appeared on the screen, indicating the various movements, with dots all over the place. A quick mouse-over on said dots revealed where the information came from. “See for
I quickly analyzed the data and found nothing that could be termed guesswork. “You mean to tell me that the Undersiders fought most of the Empire by themselves and escaped without a single casualty?” That should be impossible. Purity alone should be a match for their entire lineup, and the records indicated they’d faced that, the Blaster’s entire squad, Hookwolf’s group and more beside.

“Fought isn’t the right term,” she replied, and a video started on the screen. The angle was bad and the view was clearly a low quality zoom, but the people present could easily be identified: Tattletale, along with the Undersiders’ Mover and a teen boy holding a child. A second later, Purity dropped into sight beside them.

*Theodore and Aster Anders, then,* I noted mentally.

There were a few moments of discussion that couldn’t be caught with the video quality, then Purity flew away with the two civilians.

“Based on both footage and debriefing of the PRT troopers, the Undersiders’ Mover rescued the two children from the PRT, then delivered them to Purity,” the Canadian Tinker explained. “Judging from other sources, that is the only reason why they escaped Purity’s clutches.”

I went over the map again. “Disregarding Purity’s group, that still meant they fought Hookwolf’s entire team along with Rune and Krieg for minutes before escaping.” And that was a powerful combo. Krieg’s presence was a great asset in any group battle, especially for close-range fighters. And that was Hookwolf’s entire team.

“Yes,” Dragon replied. “While we don’t have any footage of the battle due to Grue’s power, indications are that the five E88 members were beaten when Purity’s group entered the scene. We do know that they somehow brought down Rune’s floating trailer; that may be the reason why they managed a victory.”

“True,” I nodded, remembering. I’d heard the sound resulting from that crash, and I was halfway on the other side of the city. At close range, it must have been deafening. Still, I wasn’t convinced.

The both of us had other fish to fry, however. “Send a request for the Undersiders’ data to be gone over by analysts; even with that, I don’t think they should have managed such a decisive victory against Hookwolf’s group, and that means we’re missing something.”

The window with Dragon’s face reappeared above the map. “Noted.”

“Now, the Empire,” I continued, focusing on the currently most dangerous group. “I’m sure you went over this already, and you have a good eye for detail. Anything you’ve spotted?”

She nodded with a smile. “Well, let’s start with Kaiser. He was leading…”

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I sneaked inside the Medhall building at 10:43 PM on the dot. I had done this in the past, but those were simply tests; tonight was the real thing.

*Let it not be said I don’t have plans for everything,* I mused.
I then waited fourteen minutes in one of the camera-less zones, preparing for the next hole in the security footage. I knew about such because I’d had it programmed in years ago, just for the possibility of a day like today.

The news revealing the identities of the entire Empire had come while I was outside the building for a meeting, which was the only reason I needed to reach my office tonight. I’d have launched the programs I’d prepared for such an eventuality right as I heard the news if I could have, but I made sure the could only be activated from my own office as an extra layer of protection.

Then I added a very specific security flaw that could allow me to reach said office any day.

Climbing the many floors to reach the top of the building took a good hour, where a normal man could have done it in ten minutes. That was on purpose; I didn’t want to make it easy should a Thinker manage to discern this particular flaw. That was also why I made sure to keep the Protectorate as busy as I had; with the wounds they’d taken and the hours they’d placed, they’d react much less quickly if something went wrong.

Four minutes before midnight, the camera right in front of my office entered a loop, repeating the previous minute, and I stepped up to the door. I withdrew a specific keycard, one belonging to one of the janitors. I hated the man; he was everything the Empire fought against. A black man with four children from three different wives, he had done time for both burglary and drug use. I kept him on the payroll just for that; he was the last person who would be associated with the E88.

The door snapped open as I swiped the card, and I stepped inside. I quickly cleared the outer office to reach my desk proper. Five minutes there and everything would be done, with hidden money transfers ending in E88 accounts, vulnerabilities would be added on the company servers and periodic orders for drug supplies would be scheduled. I had seven minutes to do so, before I needed to leave.

“Well, it was about time,” a female voice said, annoyance clear in her voice.

My high-backed chair (reinforced in case of sniper attack) turned from the window, revealing a tall woman seated in it. Her dark hair and Asian face were unfamiliar. The samurai armor didn’t provide any hints, either.

But the three skulls hanging from her shoulder gave me a good idea who this was.

“Butcher,” I growled. I forced myself not to tense; I wasn't going to let her get to me.

“Missed me, tin man?” she said with a smile, her finger tapping the wood of my desk. Those words clinched it; that was the nickname Butcher had given me a long time ago, when Allfather was still leading the Empire. I'd fought her (or him) multiple times while the Teeth were still in Brockton Bay.

“As much as I miss Jack Slash,” I snarled back. My mind was working furiously, trying to find a way to escape my current predicament, and I could feel myself sweating. How many Butchers had there been since they’d escaped Brockton Bay? I wondered, and couldn’t guess.

That meant she could have a good number of powers I knew nothing about. I did a half-step back at the thought.

“I told you I’d be back one day, didn’t I?” she continued, still smiling. “And you know how I treat
promises like that.”

“It wasn’t you who’d said so.” As a matter of fact, the Butcher who’d escaped the Bay had been male. “And I told Butcher then what would happen if he ever came back.”

“As if the words of a whitewashed wannabe like you meant anything,” she said as she rose, becoming serious. “We were always going to come back, and with all the competition being eliminated lately we were getting ready to move. Add in the news, and we weren’t going to miss the opportunity,” she grinned. “Now, are we going to dance or will I have to hunt you?” Her face made it clear she would enjoy both.

My lips curled into a scowl. “As you wish.” Instantly, dozens of blades surged from every direction. They came from every angle blocking all paths of escape.

Fighting in my office was another possibility I’d prepared for, and I’d trained for that particular maneuver just in case.

The very second my blades would have reached her, cutting off arms and legs, Butcher blew up along with my chair and desk. Another explosion sounded to my right, and I turned to find the Trump there, unharmed.

“That’s all, tin man?” she asked with a grin. She was clearly playing with me, and I pushed back a surge of anger at the thought. I needed to think clearly now more than ever.

I didn’t answer, metal spreading over me to form my customary armor. It would, at least, protect me from her festering touch. On Butcher’s side, she touched a marble counter and withdrew a sizable axe from it, a clear display of her brute strength. I estimated a good hit would incapacitate me even with my armor, and swore internally.

Blades shot forward once more, and again she dodged by teleporting. I retreated to the outer office, planning my escape all the while. I had a Brute teleporter after me, and she might still have powers I knew nothing about. What I had knowledge of was already enough: she could find me through walls, feel my attacks coming and, if she ever got tired of the hunt, would try to incapacitate me with pain. Even worse, I had to fight non-lethally and she knew it, while she was under no such restrictions.

This wasn’t going to be easy.
We didn’t feel like winners coming back to base the way we did.

I arrived at my place first so I could set everything up, especially the beacon, and the rest of the team staggered in fifteen or so minutes later.

They entered in near-complete silence, with only Regent making his usual off-color jokes. Brian was clearly preoccupied since the pretty boy went unheeded and unstopped.

Each fell into the seat I’d prepared for them except for Alec. The Master went straight for the first aid kit and grabbed a larger than usual dose of pain medication. He then dropped straight down onto his beanbag chair, closed his eyes, and ignored just about everything around him.

Not that there was much going on. Rachel stayed at the table long enough to make sure her dogs were fine, then walked back out as soon as that was done, her head wound simply scabbed over. I called out to her, and got a quick, “I’m fine” as she left the building.

Brian was the next one to leave. It took twenty or so minutes before his foot was healed, and he was clearly stuck in his thoughts all the while. I wanted to tell him something comforting, but couldn’t find anything to say; unlike the rest of the group, he had something big riding on the Undersiders.

In the end, he left without a word.

By then, Regent was asleep and snoring lightly in his chair while Sveta had left for her own room upstairs, leaving me and Lisa alone at the table.

“Are you gonna be okay?” I asked.

“Physically?” she replied. She then tried moving her arm and grimaced in pain. Sveta had helped her make sure the bones would heal properly, but it was clear the healing wasn’t yet done. “It’s a work in progress.”

“And mentally?” I continued.

“No,” the Thinker answered simply. “I didn’t see this one coming, and that’s making me second guess everything. I talked to the boss yesterday, and I got no hint of treachery of any kind.”

I looked to the sleeping Regent just to be sure he really was asleep. “Maybe he just didn’t think about it,” I said. “Or maybe destroying the Empire was so important, he didn’t care about casualties.” I then stopped, realizing that if this was true, Lisa was in a worse situation than I thought.
“That wouldn’t be better,” she answered. “Would you be able to take orders from someone who either doesn’t care or doesn’t think about the repercussions of his actions?”

It didn’t take long for me to shake my head negatively.

“Thought as much,” Lisa replied, then returned to her thoughts.

The silence held for one more minute. “Can I… help with anything?” I didn’t like leaving her like this.

She shook her head sadly. “No,” she replied with a sigh. “I just need to think things over for a while. I’ll be heading home soon, right after my arm is done; I’ll probably contact you later today or sometime tomorrow to talk it over.”

“You sure?”

“Go tinker,” Lisa countered with a smile. “I know it’s what you want.” She shrugged. “Might as well get the most out of the day.”

She knew me well.

“Good luck,” I answered, rising. I made half a dozen steps toward my workshop, then remembered something. “How about him?” I said, pointing to the sleeping Alec.

“He’ll make his own way out as usual,” she said. “He might raid your fridge for beer first, though.”

“I don’t have any beer in my fridge.” I wasn’t a fan of the stuff, and what the Undersiders had brought in during their last stay was long gone.

Lisa smiled a little. “That’ll just make him leave more quickly.”

I turned back and waved, stepping inside my place of work. Lisa was right; I needed something good under my belt after all the revelations of the day.

Apparition was currently out of service until the rest of the Undersiders got their feet back under them, and I had no plan for Slenderman coming out anytime soon.

That meant either Arsenal’s armor or beacons.

While the beacons were necessary, making them wasn’t as satisfying as improving my Tinker persona’s power suit. And it needed it; the Travelers had made that fact more than evident.

And, even better, I had a good clue where to start.

I grabbed a pen from the desk, then reached out for a printout of my beacon’s schematics. While it wasn’t what I was going to be working on, the original version of the device my power had given me had a couple of extra features which were exactly what I needed.

I lost myself to the improvements I was making, glad for something to occupy my mind.

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It took two days before Lisa contacted me again, and right early. She knew my schedule well; her call ended up arriving right as I respawned T for the day.

I checked the news as I waited for her to arrive, for lack of anything better to do. No changes from yesterday; the E88 was still on the warpath, though Purity and her team hadn’t shown themselves again. The Brockton Bay threads on the Parahumans Online forums were full of people asking for a kill order to be placed on her group, but there was no official word from either the PRT or the Protectorate on the subject. None of such on the kidnapping of her children or on the Undersiders’ involvement, either. The same went for who had actually released the Empire identities online. Plenty of rumors, but nothing concrete.

Twenty minutes on the dot after her call, Lisa was seated at her usual spot at the table, shaking rain water out of her hair. And she hadn’t come alone, either.

Brian was seated right beside her, head in his hands. He wasn’t looking well, with shadows under his eyes like I’d never seen before. It was clear he’d barely slept a wink since the last time we’d met, and it didn’t take a genius to figure out why.

“So, what can I do for the both of you?” I had a good clue what was going to be the subject of this discussion, but I wasn’t going to bring it up. Not directly, at least.

“What are you going to do now?” Brian asked, looking straight at me.

“About the Undersiders, I suppose?” He nodded. “Nothing.”

“What?” Brian exclaimed.

“I never cared about the Undersiders per se,” I replied. “I cared about the both of you. If the Undersiders disappeared, as long as you guys were fine, everything would be alright by me.”

“Yeah, but...”

“I know, your sister,” I continued for him. “Thing is, I didn’t trust the boss one bit from the start. I didn’t have much of an issue when it was about going after the gangs, but wanting us to hit a Protectorate event? That’s the kind of thing that ends up making you a villain for life.”

Brian straightened and looked right at me. “I can live with that.”

“I know, your sister,” I continued for him. “Thing is, I didn’t trust the boss one bit from the start. I didn’t have much of an issue when it was about going after the gangs, but wanting us to hit a Protectorate event? That’s the kind of thing that ends up making you a villain for life.”

Brian straightened and looked right at me. “I can live with that.”

I shook my head. “Are you sure?” I asked. “Let’s say your plan worked, and you managed to get custody of your sister. What do you do then? The boss still has your identity in his hands, and you saw what he can do with that. One word from him and she’s back with your father, or worse.”

Brian opened his mouth to say something, then closed it without a word. He turned toward Lisa beside him, who nodded sadly.

“You haven’t said much, Lisa.” She hadn’t said anything. “What do you think?”

“The Undersiders are done,” she replied with a shake of her head. “We go back to the boss after this? It’ll get worse. He’ll know that we’ll come crawling back like dogs, whatever happens.”

“We can go to the Protectorate, join up, but that won’t help much,” she continued. “We’ll be lucky if
we don’t end up doing some form of jail time, and even at best we won’t be trusted for years. And
the Boss would still have all our names. He might very well go after your sister, just to have a lever
to manipulate you.”

Brian cringed. “So?” I asked.

“Running’s the best bet, but even then it would be the end of the Undersiders. You and I...,” she
pointed to Brian, “we might escape, but that would mean leaving everything behind.” Brian scowled.
“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t, and Bitch would never run. Regent would, but he’d probably
make his own way before long anyway.”

“Yes,” Brian replied with a sigh. “You told me as much yesterday. Still, there has to be a better
solution than those,” he was looking at me while he said that.

Was there? I had to admit that Coil had Brian bent over a barrel. Only way I could think of getting
Brian out from under Coil was to was to make Brian worthless to Coil, and that was difficult.

“Lisa,” I turned to the female Undersider. “Would the boss let Brian off if he was suddenly
powerless?”

She thought for an instant. “I’d say no. He’s already got a good number of unpowered troops, mostly
mercenaries. He’d probably fold Brian into one of those groups, or use him in another capability.
He’s not one to let go once he has leverage over someone.”

“Then why abandon the Undersiders?” I asked.

“No clue,” she answered, and by now I could read her well enough that I could see how it grated.
“I’m sure there’s a reason, but I don’t have enough info to get to the bottom of it. Before this week, I
would have expected that us dying was the only way he was gonna let us go.”

Well, that at least was a possible solution. “So, you’re saying faking your deaths might be an
option?”

“It might,” Lisa replied. “But that’s basically running away. Our identities would be gone, and we
couldn’t even use our powers without being recognized.”

“Powers is something I can fix,” I said, raising my hand and waving my fingers.

“Yeah... That’s one option...” Lisa replied, clearly unhappy with the idea. I wasn’t surprised a bit; I
knew very well that the concept of losing her Thinker power wasn’t something she liked
considering. Brian simply nodded at the possibility.

“Still, even with new powers, that doesn’t give us many options,” Lisa continued. “Sure, it’s a better
option if we decide to go to the Protectorate, but outside of that it still leaves us without identities.
Money quickly becomes an issue after that, unless you go with under the table work. Which simply
brings us back to square one.” I saw something click behind her eyes. “How would you feel about
building your own team?”

“Me?” I asked.

“Well, Arsenal, actually,” Lisa replied, looking straight at me. Brian moved forward, intent on my
answer.
I nearly said no instantly. I didn’t see myself as leader material.

“Even as Arsenal, you’d be among the most powerful in the group, which tends to equal leadership for capes,” the Thinker continued. “You come up with good plans, as the bank run clearly indicated, and with your beacons I’m pretty sure funds wouldn’t be an issue, not for a good while at least.”

“But...”

“Better yet, with Lung’s kidnapping attempt, you have the perfect reason for it,” Lisa’s smile was wide by now, and she wasn’t stopping. “You can just say you no longer feel secure alone, and that you don’t want to rely on the Protectorate being available. With your beacons coming out and the attention they’ll bring, you building your own team is a logical next step!”

I had to admit, I hadn’t thought much about the recognition the beacons might bring me. Dragon was sure my devices would sell for millions, which was a great morale boost, but I hadn’t given a thought to what kind of negative attention it might bring. Right now there wasn’t much, since there were only two beacons out and they hadn’t been out for long, but that may very well change with time.

I turned toward Brian. “What do you think?”

He thought for a moment as a blast of thunder rang out. “If I worked under you, would you help me take care of my sister?”

That wasn’t what I’d expected. “I don’t have an issue with her,” I replied. Not unless she betrayed the group, but I doubted that would be an issue. "You would abandon your custody plan?"

He sighed. "Right now, the only way I can see of managing that is by staying with the Boss," he replied, shaking his head. "And that's useless if I end up dying in a suicide mission. Not to mention I don't want Aisha falling in with someone like him." He straightened. "Would you have a place for her wherever I end up living?"

"Sure," I answered.

"Then I have no problems working under you.” My eyes went wide. “It’s clearly not what I’d prefer, but it’s a better option than the rest. I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t drop me against the E88 heavy-hitters, which is more than I can say of our former boss.”

My head turned toward Lisa in a flash. Her smile clearly indicated I had no support there.

“Don’t look at me; I’m not leader material. The power behind the throne, maybe, but not on it,” she pointed out, raising both hands in the air. “Better yet, we can trust you a lot farther than we can our current boss. And you’re already at the head of your own little group, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“It’s not like that!” I exclaimed.

“It’s completely like that,” Lisa countered. “Sveta clearly joined the Undersiders simply because you were in, and you can’t say that T doesn’t follow your commands.”

“That’s just because we’re the same person!”

She shook her head. “You’re not, at least not anymore. T might be based on you, but she’s changed
since you started creating her.”

I tried scrambling for more excuses, but could find nothing. I didn’t want to say no, but I didn’t feel like I could do the role justice. The ever-rejected Taylor, leading a group of superheroes? Even fiction didn’t get this silly.

“What about the others?” I asked. “Rachel and Alec?”

“Alec’s easy. He’s lazy, so he won’t make waves. As long as he’s paid, you won’t have much of an issue with him,” Lisa thought out loud. “Rachel, however…”

“She’s difficult to predict,” Brian added. “She might take it better than she did with us, she might fight you for the title, or she might just leave. I think she likes you better than the rest of us, but even then I’m not that sure.”

“Pretty much what I have,” Lisa confirmed.

I took a deep breath. “So, let me get this straight,” I said, trying to keep my emotions under wraps. “You want me to help you fake your deaths, then hire you under another of my identities as a group of superheroes. Because that’s the best way to get you out of under your boss’s thumb.”

“Just about,” Lisa answered.

“Yeah, it seems bizarre when you say it like that, but that’s pretty much it,” Brian replied. “Unless you have a better idea.”

I hadn’t, else I’d have brought it out earlier.

“So, how do we do…” I started, only to be interrupted as sirens started wailing. I’d never heard them before, except during the trial runs at school.

The Endbringer sirens.

We all shot up in an instant. Sveta barreled down the stairs a second later, still wearing pyjamas. Lisa gave out one look outside the window, where clouds darker than anything natural spat a torrential downpour, and she had an answer. “Leviathan.”

“That’s the danger I’ve been seeing since Monday!” Sveta exclaimed, eyes wide.

Not human nor capes. Neither living nor dead. Not a plague or a natural disaster.

Endbringer.

Fuck.
I’d never thought about an Endbringer hitting Brockton Bay. Like most people, I assumed this was something that happened elsewhere, to bigger and more important cities. For a moment, I stood frozen in shock, not knowing what to do.

Luckily, Brian and Lisa weren’t as affected. They turned to each other, nodded seriously one after the other, and acted. Brian withdrew his phone, while Lisa dashed to my workshop. “I’m using your computer!” she yelled as she ran.

“Right,” I said, shaking off the shock. “You need something from me?” I asked Brian.

“You with us?” he asked in return, phone still on his ear.

I simply nodded. I hadn’t run from Oni Lee, the Empire, or even Lung. I wasn’t going to start today. Not with what was at stake. I wasn’t going to let them fight alone.

He just nodded back. “Come on, come on...” he muttered into his phone, as if that would make it connect faster.

But it was my own cellphone that rang.

What?

I looked at Brian in surprise, only for him to start talking hurriedly to the person on the other side of the line. Regent, by my guess.

If it wasn’t Brian, then who?

I withdrew my phone, accepting the call. “Hello?”

“Taylor, you ok?!” my dad yelled from the other side of the line. I could hear the roar of an engine, so I suspected he was in his car.

”Are you on your way to a shelter?” I replied, pushing back my surprise at the fact that he’d actually used his work cellphone while driving.

“Are you?” he countered.

I could lie and pretend I was. I could even go to the same shelter then escape using my powers; it
would be easy, even.

But I’d lied to him more than enough times. Now that we were back to talking to each other, I didn’t want to return to those days where there was no trust between us. “I’m not,” I answered simply.

“Then I’m coming with you,” he said, resolute.

I nearly dropped the phone in shock. “You can’t!”

“I’ll be at your place in five,” he replied, ignoring what I’d just said. “See you soon, sweetie.”

“But!” I started, only to find myself speaking to an empty line. He’d hung up on me without letting me finish. I stared at the phone for a moment, wondering what to do.

“Meeting place’s at 44 Dockside Road!” Lisa said, running out of my workshop. She’d managed to put on most of her costume while she’d been on the internet; only her mask was missing, and she was in the process of undoing her trademark bun. She stopped as soon as she saw my face. “Talk to me,” she said.

“My dad’s decided to join the Endbringer defense,” I replied, still in shock.

“That’s... good, actually,” she offered. I don’t know what face I made, but it clearly had an effect; Lisa took a step back and started talking faster. “What? You think they’ll send him to the front line?” She shook her head. “Not happening. His power’s much too useful to risk losing. They’ll probably put him in the back where the Thinkers are, and where he can boost them more.”

“You mean, where you’ll be,” I pointed out.

“Maybe not...” she replied, looking down. “My own abilities work via perception, so I’ll probably be closer to the front line. I’ll most likely stick with the rest of the group.”

I pushed back my issues over my father’s participation and focused on the now. I’d make time to talk to him once he arrived instead. “Any recommendations?”

“Go as Arsenal,” she replied, her hair finally flowing down to her shoulders.

“Why?”

“I don’t need my power to deduce that T will show up in the next few minutes, which means the both of you will be going under different identities,” Lisa explained as she put on her mask. Even if she sounded confident, I could tell from her posture that it was just an affectation. “Your Slenderman suit is a bad idea. Even if the Endbringer Truce is on, there aren’t many that would be comfortable fighting side by side with him. Think how you’d feel if it was a member of the Slaughterhouse Nine at your left, and you’ll have a good idea.”

It made sense. People might be too afraid to get close to me, just in case they thought Slenderman felt like grabbing a few powers, and a moment's distraction could be fatal.

“That leaves Apparition and Arsenal,” I concluded.

“Yes. And between those two, Arsenal’s the one who can take blows the best, which means you should go as him,” Tattletale pointed out. “T has a chance of living on past her death, which you
“Agreed,” my copy said, growing out of Lisa’s shadow. “Thank god my first teacher was absent, because I wouldn’t have made it this soon otherwise.”

“Get dressed,” Tattletale said. T nodded and turned back into shadow a second later, slithering down to the workshop where my costumes were kept.

I barely had a second more to think when the door to my base opened. The sudden roar of the wind surprised me, and what rain I could see was nearly horizontal. “Who’s the geezer?” Regent asked over the storm as he entered, already in costume, while Rachel and her dogs moved straight toward Brian with quick steps, anger clear in the Master's frame. Behind them, looking somewhat overwhelmed, was my own father, who clearly didn’t know how to deal with those two. He made a beeline for my corner of the room as soon as he saw me, however.

“So, you have a costume for your old man?” he asked as he came to a stop before me, visibly trying to make light of the situation.

“Why?”

He looked right at me and somehow straightened. “My only daughter’s going to fight something that might rightly be called a natural disaster. I have one thing I can do to help, and you want me to stay behind?” He shook his head. “I can’t. I’d be eating myself inside with worry if I tried hiding in a shelter.” He smiled. “And this is my town, the one I fought for all my life. Might as well try to protect Brockton Bay at the same time.”

“Welcome to the team, Danny,” Tattletale said, extending her hand. They shook, and by the widening of Lisa’s eyes I could guess she’d just gotten a boost from my Dad. “We can use all the help we can get.”

“I’ll be counting on yours also,” he replied, before turning to me. “So, you got something for your old man?” my father asked once more.

I had to think about that. I did have a spare synthetic undersuit which was stretchy enough to fit him, along with a prototype helmet I could adjust. I had enough simple gloves that he could easily have a pair, but nothing for his feet. He’d look silly with simple regular boots on, but it was better than nothing. “Follow me,” I said.

I lead him to the workshop, where he stopped for a second to gawk at Apparition putting the last touches on her armor. It was the first time he’d seen T (or me, since we looked the same) in costume, and I couldn’t blame him for having that reaction.

We didn’t have time, though.

Grabbing onto his hand, I led him straight to the closet where my spare undersuit was. Taking it out, I handed it to him over my shoulder, only for him not to react. “Dad?” I asked.

“That’s him all right,” he said, pointing.

“Yeah,” I simply replied. I was pretty sure he’d seen some videos of me in action as Slenderman, but having it right in your face was probably a very different experience.
“Will you be out...” he asked softly, “wearing that one?”

I shook my head. “No. I have another suit that’s better for a situation like this one.”

“Another?”

I shook my head. “We don’t have time. You’ll see it later.” Good thing my shadow state made getting Arsenal’s armor on an easy job.

"Are... you sure that's necessary?" he asked as I handed him my spare undersuit, looking down at his work clothes.

"Better safe than sorry," I replied. "This thing's made out of synthetic silk, which should help in the case you got hit." Not against Leviathan, true, but shrapnel and the like could still cause problems. "You'll also fit better with the rest, not to mention that it'll help hide your identity." I pointed out his work badge, which was halfway out of his pocket.

I quickly explained how the various pieces were designed while digging among my prototypes for my helmet model. It was the pre-boron version, without all the bells and whistles I’d added later, but it was still better than nothing. I handed it to him without turning around. I didn’t need to see my father near-naked putting on a skintight suit.

Not that looking at him in said suit was much better.

While both of us were of similar heights, my father was a bit bulkier than me. This made the material tighter than I’d expected, which meant it hid nothing. Only the fact that my dad wore tight briefs prevented the lines of his underwear from showing, and the synthetic silk highlighted every part from neck to toe. Including the ones a daughter didn’t want to think about when looking at her father.

The reactions from the rest of the group weren’t much different. T and Sveta’s faces were hidden by their helmets and Rachel didn’t blink an eye, but everyone else’s were clear. Tattletale’s smile hid none of her thoughts, and Regent bent in half laughing himself silly. Grue coughed twice before pointedly ignoring the costume.

At least it broke some of the tension.

“So, how do we do this?” my dad said, and I could clearly hear the embarrassment in his voice. I forced myself to ignore it, as now wasn’t the moment for it.

“You, Danny, are going with your daughter while we six make our own way there,” the Thinker continued. “Meeting place for capes is at 44 Dockside. Try leaving your car a block or two from the meeting point so no one gets a look at your license plate, and limit what details you give about your power. Be quick; we don’t know how long we have before Leviathan hits the city.” She waved. “Good luck to you both, and we’ll see you later.”
Brian turned toward the door, and I could see the resignation in his shoulders. “Let’s go, people!” They exited without further words, Regent’s snickers and Rachel’s whistles being the only sounds. Bitch’s dogs slowly grew as they went forward, and by the time they crossed the threshold the canines barely fit through.

My dad turned toward me. “You ready?” he said, car keys in hand.

I shook my head. I then rushed to the side and grabbed my prototype beacon. “Hang on to this,” I said, handing him the device.

“Oh…” he replied, twirling the cable to make it easier to transport. He took a step toward the door as he did so, only for me to stop him.

“Let me try something instead.” I grabbed my father into a hug and switched states.

I’d tested it before with both a random cat and with T without issue, carrying them with me in my other form for a good distance. I’d have preferred more tests before a live exercise like this one, but every second gained now could save lives.

Luckily, by now the path I took through the sewers to Arsenal’s workshop was one I knew by heart, and I could do it in less than two minutes. I came out of a washroom drain in the bathroom right next to my workbench, returning to physical form right in the middle of the room.

My father blinked twice. “Did… Did we teleport?” he asked.

“No,” I replied, becoming a shadow once more. This time I snuck inside my armor, going back to solid state directly within. It had taken some time to master this, but it was much better than putting it on piece by piece. “You didn’t notice the time it took getting here?” I asked in my now-male voice, stepping out of my armor’s bay.

He shook his head. “That voice will take some getting used to,” he pointed out as I came to stand beside him. I had told him about my male identity, but the voice was another first.

That reminded me of something. “Remember,” I explained, “from now on, I’m Arsenal, a male Tinker. Same goes for the Undersiders; cover names are crucial.”

“Oh… understood,” he said with a nod. “What’s mine?”

That was a good question, actually. I was tempted to go with Union or something similar, but he would be better off if his name didn't have any links to his profession. I also needed something that made sense, but wasn’t going to be already taken. I thought for a moment. “Reinforce,” I finally replied. That one shouldn’t be currently in use.

My dad simply nodded again, not giving an opinion. “You’re gonna transport us the rest of the way?”

“Not completely,” I answered, grabbing him once more into a hug. Shifting states, I quickly returned to the sewers, then made my way down toward the ocean. I’d have to check here and there, but I was pretty sure I could find a lonely spot to appear.

Next stop, 44 Dockside Road.
44 Dockside Road was a nondescript building three or so stories high. I’d probably passed it dozens of times in the past without really noticing the place. This time, however, it drew attention, even through the pouring rain; mainly because of the dozens of PRT agents and their vans. I didn't have to ask if this was the right place; the half-dozen capes that had just teleported in the parking lot made that fact evident.

That, and the retro-thruster flames from the descending mechanical suit. Dragon's work, clearly, as evidenced by the Guild logo visible on its side.

The Canadian Tinker landed pretty nimbly for being in a suit that weighed at least a dozen tons, and she nodded toward me from a distance. I nodded back in answer, then continued inside. Unless she stepped out of her suit (which she never had, to my knowledge), she wasn’t going to fit in the building.

Stepping out of the dreary morning rain and inside the lobby was an experience. I’d thought before that the meeting at Somer’s Rock would be the most capes I’d ever see in one place, but it was nothing compared to now.

There were heroes and villains all over the place. Just as I stopped, another group passed next to me, shaking the water out of their costumes.

I was thankful that my visor prevented my cape sight from working, as I was afraid I’d be blinded by the number of parahumans in the room. In fact, I could see that Apparition had her head down, probably for that very reason. The rest of the group were all around her, seated in the plastic chairs that had been placed in the center of the room.

Opposite the Undersiders, near the wall, were the Empires capes. Not all of them, since Kaiser was absent, but pretty much all the rest. Cricket was also missing, but she probably hadn’t yet recovered from our last meeting. For some reason, they were split into two separate groups, Purity in one and Hookwolf in the other, and I didn’t have the time to guess why.

The Travelers were the only other villain group I could identify by sight. The four of them sat in the front row, closest to the screens arranged there, and they looked more serious than I’d ever seen them. There was a grim atmosphere around them for a reason I couldn’t fathom.

New Wave, the Wards and Brockton Bay’s Protectorate were the rest of the locals I knew, though I spotted Parian, who was a Brockton Bay rogue, in another corner of the room. They were spread all over the place, either talking amongst themselves or with people I supposed were out-of-town capes.
I saluted in Kid Win’s direction, who was speaking with Panacea for some reason. Both waved back, then returned to their conversation.

Then, there were the big names.

I spotted Eidolon first, as he stepped toward the big windows at the end of the room, behind the screens themselves. He wasn’t paying any attention to the people behind him, singularly focused on the deepest part of the approaching storm.

Alexandria was next as she passed by me with her team. She barely paid me attention, though I had to agree that there were bigger fish to fry.

Legend was the last of the Triumvirate I noticed. He was talking about something with Armsmaster, who had clearly come fully equipped since he had an extra halberd on his back. The Brockton Bay leader realized I was there a second later and beckoned me over with a wave.

Most of those present glanced at us as we walked up. Some did more than that, but not many. Even with his costume, Reinforce drew the eye much less than I did, though judging by some of the other costumes in sight, his wasn’t that far from the norm.

It seemed I had started to develop a reputation in Brockton Bay.

“Arsenal, Legend,” I said as I reached them, my father coming up behind me.

“Arsenal,” Armsmaster replied with a nod.

Legend smiled. “So you’re the Tinker I’ve been hearing about! Legend, though I suspect I don’t really need to introduce myself,” he said, extending his hand. We shook. “Is that one of your beacons?” he added.

“The prototype,” I said, grabbing the device and handing it to Armsmaster. “I suspect you know better than I where this could be useful.”

The Tinker nodded. “I do,” he replied as he looked the beacon up and down. “Any differences?”

“It needs to be plugged in, but nothing outside of that,” I explained.

“And who might you be, mister?” Legend said, turning toward my father. His eyes went quickly from top to bottom, before the Blaster extended his hand.

Did Legend just check out my dad?

“He’s the first member of my new team,” I said as the idea came to mind. If I was to go forward with Lisa’s plan, some setup beforehand would only help.

My dad looked to me for confirmation, and I nodded. Legend was the very face of the Protectorate, and was well known to be the epitome of 'fair and just' heroes. I don’t think my dad was in any danger here.

I understood a little too late what he’d meant when he removed his right glove to shake. “...Reinforce,” he replied after a moment’s hesitation.
Legend reacted as if someone had just shocked him. His eyes went wide. “What... What was that?”

I looked around to see if anybody was listening. Nobody that I could notice. Perception was telling me there were quite a few eyes on us now, though Legend was probably the one who really drew the attention. Still, I stepped forward, forcing my voice to go as low as I could while still being understood. While, if I wanted my Dad safe, Legend was the best person to talk to, I still didn’t want everyone knowing. It would paint too big a target on his back.

“Reinforce here can provide capes with temporary power boosts,” I explained softly. “From what I understand, it’s similar to the concept of second triggers.”

Legend’s eyes went even wider at this, and Armsmaster’s body language indicated pretty much the same reaction. The two of them looked at each other. “Are you...” The Tinker started, only to be stopped by a shake of the Blaster’s head.

“Any limits or restrictions?” Legend asked.

"I don't actually control how the powers get stronger, although they do seem to improve in the same way each time,” Danny explained. “And the changes fade faster when the capes get more than a block or two away from me."

“How many can you affect at the same time?” he then asked.

"I've never actually had the chance to affect more than three at a time,” he replied after looking at me. "Kind of hard finding opportunities to use my power."

“Wait one,” Legend said before he basically rushed to Eidolon. I didn’t get what they said, but Eidolon got a distant look on his face for a couple of moments before spending a few seconds looking over both Legend and my father, finally shaking his head. The two of them headed back our way while waving over both Narwhal and Alexandria to join us in the discussion.

“Can you use your power on these three, also,” Legend asked.

Again, dad looked at me for confirmation, which I gave. After Legend, the rest of the Triumvirate wasn’t an issue, and Narwhal, as the best known forcefield user, was another cape that was crucial to the defense of the city. He extended both his hands after removing his second glove. “I need skin contact for this,” he said, mainly looking at Alexandria’s glove-covered hands.

Said cape removed her left glove, while Narwhal’s forcefield scales receded for an instant.

Eidolon was the first who reacted. “I can... I can choose!” he said, a smile coming on his face. His voice actually sounded pretty normal, compared to the charismatic timbre of Legend’s.

Alexandria then levitated, moving her limbs as if testing them. “Interesting,” she replied. “How long does it last?”

Narwhal stayed silent all the while, a hexagonally-shaped forcefield in her hand.

“Thirty minutes is the maximum I’ve recorded, but that was for someone who stayed within a meter of me the entire time,” Danny explained. “And I know that distance from me also affects how long it lasts.”
The signature flying brick nodded, then indicated the podium to Legend with a sign of the hand. The entire lobby went silent as the leader of the Protectorate walked up to the front of the room.

“Here,” Armsmaster said, and I turned back my attention to the Tinker. He handed me an armband, then did the same to Reinforce behind me. “Put those on.”

“What are they?” I asked, unsure. I wasn’t going to put just anything on, even in a situation like this. The Protectorate member showed his own wrist, where a similar armband was present. “Dragon’s work. Tracks life signs, sends messages to Dragon if people are hurt.”

I nodded. “Will it work through the armor?” I questioned.

“Should. Works through mine,” he pointed out. He then quickly launched into an explanation of the features as Reinforce and I did the setup on the devices.

“So, building a team?” he asked once he was done. “What happened to the lone wolf?” His tone was somewhat hurt.

“He had a disagreement with Lung,” I replied. “Working alone didn’t seem so good a prospect after that.”

“You know the Protectorate is more than ready to take you in,” he pointed. “The both of you, actually,” he then added.

I shook my head. “Not happening. Nothing against you personally, but I cannot trust my life to a bureaucracy. And you can’t tell me the Protectorate isn’t one.”

He sighed. “No.”

“If I’m going to be part of a team, it will be a team of people I trust, not people assigned to me by others,” I said. “I could also do without all the PR stuff that’s probably attached to being a Protectorate cape.”

Armsmaster shook his head sadly, then looked back to the podium where Legend was clearly wrapping up his speech. “Duty calls,” he said softly, then walked forward. After the first step, his entire posture transformed itself; he wasn’t the human Tinker I’d just talked with any longer, but the cape that led the city. His body language changed, and he stepped forward with a confidence that felt misplaced at a time like this.

He didn’t get to the front.

“Incoming!” I heard Sveta yell, followed by a dozen voices exclaiming surprise. I turned to see her running out the room, quickly followed by the rest of the Undersiders. The last of them had barely stepped outside before the building shook, and a fist the size of a person burst through the wall at high speed.

Things then started happening extremely fast.

Alexandria was the first to react, blurring forward. She hit Leviathan’s hand with all the force of a bullet train, and even pushed it back somewhat. Legend reacted next, shooting a reddish-white beam of raw force a foot wide through the wall. The arm was forced back some more by that.
Then Armsmaster screamed “Shields!” just seconds before the water shadow hit.

Luckily, some Shakers managed to react in time, Narwhal included. Fields of all kinds sprout out, some only to break a second later, but the wall held. Water started trickling through the gaps.

“Retreat!” Armsmaster ordered amongst the yelling of surprised capes as Legend and Alexandria continued pushing the Endbringer back, alternating powerful attacks. “Spread out once outside,” he continued as he ran. “Thinkers, support personnel, to me!” he turned around. “Reinforce, that also means you,” he added in a lower tone.

Reinforce looked at me for a second, just long enough for me to nod.

The retreat wasn’t orderly in any way, more like a stampede, but the room still emptied quickly. Some capes, like Hookwolf, didn’t even try for the doors; the Changer burst through the wall like a wrecking ball, and he wasn’t the only one.

I was barely out the door, with Reinforce in front of me, when someone else yelled “Wave!”

Forcefields snapped all around, mine included, and those weren’t the only capes to react. Strider appeared then disappeared with a good number of parahumans, which included my dad and the rest of the support capes, while the two giants of the E88 grew tall and braced the building for impact. The last few capes threw themselves between the Brutes' legs as the water hit, some screaming all the while.

Between the building and the forcefields, we capes weathered the attack pretty well. The few outside the fields, mainly fliers, didn’t do so well. Some were fast enough and managed to escape the surging waters, but a cape in white didn’t, and the wave deposited him straight into a concrete wall on the opposite side of the Boardwalk.

*Dignity deceased, CF-2,* my armband supplied helpfully. The battle had taken its first casualty.

Behind us, the building crumbled, the wave having destroyed its supports. The rain made the dust fall quickly, and we were graced with the sight of Leviathan throwing Alexandria out to sea while Legend dodged the beast’s tail.

The capes present didn’t wait. Projectiles of all kinds rushed forward as Shakers brought up walls and fields as barriers. Brutes rushed forward, hoping to join the melee and hammer the Endbringer to the ground. “Spread out!” Armsmaster yelled, already moving, but most didn’t heed his words. I did, putting some space between me and the mass of heroes and villains, and I could see the Travelers and some others emulating me.

Then Leviathan turned upon himself, disappearing behind his water shadow for a second. And just that was enough; the next moment, he’d broken through whatever barriers were in his way with a singular burst of speed. He was then in the middle of the massed capes, his water shadow a second behind him. His tail blurred low to the ground and dozens were bowled over instantly as the massive limb rushed forward without stopping.

And a second later, it arrived right in my face.
I jumped backwards as Leviathan’s tail came for me and that single action was the only thing that saved my life.

The extra tenth of a second it gave me was enough for my shield to snap into position inches from my helmet. The Endbringer hit it with all the momentum of a crashing plane the very next instant, brutally flinging me backwards since my forcefield wasn’t rooted in place. A quick movement of my fingers and I had Lucifer in hand, firing the mace’s jets as soon as possible to redirect my impromptu flight. They came on just in time, and I merely clipped the side of a building instead of being slammed straight into its side.

I then managed a tumbling landing on wet ground that, while painful, didn’t stop me from rising once more. I mentally noted as I did so that my field had been overwhelmed in a single hit, and that it would be offline for the next minute.

I forced myself to push back the pain from my injuries, my arm twinging as Lucifer’s head came back in position. My mid-air maneuver might have saved my life, but I’d still nearly wrenched my arm off from the forces. I could also feel a headache coming, either from the stress or the flips I’d done before I landed.

I took a deep breath to center myself while the heavy rain was the only sound I could hear, then focused back on the situation at hand.

I couldn’t see either Leviathan or the main mass of participating capes from my position, my impromptu flight having redirected me down another street. And the litany of names coming from Dragon’s armbands didn’t indicate a good situation.

…Laserdream deceased, CF-5. SX deceased, CF-5. Mechanical Messiah down, CF-5. Browbeat deceased, CF-5…

Losing sight of Leviathan was the worst thing that could happen now. Therefore, I used Lucifer as a climbing tool, and rappelled myself up the tallest building near my position. Getting into place, I saw through the downpour that the monstrous hydrokinetic hadn’t budged a meter; he was still in the middle of the amassed capes, wailing on four or five opponents at the same time.

And, worse was, he was winning.

While punching a man behind a forcefield, he swept his tail and bowled three capes over, two of whom didn’t get back up from where they fell in the mud. One person in armor somehow turned to
flame, letting the tail fly through him without effect, only for Leviathan’s water shadow to hit the reformed cape like a ton of bricks. Another parahuman, a Brute this time, took advantage of the fact that he wasn’t being targeted to toss a metal man at Leviathan’s back. What I supposed was a Changer clearly wasn’t an unwilling projectile; he landed on the Endbringer’s back with arms like giant hooks and started ripping into whatever he could find there.

...Knight Errant deceased, CF-5. Radiant Tiger down, CF-5. Crackerjack down, CF-5...

Ok, I asked myself, the pain in my head giving another twinge. What now?

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

[Apparition]

Alert looked around, shaking the water from her suit. “This is the least red place I can see around here,” she explained.

“Good enough for me,” Tattletale replied. “And thank you for the warning, it probably saved our butts.”

I could tell that she was smiling at me simply from her body language. “Now what?” she asked.

“First, I’m setting up a power zone,” I said, removing one of my gloves to touch the ground directly. Tattletale nodded at that, stepping back as I started forming a six foot wide square on the floor. Bitch simply stood there, caressing her enlarged dogs as she looked out the rain-splattered balcony doors toward the battle happening there.

“Power zone?” Regent asked from the recliner he’d claimed. “Mind explaining that, Blondie?”

I ignored him. While it wasn’t the time to hide things, it also wasn’t the one for explanations. Grue shook his head at the Master, who scowled and let it go, turning to look toward the beach.

I closed the zone only for the power not to take. My eyes went wide in surprise, and I tried again only to get the same result along with a rising headache. My third try was a smaller one, barely a meter wide, and this one clicked true with effort. The mental pains slowly vanished as I pushed the zone into increasing powers.

Unsurprisingly, Tattletale noticed and stopped in the middle of her explanation about Dragon’s armbands. “What’s happening?” she asked, concern evident in her voice.

I didn’t reply, focusing instead at what I felt in my head.

There were eight sparks there.

What?

I sure hadn’t gone after powers, so that would mean Taylor. Why would Taylor go steal sparks in the middle of an Endbringer battle?

Except that Taylor had gone as Arsenal, which meant she couldn’t be stealing powers. Not without slipping out of her armor at minimum, and as paranoid as she was about keeping her various identities separate, she wasn’t going to do that without proper preparation at least.
There was something odd going on here. A ninth spark choose that moment to appear. Transition, I noted instantly.

I turned straight toward Tattletale. “Want Perception?” I asked, and there was an edge of desperation in my voice.

“What?” the Thinker replied, and I could see wheels turn in her eyes. “Something’s happening with your powers,” It wasn't a question.

I nodded frantically and she stepped forward, being careful not to step in my zone.

Taking her power and adding to it meant that I was getting close my limit. Luckily, I managed to jam the three powers together without any other spark popping up, pushing it back to her right there.

“How much?” she asked as lightning flashed outside.

I indicated eight with my fingers as I focused back inside, trying to fit this together. I went over everything I had quickly, categorizing my new acquisitions.

I quickly put names on them: Gravity, Field and something like Shift along with Transition. I grabbed the last and thought.

I currently had four sparks I used: my trio of Shadow/Tentacle/Wyrm, Area, Clone, and my double Tinker. I couldn’t touch Area without going over my limits, and Clone was out of question. That unfortunately left me with only two options: my three part spark or Tinker.

Of course, things started well; neither Gravity nor Shift matched with each other or my two other sparks. Luckily, Transition matched itself properly with my multi-part spark, and Field combined properly with Gravity. Which put me back down to six.

"So, what now?” Regent asked, to which Bitch nodded.

“You think your power might work on Leviathan?” Tattletale replied.

“Fuck no!” the Master answered, shaking his head. “Even if it did, I’m pretty certain I’d get the backlash of the century just for trying!”

“We’re search and rescue,” Grue interjected, looking through the rain toward the ocean. “So that’s what we’ll do. Go for the high spots, keep track of Leviathan, take the wounded to safety if possible.” He turned to Bitch. “We’re using the dogs, ok?”

Bitch looked down at her canine allies, her hands moving to scratch them instinctively. “No fighting?”

“No fighting,” Grue confirmed. “Not unless it’s a life or death issue for any of us.”

She was silent for a moment, then she nodded.

“Good,” the Undersiders’ leader said. “Bitch, you’re with Regent, go right. I’ll go left with Alert. Tattletale, you fine with Apparition?”
“I’m stuck in place at the moment,” I pointed out, then cursed as another pair of sparks suddenly appeared in my consciousness.

“And I’m staying with her.” Alert’s tone brooked no compromise. Outside, thunder rumbled once more.

Grue simply nodded, having caught on what was happening. “Fine. Tattletale, you’re with me.” The Thinker nodded.

I ignored the rest of the Undersiders as they moved out, focusing inward instead. Solid, this time, along with a Human spark.

And they didn’t match with anything I had. I was now at eight out of ten, with no clue about how many more sparks might appear.

“Damn it!” I cursed out loud, and Alert turned toward me. “Give me your hand for a second, I need to give you another Human spark.”

I’d barely done so when the building shook. Alert instantly righted herself, and seated as I regained my balance easily. “Wave,” my companion pointed out.

My eyes went wide as I realized the probable implications.

Implications which were proven true the next minute, as seven more sparks dropped into my mindscape within a couple of seconds, along with once again rising pain.

I grabbed the first, barely analyzing it, and smashed it together with what I thought would fit best. Luckily, the two sparks clicked together without issue, and I could detect my headache now rising an inch slower.

And I didn’t stop doing that until I couldn’t match anything anymore.

*_*-_*-_*-_*-_*

[Arsenal]

I was starting to get the trick of using Lucifer to move around.

I had to since running in my armor, while doable, wasn’t any faster than without it. I jumped from building to building, breaking my falls by using my mace as a retrothruster, forcing back the pains in my limbs and head. I only stopped when I was the closest I could possibly get to the street right next to the beach.

Where Leviathan was still fighting.

Close-range combat had given way to something more like a shootout. Only Alexandria remained within arm’s reach of the Endbringer, hampering it and keeping it relatively immobile. The many Blasters didn’t ignore the opening, hitting the beast with everything they had.

Leviathan was blasted with everything I could imagine, from flames to lasers, from crystalline shards of rock to shaped forcefields. The combined assault was making so much noise that one couldn’t hear the rain with all the blasts and explosions. The Endbringer ignored most of it, barely dodging, with
unfortunately few attacks seeming to have any real effect. Legend’s beams were one of the few that I
could see were doing appreciable damage, along with whatever distortions Eidolon fired.

There wasn’t much I could add there, not without risking the loss of my mace without any real gain.

Surprisingly, outside using his water shadow as a shield, Leviathan seemed content to stay pretty
much in place, regardless of the barrage he was facing or even the gigantic sun that was approaching
him. I wondered why for a second, then realized the error everyone was making as I looked at the
ocean behind them through the pouring water.

I quickly pressed on the left button of my armband. “Hard override! Wave!”

I was unfortunately too late.

Dragon relayed my message just as the wave hit the shore. The defenders turned as one, and that was
when Leviathan struck.

The beast backhanded Alexandria, who was one of the rare ones who hadn’t turned, and she was
flung back a few hundred meters, winding up underwater. Its other hand grabbed the metal cape still
on its back, flinging him negligently at the approaching ball of solar flame. Nothing came out the
other side. The next second, the wave hit said sun, releasing massive amounts of steam everywhere.
So much that, even on a building’s roof, I was covered up to my knees. The sound was enormous,
covering every other noise, and didn’t help my headache.

Dragon was the first to surge out of the cloud, followed quickly by the Triumvirate. The three
Protectorate leaders had a quick mid-air meeting, after which Eidolon did something that made the
steam flow back to the ground as water.

And, on the ground, only the bodies of broken capes could be spotted, floating here and there on the
remains of the wave. The Endbringer was nowhere to be seen.

Leviathan was missing, and no one knew where he was.

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[Apparition]

Spectre with Horde. Frost with… Not Shift, not Gravity… Solid. Giant with… Shift. Two Humans
together. The second Field with the first one, connected to the Gravity multi-part.

Now I could breathe.

I curled on myself, my headache finally starting to recede. On my armband, a litany of names was
coming out, spoken by Dragon’s voice. The dead and the incapacitated.

While most names I didn’t recognize, some I did. Vista and Aegis were both among the dead,
something that gave me a bad taste in my mouth. I might have faced them as an opponent, but I had
nothing against them. Actually, I remembered Vista being the target of Sophia’s anger during my
clandestine meeting with the Wards, and the few conversations where Kid Win had spoken about his
teammates.

It wasn't fair.
The Wards weren’t the only ones to have lost members, but I had difficulty caring much about names I couldn’t place, and less about those I could. The Empire had lost two capes, and I couldn’t find myself feeling anything better than ‘good riddance’. Not after the rest of the dead.

The fact that Leviathan was loose in the city somewhere, unseen, was more urgent however. Unfortunately, I was at double my normal limit, so moving from my power zone wasn’t a possibility. I would have mixed them more, but there were no other possible matches left, or at least none that freed any space.

So, instead, I turned to my fellow Undersider beside me. “Any clue what’s happening?”

“Not anymore than you,” Alert returned. Our armbands were blessedly silent regarding casualties, and no new spark appeared in my mind.

I decided to take a chance. “Let me borrow your powers for an instant.”

She didn’t hesitate in giving me her hand, and I took her sparks for a moment. As I unfortunately expected, there was nothing in my ten slots I could match to her power, and being over the limit I found I couldn't even split sparks to try different combinations. I quickly handed Alert her power back, and by her reaction I was certain she knew that whatever I’d tried hadn't worked.

The calm period stayed that way for long rain-drenched minutes that seemed never-ending. Various capes called, confirming areas to be Leviathan-free. That is, until the beast was finally found.

“Leviathan found. Corner Jackson and Lincoln. Right before the Heritage Insurance building.”

It was said in Arsenal’s gruff, male voice.

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[Arsenal]

My finger dropped from the armband as soon as the message was sent. What was Leviathan doing?

It was looking down, toward the pavement, as if it was reading something on the ground. Behind it, its water shadow stood still, the mass of liquid being the reason that my sensors noticed it in the driving rain. That, and the fact that I was on top of the PRT building, which towered over near-everything within two blocks.

Orders started coming from the armband among the sounds of thunder, sending capes into position to hammer the Endbringer. Just as the last message completed, the giant finally moved, turning near 180 degrees to look up in my direction.

Not just in my direction. It was looking straight at me!

What?!

I barely had the time to finish that thought before Leviathan rushed forward, still heading right for me. It took barely two seconds for it to cover half the distance between us, after which it went airborne, coming at me with every limb.
I didn’t hesitate, throwing myself to the side, swinging Lucifer at the same moment. This time, I didn’t limit my mace’s output, doing everything I could into putting some distance between us. Lucifer roared through the downpour, carrying me off the rooftop to safety.

_What the hell?!_

Behind me, the PRT building cracked, then crumbled as both Leviathan and its shadow smashed into it feet first.
Twisting Lucifer to the side, I peered behind me into the pouring rain. There, coming out of the building it’d just drop-kicked, Leviathan ran once more in my direction, ignoring everything else. At its back, I could see the PRT building giving up the ghost, its remaining wall failing to ignore the constraints of gravity. My armor muted the roar as it was set up to do, negating the sound to prevent it from harming my ears.

The Endbringer clipped the building I’d just dodged without any appreciable loss of speed, slowly gaining ground on me. I wasn’t stupid; with how it was mindlessly targeting me, I had to find a way to escape. The PRT building, which was made to the level of toughness required from Endbringer shelters, had barely slowed it down, so dodging between edifices hoping to lose him wasn’t a good proposition. I wracked my brain for a few more instants as I was pulled down the street by my mace, when the obvious solution came to me.

Up. It couldn’t fly, so soaring upward was the best solution. Landing might be an issue later, but at least there would be a later.

I stopped Lucifer’s propulsion for a second, just enough to redirect it above me, only to abort at the last moment as a massive shadow passed above, Leviathan having somehow divined my intentions. Instead, a burst to the side cancelled most of my momentum, allowing me to land on the rain-slicked ground more or less in one piece. My head was ringing fiercely and my left knee had taken the worst of the landing, but I could still stand.

Leviathan stood before me, a Goliath to my David. And I didn’t think any single attack of mine could fell this beast.

At this range, escape was no longer a possibility. While I could technically have my mace drag me faster, my armor wasn’t made for supersonic velocities, and that was clearly what I’d need if I wanted to outrun Leviathan. Still, I wasn’t going to give up; every second I bought might bring reinforcements, and maybe even a chance to retreat. My arm snapped to the side, ready to shield me if necessary, and Lucifer unwound from my hand to counter the beast’s physical blows or pull me aside.

I only caught Leviathan’s attack because I was expecting it; a sudden dash and he was nearly in my face, claws ready to splatter me on the pavement. I rolled to the side, passing clear by centimetres, and my shield snapped into place just in time to block the water shadow’s strike. It even held, which I attributed to the shadow not hitting as hard as the real thing. Still, I was pushed backwards, sliding on the wet asphalt.

Then a message jumped into my face.
**Armsmaster: Jump. Incoming tail.**

I didn’t hesitate, jumping and having Lucifer drag me up for an extra push. As said, the beast’s tail passed right below me, followed by Leviathan’s water shadow.

With what had happened at the fundraiser, I’d completely forgot to close the port I’d opened for the Protectorate leader. Good for me in this case, as his message came just in time.

I landed a little farther from the Endbringer, though still not far enough that I’d consider escaping. Leviathan took two steps forward to continue its attack, only to stumble on the second as a wide cut appeared just below its knee without a sound. Armsmaster rappelled himself next to me in the following instant, two halberds in hand, sliding to land on the watery street beside me.

“Arsenal, are you still combat viable?” the man said, his eyes not leaving the giant hydrokinetic.

I could barely hear his words with the pouring rain and the thunder, so I opened my communication port to allow for sound as well as text. The Endbringer truce was in effect; it wasn’t time to quibble on communication security. Not that there was someone who could profit from it at the moment.

“I’ll live,” I answered, receiving the barest hint of a nod. “It’s after me, for some reason,” I added as I moved to stand beside him.

Before us, Leviathan stood once more. It was visibly favoring its left side, but it was clear that it was still capable of fighting. I found it odd that such a wound could affect it that much, especially considering its previous speed.

“Jumping stomp followed by tail,” Armsmaster exclaimed.

And the next moment, Leviathan was airborne.

I shot left while the Protectorate leader shot right, Leviathan falling right between us with a splash. With the warning, I’d even cleared the tail. “How?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Predictive program,” the Tinker replied simply, jumping abnormally high toward Leviathan’s neck. I realized the opening for what it was less than a second later, and Lucifer rushed forward toward the beast’s wounded knee, hitting it at hypersonic speed while weighing relative tons.

Leviathan stumbled once more, his clawed foot skidding in the water.

Armsmaster didn’t hesitate a second, clearing great gouges in the beast’s head, neck, and back. The beast rolled as soon as it could, trying to crush the Tinker under its weight. Armsmaster saw it coming though, once again hooked himself back to the ground.

“You think we humans weren’t planning for you, brute?” Armsmaster exclaimed while Leviathan thrashed on the ground, sending water everywhere along with pieces of pavement. “All of your fights that we have on film? All uploaded and analyzed. I know every move you make before they come, even before you start doing them. You’re done now, beast.”

I ignored Armsmaster’s banter, as good as it was for morale, and focused on the situation at hand.

I could escape.
Leviathan was wounded and bleeding, and its knee was clearly slowing him down. Thrashing on the ground as it was, I could probably jettison myself straight up without issue.

I’d be leaving Armsmaster behind, though.

While the Protectorate leader seemed to have things under control, I doubted a simple predictive program could really make enough of a difference for a complete victory. Based on its reactions before, Leviathan was clearly more intelligent than I’d originally given him credit for. It would either ignore Armsmaster to go straight at me like it had before, or it would finish off the Tinker and move to its next target, i.e. me.

And we could gain more time by acting in concert than by separating.

Leviathan crashed into a building on our left with a bang, then used what remained to pull itself up, turning to the both of us as brick and concrete fell around it. “Waiting for commands,” I said, stepping to Armsmaster’s side. I might have imagined it, but I think I saw his lips curl into a smile right then.

And then, Leviathan was upon us once more.

I imitated Armsmaster’s moves a half second behind him, clearing three monstrous limbs in turn. My shield took the brunt of the water shadow, giving Armsmaster to opportunity to land a second strong blow to Leviathan’s right knee. Lucifer followed, roaring as it broke the sound barrier and pushing the Endbringer back a step while Armsmaster cut off one of Leviathan’s clawed toes, leaving it lying on the muddy ground.

The beast continued backing away, but the Tinker didn’t let up, following and continuing his chain of attacks. I trailed a little behind, ready to intervene if necessary.

“Finally starting to understand, are you?” Armsmaster growled.

I wasn’t so sure. If Leviathan was retreating, he’d retreat toward the beach, where his ability with water would give him advantage. He was doing the opposite, going deeper into the city. Worse, he wasn’t using his massive speed, slowly backing up where he could run in an instant.

Still, Armsmaster pressed the attack. He managed to do damage even in his dodges, gouging Leviathan’s tail as it passed and opening rents in the beast’s arms after each blow. I followed up behind him, hammering Leviathan whenever I could. I didn’t have Armsmaster’s raw skill and couldn’t do as much damage as his nano-halberd, but I made each one of my hits count as much as I could.

What blasters remained after the wave finally joined us, with Legend at their head. Initially the Triumvirate member alone blasted the beast, then others joined, giving us more time to rest between each attack.

*We’re… we are winning,* I finally had to admit.

I dodged to the left, evading the predicted claw strike as it broke the pavement, smashing Leviathan behind the head with Lucifer as Armsmaster attacked an elbow. Winding my mace back up as a blaster readied a plasma bolt, I fell to one knee as my leg twinged. I shook my head, trying to clear the pain, only for a detail to jump to my eyes.
That’s weird, I thought, the water’s not flowing correctly.

I realized the implications a second later, after a second look.

All the water is going for the drains!

“Aarmsmaster, hook me!” I yelled, running for the sides of the street. I’ll give him credit, he didn’t hesitate; his halberd hook went straight for my armor. “Come!” I then exclaimed as soon as his weapon had clamped on, rushing into the sky using Lucifer.

The entire street exploded in a watery surge not seconds later, the street bursting and sending bricks and pavement all over the place. My shield blocked both water and projectiles that reached us, failing in the last moments. The last few solid bits hit my armor with small pinging sounds, failing to do any damage.

Both of us dropped on a building’s roof, Armsmaster nodding at me in thanks for the save. “That’s another trick that won’t do you any more good,” Armsmaster exclaimed at the Endbringer, only for Leviathan to burst out of the pool-like street, jumping right for our platform. We were back in the air as the beast fell, the roof giving way in a resounding crack.

It then happened again as the beast followed us relentlessly, caring not about obstacles it its way.

Fighting on the rooftops clearly wasn’t a good idea, with Leviathan leaving a trail of fallen buildings behind us as we evaded, so the pair of us landed in a vacant lot, hoping to continue the combat on more even ground. Leviathan dropped right at our back, still on the attack, Armsmaster calling them all out as he’d done before.

Somehow, we were having less of an impact this time. Armsmaster’s nano-halberd cut less deep, and my strikes made the beast stumble less. Worse, whether because of the time or because of the immersion, Leviathan’s wounds had healed, and it fought more like it was fresh than like it’d been hurt.

Still, with the predictive program, we dodged everything. Left, up, left, right, roll, jump. I dodged a claw and jumped over the tail, readying my regenerated shield for the incoming water shadow.

It never came. Not as I was expecting it, anyway.

It came from the other side instead.

Armsmaster released a blast of flame at it, but it was too close and too late. The water spray pushed him back at me, and he was clearly stunned.

I tried my best to shield him, to give him time to recover, but Leviathan wasn’t going to let us have it; he went straight into another murderous combination. I managed to push the Protectorate leader aside to save him from an evicerating claw, pushing back the tail with a strike from Lucifer, only to be hammered straight down by a watery tail. My shield broke right then and Lucifer slipped from my fingers.

And with all the water I never saw the kick coming.

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I jumped to my feet. No, no, no, no, NO!

I nearly rushed out, but realized it would just make things worse. With the few capes that had just died in the last minutes, I was already over, and the new power that had just jumped into my head (another Tinker, I noted) wasn’t helping things.

I mixed that one with the rest of the Tinkers, found a place for Repel and matched Fill with Shadow after three other tries, only to be still stuck at eleven.

I looked at Alert beside me, who was on the balcony, looking everywhere as if she was searching for something. She then crumbled to the ground, as if her strings had been cut.

“What?” I asked.

She shook her head. “All red,” she intoned gravely, and I had the feeling she was starting to cry.

“What does…?” I started, then realized what she meant. “No.”

“There is…” she sniffed. “No path to reaching Taylor alive. Everything… Everything is red.”

I wasn’t going to accept that. I was still over the limit, but if I managed to fix things enough, Taylor might escape. She could use Shadow and slip away. I needed to match things enough that she could survive.

The problem was actually Human. Actually, the six smaller Humans sparks that I’d matched together, along with Flesh and Redundancy. That combined spark matched with nothing else, and it was the smallest I had remaining.

But there was something I hadn’t tried. At any other time, I wouldn’t even have thought of the possibility, but desperate times called for desperate measures. And I’d risk it all for Taylor to survive.

Grabbing Human with a metaphorical hand, I tried jamming it as hard as I could into Clone, hoping with all my heart that the two matched as Taylor and I long suspected.

They did.

I released the breath I’d been holding, turning to Alert once more. “Try again?” I asked.

It took even less time for her to shake her head in another no.

Two sparks jumped to mind as another name came out, and I focused hard on matching them. I wasn’t going to give up, not now. Taylor’s name hadn’t come out of the armband yet, not deceased anyway, and I wasn’t going to abandon her until death took me.

Not now, not ever.

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[Arsenal]
I came to feeling horrible. My head was ringing like a church bell, and I could sense my bones grinding uncomfortably. Worse was, I couldn’t feel the bottom half of my body, and that was probably even more of a danger.

And I could see nothing.

With my thoughts jumbled and the pain in my brain, it took me a while to realize what had happened. Seconds passed before I could remember, and finally put a finger on the events of the last few minutes.

Leviathan had finally got me.

I was surprised to actually still be alive, regardless of my current state. Outside my head, there was surprisingly little pain. Distantly, I realized that there was water in my suit, and that it was slowly rising.

Oh, yeah, I realized, I should escape.

I focused on turning into shadow, as I’d done hundreds of times, only for something like a live current to pass straight through my head. A second try did the same, only worse, making me black out for an instant. Forget little pain, my head was now a death metal loudspeaker cranked passed eleven.

“What?!” I tried exclaiming, but only a wheeze came out. Even more dangerous was the fact that I had water up to my chin now, and it was still going up. At least, the sudden agony had cleared my thoughts.

Ignore it, I told myself, pushing back the pain as much as I could. Looking inside, I finally realized the cause of the pain. There were twelve, no, thirteen sparks there. And huge sparks unlike anything I’d had before.

As I focused, one disappeared, being matched with another. So T’s working on it, I noted absently.

I took a breath, trying to focus beyond the pain, only to breathe in what was mostly liquid. I choked, and pushed the water out, forcing my mouth closed. I could feel the water creeping slowly up on my lips, and what little air I could draw from my nose was wet and salty from the spray.

I attempted again to change state, with pain as my only answer. No, no, no! I tried everything else: pushing myself up, forcing my nose closed, twisting around to find a way for the suit to empty itself, but nothing helped. My suit had no power and couldn't move, its arms were twisted into place and didn't respond, and with my unresponsive legs, I couldn't an inch.

I was well and truly stuck.

NO! I screamed inside. Not like this!

I tried holding on and not breathing for as long as I could, but my body betrayed me; I couldn't help but reach for air, and my lungs filled with cold liquid. I could fell myself fading, my muscles not responding to my desperate struggle for air, my whole body desperately aching for breath with no salvation in sight.
As blackness became near total, I tried once last time to turn into my other state. The pain was even worse this time, before I...

no...

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_Arsenal deceased, GB-8._
Downsizing Interlude: Teammates

Chapter Summary

Especially big thanks go to Robo Jesus, LordsFire, Anonemuss14, Iny, Essex, EdBecerra, jderig, naarn & Daecl for their support in the Beta. Each gets his own personal Sonic Screwdriver. Quantities Limited. Please specify type of head requested, also.

[Reinforce]

I found myself in a position I’d hoped never to return: helping with the triage of patients. I’d done so once before in my life, when one of the buildings in the docks had fallen after a cape battle, and it wasn’t any better now than it had been then.

It was, however, the best place for me to be.

When that teleporter warped us away from the battlefield, he dropped me and the others on top of Brockton Bay Hospital. Judging by Armsmaster’s body language, not everyone expected had ended up being transported, but he still took command, dispatching the lot of us to appropriate locations.

I had no clue where to go, or anything else in this business, so it was good that someone at least could give orders, and be listened to.

I didn’t expect to end up in the hospital, though.

The Protectorate Tinker had me use my power on Panacea, since she was one of the most important capes not involved in the combat. It turned out that reinforcing her power extended her ability to divine the workings of people’s bodies to line-of-sight, something which was a godsend when seconds counted.

Because of that, I was ordered to follow her wherever she went, and to make sure she could use her enhanced power as long as possible. Armsmaster was teleported back into the fray right after that, leaving me with the beacon Taylor had given him and with no other valid option than following Panacea into the building proper.

I felt a little like a third wheel as she entered the place, ordering nurses and orderlies as if she ruled over all of them, regardless of the fact that she wasn’t even an adult yet. The two of us were brought to a ward that was more like a warehouse than any regular operating room.

I could already see two beacons farther into the room, and a doctor relieved me of mine only to plug it into the wall.

Then the wounded started streaming in as the names continued to flow from my armband.

At first I simply stood there, just trying to stay out of the way as much as possible, but within minutes there was too much to be done for me to stay idle. I had very limited medical training, mainly first-aid
knowledge, but I was used to managing people and jobs.

This time, it was the beds I was managing.

I wasn’t doing much, simply being the buffer between Panacea and the nurses, remembering her diagnostics and sending people to various corners of the room based on her words.

I also started hating the armbands we’d been given.

I understood what they were trying to do with it, and agreed that communication was crucial in a situation like this, but as name after name came out, I could see the effect it had on everyone. Each one was another stab in our collective morale, another hint that things were doomed to fail.

I’d personally never been involved in an Endbringer fight, and had simply watched the newscasts detailing the losses as numbers on a screen. Now, I could see in my head the many capes waiting at the rendezvous point, and could no longer treat those names I heard as statistics.

Worse was when it was names I recognized.

*Manpower deceased, EF-4.*

*Lady Photon deceased, DF-6.*

I wasn’t the man with the best knowledge of the cape world, but I’d followed the news more than enough to know the big names of Brockton Bay. New Wave lost three members over ten or so minutes, and I couldn’t help but fear for Panacea, who was barely older than Taylor.

Still, she surprised me by soldiering on as if nothing had happened. She wiped her eyes dry a few times with her sleeves, but she kept working resolutely through her loss.

Then, for a moment, the names tapered off, and the both of us finally had a moment to talk as she went over the less urgent cases. I also used the pause to refresh my power on her, just in case.

“Is… Is it over?” I asked her, unsure. Around us, people were discussing the very same, and no one seemed to have a sure answer. None went to Panacea, though.

Keeping one hand on her patient, she looked down at her armband. “No,” she said with a sigh as she walked to the next bed. “Leviathan’s just hiding. It does that sometimes, and it’s never a good thing.”

I realized right then that this wasn’t her first time in such a situation. “Are you… going to be alright?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“They might not be dead,” she answered as if by rote. “Armband might have shorted, or broke, or…”

I saw what she was trying to do, and kept silent. This wasn’t the time to focus on such things.

The male voice of Taylor’s persona rang out through both of our bracelets. “Leviathan found. Corner Jackson and Lincoln. Right before the Heritage Insurance building.” I nearly didn’t recognize it, still unused to the voice. When I realized, a shiver went down my back at the idea of Taylor being within the beast’s sights.
Luckily, only a few more patients arrived in the next few minutes, most having been nearly drowned by Leviathan’s waves, but nothing compared to the earlier casualties. My focus was elsewhere, and I couldn’t have managed the quicker work I’d done earlier.

*Arsenal down, GB-8, Armsmaster deceased, GB-8.*

*No,* I couldn’t help but scream inside, glaring at my armband as if I could affect things that way. *No,* *No,* *No…*

Endless seconds passed. I kept waiting, looking at every person coming in, hoping to see my daughter’s armored form on a stretcher. I’d seen Panacea do miracles, I’m sure she could help Taylor, whatever happened…

*Arsenal deceased, GB-8.*

“*NO!*” I screamed, grabbing my armband and trying to crush it to powder. With my limited strength, I couldn’t even dent the thing, but I needed to do something, anything. “*NO! NO, NO!*” I continued, stamping on the ground with every syllable. My teeth ground on each other as I clenched hard, and my whole body tensed with rage. "*THAT'S A LIE! THAT CAN'T HAVE HAPPENED!*" I yelled, the orderlies around me retreating.

 Barely a moment after that, I felt a hand in mine. I turned in a flash to see Panacea looking at me in the eyes.

“Armband might have failed,” she pointed out flatly.

The fire bled out of me near-instantly as I realized what she was doing. She was trying to give me hope, to help me go forward.

It is a sad thing to realize that a girl less than half my age is stronger than I am.

“Yes, an armband failing…” I replied desperately, grabbing onto that shard of hope. “Right,” I breathed, nodding as I forced myself to push down what remained of the anger back. I inhaled and exhaled repeatedly, making myself calm down as I’d done hundreds of times before. It might be an infinitely small chance, but it was better than no hope at all. “You were saying?” I asked, still taking deep breaths.

“First goes bottom left, second goes straight to me,” she repeated as she turned back to her current patient.

I turned back to the rest of the room to convey her words in a rigid voice, my hand reaching for Dragon’s armband unconsciously.

*Please, Taylor. Please be alive and safe,* I repeated inside my head as a mantra. *I can’t deal with losing you too.*

*-*-*-*-*-*-*

[Tattletale]

*Arsenal deceased, GB-8.*
That...wasn't what I'd planned! I raged inside, trying to figure out what went wrong. Between the armor and her power, she should have been safe!

I could feel my power trying to push through the walls I'd made, and forced it back. Trying to push right now was useless, with all the extraneous data from the storm and the rest of my environment.

Hearing every single drop of rain separately was a pain and a half, let me tell you.

I pushed Brutus in a beeline toward the apartment building we’d claimed as a temporary base of operations, ignoring the cracks of thunder and the rain falling off my back. Two buildings before reaching them, I was finally close enough that Taylor's newest addition to my power let me see into the base's interior and make out the pair of capes who were still inside.

I released a sigh at that. Worst case averted, I noted. Still, that meant quite a few possibilities left. Had Taylor survived the loss of her armband? Had she… died, and T was somehow still there? The pair of them had been getting new sparks; was one of them the cause of this?

There were still too many questions.

I rushed inside as soon as Brutus landed, Grue not far behind me. While I could see through the walls and rain using Perception, that didn’t mean my night vision was better than it had been before.

I absently noted that both of them had barely moved from where they’d been standing when we’d left, which I supposed meant Apparition was still over the limit, and I stepped up right next to them. Behind me, Grue closed the balcony doors, giving me some small degree of relief from the incessant downpour.

“You two fine?” I asked, my eyes quickly going over the both of them. I couldn’t see anything wrong with either Alert or Apparition, but something was nagging me about the second, and I couldn’t put my finger on what.

Seeing as that might be linked to her continued existence, I relaxed my barriers and let my power flow.

Worry, tears: Taylor in danger. Precognitive, tears, unmoving: Nothing can be done in time.

I shook my head, forcing myself to push back those facts. That wasn’t what I needed right now.

The pair nodded as I continued pushing my power on, ignoring the pain. “Taylor?” Grue asked as I did so. I already knew what was coming, and ignored him. There wasn’t anything I could do about it, anyway. Better to focus on the present.

Increased heart rate, closed eyes: Inner focus toward powers, desperation. Desperation, headache, power mixing: Mixing of normally untouched power. Clone mix. Clone mix, notice of death, nothing to be done in time: Change in clone power. No longer creation of Taylor.

No longer clone.

“Red,” Alert sadly answered as that conclusion flashed into my brain. “Everything’s red.”
Normally, I trusted my power somewhat blindly, but this time I needed to verify.

“How about powers?” I asked, trying to confirm. “Are you over?” I could remember Taylor telling me that going over made her powers unreliable, along with migraines similar to mine. If Apparition was too far gone in sparks, she might not even be able to tell.

“I managed to get everything into ten slots,” the Trump said, shaking her head. “I can’t get below that.”

I winced again. “So, still stuck in place?” Grue verified.

Apparition simply nodded.

“What about Clone?” I asked, and the meaning behind that was pretty clear.

“I… I don’t know,” Apparition admitted. “I was forced to mix it with other stuff, so I have no clue how it works any more.” That was at least confirmation of part of the chain.

Alert turned to her, and looked her up and down, eyes going wide. “I’m… not seeing much red… barely light pink. You’re… you’re not going to vanish in the next twenty-four hours!” she finished with the beginnings of a smile.

I couldn’t help but echo her smile at that, regardless of the current circumstances. With Alert having predicted Leviathan, that was all the proof I needed.

Apparition turned to the Changer in a flash. “That… That…” she fell down as to her knees as she clearly realized something. “Clone’s no longer active.”

There was another moment of silence as everyone digested those words. Normally, from what Taylor had said, Clone only went inactive when T was gone. A possibility came to mind, and I started hoping beyond hope that I was right, and that this wasn’t a new peculiarity of her power.

“What…” Grue started, voicing what everyone thought. “What happens if you activate it?”

Apparition reached out, pushing a hand forward. And, inches in front of that, something started growing. First, it was simply a floating spot of skin that I could barely see with my eyes, which slowly grew into a digit. Flesh, skin and bone quickly started knitting themselves together, appearing seemingly out of nowhere, forming first a hand, then an arm, continuing on into a torso before growing into a full body. Everyone stood transfixed as another Taylor grew before them, naked as the day she was born.

It was a bizarre thing to experience, especially since the innards could be seen as the body came together. Eyes and hair formed last, the latter ending up with identical part and styling to what Taylor had that morning.

Please be Taylor, I prayed inside. Please. I can’t have sent someone else to their death. Intellectually, I knew that this could simply be another clone of T, a spare body, or a dozen other possibilities. Still, I prayed.

Then her eyes opened, and I thought I saw recognition somewhere in them.

And in the next moment, she bent over and tried to hurl the contents of her stomach on the floor,
vomiting out what little was there.
I couldn’t help but try to purge everything in my body.

I had no clue what had happened after I blacked out, or how I got to wherever I was, but my body was insistent; everything needed to go.

Bizarrely, I found that nothing came up. None of the water I remembered inhaling, not even bits of my breakfast or yesterday’s supper. Nothing.

Still, for a minute I found myself dry-heaving, trying to evacuate something that wasn’t there.

After that, luckily, the instinct tapered off, and I rose shakily. I found Apparition before me, Alert at her side. A look around me revealed I was in some sort of empty apartment, with Tattletale and Grue also present in the dim light of the room. The sound of rain striking the windows and patio doors was the only thing I could hear at the moment.

“Taylor?” Tattletale asked, breaking the silence, sounding unsure for some reason.

I tried answering, then coughed twice as something caught in my throat. I simply nodded, taking deep breaths.

You never realize how good breathing feels until you can’t do it anymore.

I then found myself with arms full of parahuman as Alert jumped forward and hugged me tight. For a moment, I could barely move, stuck in place, immobile under her strength. Looking around once more, I could see Apparition relaxing for some reason, and there was a hesitant smile completely different from Tattletale’s usual smirks on the Thinker’s lips. Even Grue’s body language changed, although with his suit I couldn’t get anything detailed.

How had I gotten here, anyway?

“Did… Did I get teleported?” I asked the group, not seeing any other possibility, hugging Alert back automatically. I could still remember being stuck in my suit a few seconds ago, and the rising waters. I had to hold myself back as the image threatened to make me choke once more, and I focused on the present.

A trio of shaken heads was my answer. “You’re a clone, Taylor,” Tattletale added, completely serious.
My eyes went wide, and I turned to Apparition who confirmed with a nod. “What?!” I said out loud, then focused inside.

With all the changes T had made, combining powers, Clone took a moment to find. I quickly realized she’d merged it with a number of other sparks. It also wasn’t active, though by focusing on it I felt something quickly counting down, like a timer.

*That’s new,* I noted.

There was a moment of silence as I digested the news, after which Alert released me and stepped back. Tattletale instantly smirked as something obviously crossed her mind. Grue then turned his back and faced away from me for some reason.

*Do I have something…* I started thinking, then looked down and instantly understood.

I wasn’t wearing anything.

I did the only thing I could think of, sinking into the ground as a shadow.

Tattletale’s grin only got larger at the sight, before it vanished under a serious face. “So, what happened?” she asked after a moment, clearly trying to change the subject to what was really important.

While I could hear in shadow state, I couldn’t answer. And I didn’t want to return to normal naked before everybody, regardless of the fact that everyone looking was female. I suddenly realized that I'd flashed Brian for a good minute, and thanked whoever was listening that shadows couldn’t blush.

I then pushed back those thoughts as far away as I could. We were still in the middle of an Endbringer fight, and there was work to be done.

As such, I pushed myself into solidity, but while trying to shape myself into the smallest possible shadow dragon I possibly could. I’d not used that power much, and hadn’t tried for size. At worst, I’d tower over everyone.

Things didn’t go as planned. While I did fade back into three dimensions, it was in a shadowy body much closer to my human form than I’d expected. I still had the wings and tail, though, as I could feel them at my back.

“That’s new,” Apparition said.

“I’m not surprised,” Tattletale added, “considering how many sparks you mixed together.”

I nodded at that. My mixed Shadow spark had doubled in size compared to this morning, and it had already been the largest I’d possessed.

“Leviathan is what happened,” I explained, to which the Thinker before me winced. “It came straight for me, full speed, ignoring everything else, even buildings.” Her eyes went wide at the implications. “And once I was in close range, it didn’t let go and kept attacking, not stopping until I was down.”

“That’s… that’s worrying,” Tattletale replied, to which Alert and Apparition nodded.

“That’s… it’s not all,” I added with a scowl. “Leviathan’s playing us. He caught Armsmaster and I when
he stopped pretending his water shadow actually had to imitate him. It came from the opposite
direction it should have.” I then forced myself not to think of what had happened after that as thunder
rang in the distance.

Tattletale turned to Alert at that, who studied me briefly and grimly. “She’s telling the truth,” she
confirmed. “And worse, she’s still being targeted,” she added with a scowl.

The Thinker blanched. “Anybody else?”

The former Case 53 quickly looked around the room at everyone. “Apparition here also,” she noted.

Everyone tensed at that. “You need to get out of here pronto, then,” Grue said, turning to look
straight at my face and not anywhere else. He’d clearly been following the discussion.

I wondered for a moment how much detail one could pick up on my new Shadow state.

Still, I nodded in agreement. With the number of powers we had, either T or me was stuck immobile.
Having the both of us in a single place was an extra risk that we couldn’t take, since that way both of
us could be taken out at the same time.

I looked straight at my doppelganger. “I’m going back to base. I’ll build a zone once there, so you
know when you can move. Build it back when you’re in a safer location, one out of the city if
possible. I don’t think this place will remain safe for very long.”

Alert nodded at that, confirming my words.

Grue stepped forward. “Take care and be careful, Taylor,” he said as he reached for a handshake.

His hand passed through mine when he tried it, but I managed to grab it without issue and shook.
Tattletale beside me gave a thumbs up, and both Alert and Apparition nodded. The latter handed me
her armband, since I’d lost mine. She wouldn’t need it, not if she stayed close to Alert as she had.

*Apparition deceased, D-3,* it supplied unhelpfully. I just kept it in hand, not putting it on.

The next second, I was a shadow on the ground, speeding down the building and out into the streets.

For some reason, I was noticeably faster, even counting the fact that I was technically being boosted
by Apparition and the darkness all around from the storm clouds. It was especially evident while I
was going in straight lines, where over short distances it felt more like teleportation than anything
else.

As such, I arrived in my base much faster than I’d expected, turned back to human form, then
instantly formed a zone around me.

Then I started thinking. *Now what?*

It wasn’t like I could do much more while I was the one in the zone. And I needed to plan things,
especially with all the new information I’d learned.

I could stay here and wait the battle out, or simply escape. With the powers I had, it would even be
easy. Just turn into shadow and not turn back. And I’d done my part already, anyone would agree.
But I’d feel guilty anyway, especially since the Undersiders were still out there. Not to mention Dad and the Wards.

I then cringed, realizing that my death had probably been broadcast all over the place by those armbands. I scowled at Apparition’s armband at the realization. I understood the use of having such communications available, but it had been nothing but a morale drain in my case.

*Kid Win down, J-9,* the armband spat out, as if to confirm my words.

*Definitely going back out,* I swore inside.

Unfortunately, I was still naked, and going out that way wasn’t an option, unless you're Narwhal. I could try my new and improved shadow power, but relying on something untested while possibly in battle with an Endbringer seemed like a good way to end up dying.

*Again,* I added inside my own head, cringing all the while.

Which meant I had only a single choice.

Since the area below me was still active, I focused back inside on the many powers now present. The only times before that I had so many sparks I could use was when I was testing, and never such big ones.

Still, I went over all of them. I wasn’t going to test them, not in a situation like this, but I might get some clues here and there.

Then I noticed that I had a power active which shouldn’t have been.

Sure, Area was active, but that was a given. The massive Tinker spark was also, but that wasn’t a surprise, since it tended to activate depending on what I thought or looked at.

But another of the big sparks was currently working, and not one I’d tested before.

I focused on it, trying to figure out its component parts one by one. It was much more difficult than I’d expected, but I managed to get a name after a moment of concentration.

Gravity.

My eyes went wide. *You mean, as in…* I thought, then focused on that particular spark and pushed myself up, just a bit. Just like T had when she tested her flight devices.

And, as if I was wearing one of them, my feet left the ground, leaving me hovering an inch above the floor.

I couldn’t help but smile at that. It might be the wrong time for feeling like that, but the simple idea of flight raised my spirits.

I was barely in the air for a minute when the zone below me vanished. I could still feel my powers being boosted and no headache coming, so Apparition had rebuilt her own zone in a safer place. I didn’t wait, diving to the ground and turning into shadow, leaving the armband behind. I couldn’t allow myself to be tracked, not with the face I was going as. I then slithered inside my only remaining suit, and returned to human form there.
It wasn’t comfortable, since I wasn’t wearing an undersuit, but I’d have to deal with it. I didn’t have any more spares after Dad took the last, and this was the only way I could see me able to rejoin the battle.

If Leviathan was after the both Apparition and I, then better I be the one to draw attention. T had managed to regenerate me, or so it seemed, and I had no clue if I could do the same for her anymore. Better that I take the risks, then.

Hopefully, Slenderman’s presence wouldn’t throw everything in disarray.

With my increased speed while in shadow state, I quickly returned to where I’d fallen, looking for the Endbringer. I forced myself not to look at my downed suit and searched for signs of continuing battle. I first went by shadow, travelling from place to place, but then I had a better idea.

While I was fast as a shadow, I couldn’t see much with all the water on the ground disrupting my line-of-sight, not unless I turned back to physical form. My new flight ability might be slower, but it gave me a much better vantage point.

And with Leviathan being mainly ground-bound, it gave me a much better chance at evading whatever it could throw at me.

What he could throw at me ended up being very literal less than a minute later, as I approached the battlefield itself, following the sounds of buildings crumbling in the rain. The moment I got close enough to the action, the Endbringer turned straight toward me. He then rammed a building as he dodged both Alexandria and Legend’s attacks, pushing up in such a way that the roof came straight for me.

I didn’t dodge, not trusting my speed in the air. I simply turned to shadow as the rain-slick stone reached me, and reformed on the other side.

The two Triumvirate members, being the only ones still there, hadn’t missed the opportunity and took the fight to the beast. At least it seemed that, in the current situation, Slenderman’s presence wasn’t hindering anything.

A wide swipe from Leviathan fired more projectiles at me while forcing the flying brick back. Legend’s attack did punch through the water shadow, generating a short-lived cloud of steam, but didn’t do much more than that. I dropped straight down, letting Leviathan’s hurled projectiles pass overhead, then resumed my previous position, as if to taunt the Endbringer.

That pattern repeated itself for the next few minutes. Alexandria aborted every attempt by Leviathan to get closer to me, coordinating perfectly with Legend using only short phrases and hand signs, while I simply stood there and drew in the attacks. There might have been offensive sparks in my new ones, but I wasn’t going to try them, especially not when I could take out others with the collateral damage.

This pattern at least had the advantage that the Endbringer stayed in pretty much the same place, which limited the damage to the city. It also allowed the remaining others to catch up, and more and more Blasters started pouring fire on the beast whenever the Triumvirate members called for support, screaming war cries and exclamations of rage all the while.

It was, unfortunately, too easy for it to last. Tired of all the attacks, the beast changed tracks and, in a
blur of speed faster than before, managed to smash Legend to the ground in a single strike, a geyser rising then and there. Alexandria then punched through the water shadow with a yell, only to find herself meeting the beast’s tail right as she came out. She joined her partner in the watery ground an instant later.

It then picked her up from where she was sprawled and didn’t let go this time, rushing the grouped Blasters with her in his oversized hand.

There wasn’t much I could do. Untrained powers could do more harm than good, and the rest of what I had didn’t have any offensive potential. I had hoped before that I could depower it like I did other capes, but Leviathan didn’t shine in my sight, and without that I wasn’t going to take the risk.

So I did the only thing I could think to try. I stopped hanging far above in the air, landed on a building closer to the battlefield, and waited in the rain.

Leviathan reacted instantly. It fired Alexandria like a javelin at a building close to the bunched Blasters, then turned on a dime to rush me, asphalt and water flying under its feet.

I simply stood there, focusing on the Endbringer through the downpour, ready to turn to shadow at any moment. I could take his charge more easily than the others.

The beast took two blurring steps, crushing a car on the street, then launched itself straight at me, claws first.

They never landed.

Instead, a beam of golden light erupted from somewhere behind me, passing barely a foot to my left, clipping the Endbringer in the shoulder. Unlike Legend’s earlier attacks, this one had great effect: the beam twisted the beast in the air, and Leviathan fell back onto the street in a heap.

Everyone on the battlefield froze for a moment.

I saw light creeping up on me, and for a second I wondered what it could be. Still, I didn’t take my eyes off Leviathan, who’d risen from his prone position. Behind him, I saw the remaining parahumans, and for some reason I could see relief in their faces and stances. A cheer even started, slowly.

That was when it clicked.

Scion was here.

The city was saved.
Especially big thanks go to Robo Jesus, LordsFire, Essex, AllRoadsLeadTo, EdBecerra, Suryn & naam for being answering the Call of Beta. I have enough True Runes from all of them, as a reward. I'm keeping True Creation, since it seems to help with writing.

Scion’s appearance didn’t mean that Leviathan was giving up. On the contrary, the Endbringer rushed forward once more, even faster this time. The beast jumped claws first, aiming straight for Scion instead of going for me.

It didn’t get any farther than it had in its first attempt.

Once again, Scion blasted the Endbringer back, launching him straight into a building on the other side of the street. This time I even caught the instant the beam appeared beside me.

Leviathan’s water shadow came next, but barely got any further than the Endbringer. Less than five meters from Scion, its momentum suddenly halted and it splashed to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. It fell with a great splash that overpowered the sounds of the rain for an instant.

As it seemed I was safe, I turned to look at the world’s first cape. I found him looking me up and down, then nodding, as if I was doing something right. I felt like he was approving of what I was doing. I simply nodded back on instinct.

A great tearing sound pulled my attention back to where Leviathan was. It was right in the middle of the street before us, striking the pavement with great blows, all the while looking like a kid that was throwing a tantrum.

That’s new, I thought, and prepared myself for the worst.

Within a second, it became evident what Leviathan was attempting. Great geysers of water started surging from where the beast struck, and the next blow crumbled the entire street for hundreds of meters, swallowing the area in an impromptu lake.

And the buildings weren’t spared that fate.

The roof under my feet started tilting, shifting down toward the street. I rose instantly using Gravity and found that Scion had preempted me with his own powers, the both of us now standing freely in the air. I heard screams and yells in the distance as the grouped blasters abandoned their position, flyers grabbing non-flyers and evacuating them. I even saw Purity and a recovered Alexandria ferrying people farther from Leviathan’s position, each carrying a pair of capes to safety.

Within moments, all that was left below us was a dark expanse of water nearly a kilometer wide and still growing. Leviathan was nowhere to be seen, hiding in the murky depths of the new lake below.
The fight needed to end quick. If Leviathan was given time to grow this watery crater as much as he wanted, Brockton bay would be underwater before long!

Still, Scion showed no urgency. He waited as if he wasn’t in any danger, as if his victory was certain and absolute. For my part, I simply stayed where I was; I doubted I could find a safer place to be in this situation.

Jumping out of the water like a dolphin at SeaWorld, Leviathan lunged for our backs, moving at even greater speed than before. Scion was clearly the target as the beast surged toward him, only for the world's first and most powerful parahuman to move so fast that for a second I thought he’d teleported.

The blast he sent this time was twice the size of the previous ones, and caught the Endbringer in mid-air just as gravity had started the creature onto a downward arc.

And this time, no building stopped Leviathan’s tumble.

The blast caught it from below, flinging the beast at least a mile toward the ocean, with it landing somewhere in the docks. Scion quickly followed, and I did the same, wanting to see the end of this fight.

It seemed that, by this point, the Endbringer had finally had enough, as it clearly started retreating toward the beach while Scion approached.

Leviathan was barely ten meters from the water when it found itself hammered to the ground as if by a giant invisible weight falling on its shoulders. The ground around it also cratered from the pressure, looking from above like a giant hand in the sand.

And, above it all, Eidolon hovered, arm extended.

Scion slowed twenty meters from the Triumvirate member and scowled at the Protectorate Trump. I could sense disdain and disgust there, and couldn't understand why. Still, Scion’s hand came forward and another blast plowed Leviathan straight in the beach’s sand.

And again. And again.

By the third blast, Legend was there, and his beams joined those of the golden man. Eidolon’s hand was still extended, and I could feel something before me, keeping Leviathan from rising.

A gravity effect, I wondered. That might explain why I could suddenly sense it.

It was clear the two Triumvirate members wanted to keep the Endbringer there and blast it until it was dead and gone. However, a great surge of water rose off the beach, barreling straight for Eidolon and Scion.

The Triumvirate member twitched his hand to the side, flinging the water out of the way, while every drop of liquid the came close enough to Scion stopped and fell instantly. Not a drop even came near me.

But, of course, Leviathan had vanished during that instant.

Scion continued straight on, going past the beach and coast to hover over the ocean, showing no sign
of stopping soon. Legend, however, came to a stop before me, followed by Eidolon a second later.

“Slenderman, I presume?” he asked.

He wasn’t making any offensive move, so I simply nodded in answer. I had no clue what else I could do.

I looked over to Eidolon and, now that the fight was over and Leviathan was gone, noticed that his aura was bronze instead of white. Turning back to Legend revealed the same. Curious, I noted. The Travelers were the only group to date I’d seen with only bronze auras.

The Blaster had quickly looked me over as I’d done so. “I see you do not have an armband, and from what I remember, you weren’t present when we capes met before the battle.”

I shook my head this time, and indicated for him to continue. I pushed my thoughts on auras back, as it wasn’t the time for such things. I'd need to talk to T and Lisa anyway before I did anything with this information.

He was silent for a moment, as if he was thinking of what to say. “Are you aware of the Endbringer truce, then?” he finally asked.

So, that’s what they were afraid of! I realized. It was true that there were dozens of capes grouped together, a prime target for a villainous power negater like me.

At least, if one were to base his assumptions on the rumors around my Slenderman persona.

I nodded, and I could see Eidolon relax somewhat in the background.

Legend lowered himself to land on the beach sands, and I followed suit. Eidolon did not, however, remaining in the air, though he was barely a meter above sea level.

The heroic Blaster then pressed both buttons on his armband, and spoke out with a clear voice. “Endbringer Gone. Scion has also left.” I heard the message echo from Eidolon’s armband, and guessed that this message had gone to everyone.

Legend then nodded to Eidolon, who flew away, before turning toward me. “Thank you for the help,” he said. He started extending his hand instinctively, then realized what he was doing and turned it into a salute. “You may have saved dozens of lives by drawing Leviathan’s attention like that. Any idea why Leviathan went directly for you? Any clue you might have on his motivation could be of great help in the battles against him.”

I had a lot I could say, but this clearly wasn’t the time. A good part of Slenderman’s power was his mystique, and answering questions here would ruin it. More than that, this suit wasn’t equipped with a voice modulator, and Endbringer truce or not, I wasn’t going to trust that I wasn’t giving more information than expected.

As such, I did the only thing I could constitute as a valid answer. A flick on a switch in my suit started my soundtrack of laughing children, and I was rewarded with a small flinch from the Protectorate leader, who rose an inch from the ground.

Now, for a suitable exit, I said to myself, and started thinking. Then I smiled inside my suit and started walking.
Straight in the direction Scion, and probably Leviathan, had gone.

“What are you planning?” Legend asked.

I pushed my soundtrack two notches higher, drowning the sounds of the rain, and stepped forward until I was ankle-deep in the water. Then, I turned to shadow, quickly rushing forward to hide what could still be seen of my presence. While Legend was known as the ultimate Blaster and Mover, he wasn’t known for any special senses, but that was no reason to take any risks. Between the gloom of Leviathan’s storm and the murky water, he’d probably seen nothing of my transformation. Hopefully he’d think I was still going after Scion or Leviathan and go for something more urgent.

I didn’t stay and check, though. After taking a second to orient myself, I dashed for one of the storm drains that littered the beach. While I didn’t know where they all lead, I knew where some did after my studies for the bank run. The overflowing water wasn’t an issue in shadow state, and even if the pipe I took had partially crumbled, I could still force my way through without much issue. This specific drain lead under the bank, and from there I had no issue finding the path home. And with my newfound speed, I was there within minutes.

Now what?

Looking at the time, it wasn’t even ten. It had barely been an hour since the sirens had started ringing, and everything was done. The city still stood, regardless of the damage and the cape deaths. I put back my Slenderman suit in the closet, and dressed in some of the clothes I’d left here for T.

One thing quickly came to mind.

My father.

I rushed for my phone. The call had gone out that I’d died, and the same happened for about Apparition. Knowing him, he was stressing horribly, and that was the best case scenario. Grabbing it, I entered for the number of his work phone, which he’d started keeping on him ever since he’d learned about my cape identity.

I was answered by his shirt vibrating on my work table. Of course, dressed as he was, he hadn’t taken it with him. I hung up.

Only for my phone to ring in turn.

“Hello,” I answered.

“You fine, Taylor?” Lisa asked from the other side of the line. There was quite a bit of interference of the line, probably due to the remains of Leviathan's storm.

“Not a single hit. I’m fine,” I quickly replied, hoping the message would go through.

“She’s fine,” Lisa relayed to whoever was with her, putting the phone aside for a moment. “Glad to hear it.”

“You?” I returned the question.

“Wet. The worst thing I can see is getting a cold,” the Thinker quickly replied. “Back at the base?”
“Yes,” I answered.

“Mind building a zone there?” Lisa asked, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “T might want to move back home also.”

“Right,” I said, feeling stupid. I then dropped the phone on my table for a moment. I quickly drew a zone at my feet, then returned to Lisa’s call. “Done.”

“I noticed,” Lisa pointed out. Brian then said something that I didn’t catch, to which Lisa agreed. “We’re on our way,” Lisa added. “You should see T and Sveta soon, since they’re taking the shadows together. We’ll be behind them somewhat.”

Message understood.

“Catch you later!” Lisa finished.

“See you,” I replied, and hung up.

Dad was the last one left, and the one I was the least worried over. He’d vanished with Armsmaster, and I suspected he was somewhere safe at least. I doubted the Protectorate would have him anywhere close to the front lines.

That was when the door slammed open.

For a moment, I thought it was T and Sveta, then I realized there would have been no reason for them to appear outside instead of inside.

“TAYLOR!” Dad’s voice rang out.

“I’m here!” I cried out in reply, suddenly feeling very small. I moved for the door, then realized that I was currently stuck inside my zone if I didn’t want to go over my limit.

I didn’t need to wait long; dad rushed toward me with loud strides. He took off his mask just as he entered my workshop, then rushed and grabbing me in his arms. I could see the tear trails on his face.

“You’re okay!” he yelled out, heedless of his volume. “I thought… I thought…”

I hugged back. “I know, I know,” I replied. “I’m so sorry, Dad. I didn’t think about…”

“Shhhh…” he whispered in my ear. “It’s fine, I understand. You don’t have to say anything…”

Tears started coming out of my own eyes.

Both T and Sveta rose out of a shadow on the floor at the door of my workshop. “Is everything okay? Dad? Taylor?”

Both dad and I said nothing. He did, however, release me to hug both Sveta and T. “Everything’s fine now,” he replied.

“Everyone’s fine,” he continued. “And that’s all I need.”
The four of us ended up in a group hug for long minutes, simply hugging and holding on. Now that the adrenalin had passed, I nearly crumbled to the ground, and T seemed in the same situation; only Sveta and my dad kept us from ending up on the floor.

I didn't even noticed Lisa had arrived before she spoke up. “Sorry to interrupt the moment,” she said, a bizarre smile on her face. It was nothing like her usual ones; it was somehow sad, happy and envious at the same time. “But you might want to hurry and get your suit back, before the Protectorate finds something they shouldn't.”

I blanched, and T did the same. It was still where I'd fallen, and I had no clue what was left inside. There might be more than enough to identify me there, and I needed it back if I wanted to keep my identity as Arsenal. I wasn't ready to abandon it, not with everything that was attached to that name.

“What's in there that they shouldn't find?” My father asked.

Both T and I gulped in sync. That wasn't a discussion I was looking forward to.
Especially big thanks go to Robo Jesus, Essex, EdBecerra, Suryn, Tealg15361, Torgamous, Wonko the Sane, Words Words Words, Finbar, JamesBCrazy, kilthmal & naarn for being part of Beta-Com. They get a one way trip to any day in the past in the last ten years. Please, no killing me. There's enough paradoxes going on already.

[Taylor]

I gained some time by directing everyone to a chair. T stayed behind in my zone, at least until I transferred it under my own seat, at which point she joined the rest of us.

How could I explain? Regardless of the fact that I was still there, I’d died. I’d drowned inside my own armor, and might even have left a corpse behind. If I was lucky, whatever had been left had turned to dust like Oni Lee’s clones did, but I couldn’t count on that.

And I didn’t want to lie, either.

A look to the people around me didn’t particularly help. Brian was still in his suit and clearly had nothing to say, both T and Sveta looked just as uncertain as I was, and Lisa shrugged when I glanced at her.

No help there.

“Well, it’s kinda like this…” I started, only to be interrupted by the doors to the base opening. Regent strolled inside, followed by a grumpy soaked Bitch and her dogs, who were shaking water out of their fur. The young playboy went straight for the table, falling into his commonly-used beanbag chair, then looked right at me.

“Well, I like twins as much as the next man, but there’s clearly something going on here,” he smirked. “I mean, Spandex Geezer comes out of nowhere, Blondie-the-Return appears and no-one’s surprised, and now this business about power zones and sparks. I’m all for live and let live, but this is getting ridiculous!”

Behind him, Rachel grunted and nodded, still standing.

Great, another discussion I’m not ready for! I noted sarcastically.

“No time like the present,” Lisa countered, having evidently read my thoughts in my facial expressions.

I took a deep breath to center myself, then realized the best way to tackle at least Regent’s question. A quick look to Sveta got me a nod, which I took to mean there wasn’t any danger in what I was about to do. “Take over the zone?” I asked T beside me, and before a minute was over I was free to move.
Sneaking back into my Slenderman suit barely took ten seconds by turning into shadow, and appearing behind Regent didn't take much more than that. I said nothing and stayed silent, waiting for him to react to my presence. Based on what he'd told me about his power, he knew I was there. Seem like he didn't fear something right behind him he could detect.

Perfect.

Lisa’s grin grew as I did so, and Brian lowered his head to put his hand on his face mask. T echoed the Thinker beside her, and even Sveta smiled somewhat. Even dad understood what was happening, and I could see his lips curl.

Bitch’s reaction was clearly more aggressive, however.

She jumped back to put more space between us, falling farther from the table, and was about to send her dogs forward against me when she stopped, unsure. Her canines growled and took position beside her, visibly reacting to her tension.

Regent paid no more attention to the dogs than he usually did, ignoring them.

“What are you all smiling for? Did Blondie put a 'free and easy' panel over me or something? Bondage gear?” he asked, looking from Lisa to Sveta. Brian rose to grab a soda, unconcerned about what was happening.

Well, I wasn’t going to be getting a better opening. I dropped an ungloved hand on his shoulder, and thumbed my soundtrack up at the exact same moment.

I smiled myself as he instantly tensed, releasing something of a girlish scream. “You're shitting me!” he exclaimed, turning his head around to see better. He found himself face right next to mine, as I twisted my ‘head’ in his direction.

“Motherf…” he screamed, falling off his chair. He didn’t stop there, crawling back to put more space between us.

Then he seemingly realized something. “It’s a joke, right?” he finally said. “You’re somehow using your shadow power to get one over me, right?”

I simply raised the sound higher, and glided forward. Even with Regent crawling backwards, I easily reached him, poking him in the face with a single finger and taking his power. Puppet, I noted.

“Well, that’s easy to test,” Lisa added, clearly appreciating the spectacle. “Try using your power.”

He clearly did so, then blanched at the result. “It’s the real thing!”

I smiled inside my suit, then poked him again, giving him back his power. “You can take it back,” I said in my normal voice, shutting down the laughter of children.

“Bwhat?” he exclaimed eloquently, still on the floor.

I quickly shadow-travelled behind my chair, then shed the suit to retake my seat. Lisa was snickering beside me, and I could even see hints of a smile on Brian’s lips, who’d finally removed his helmet. Danny shook his head from side to side as if disagreeing, but I could still he'd found this funny.
Everyone waited until Regent had crawled back into his seat before turning to serious things. “Brian, you want to start?” Lisa said, turning to the Shaker.

He simply nodded. “The Undersiders are done,” he exclaimed solemnly. “Regent said it best, last time. We’re burned, and the boss let us hang to dry. We go back to him after that, and it’ll only get worse.”

“Knew he couldn’t be trusted,” Rachel growled. My dad nodded at that, having made his opinion clear long before now. Regent made a comment about nobody explaining this ‘Slenderman’ thing, but no one paid attention to it.

Lisa continued, ignoring Bitch’s interruption. “Thing is, the boss isn’t one to let go. We stay in Brockton Bay, he’s gonna come after us, force us back in line.”

“So we flee the city,” Regent pointed out.

Lisa nodded, “That’s one possibility. However, some of us can’t pack our bags and leave any time we want.” She looked at Rachel, who scowled and nodded in agreement. “As such, Brian and I have been discussing things with Taylor here, and we might have another gig set up instead.”

“Pays well?” Regent asked.

“As much as our previous one, at least.” I inclined my head in confirmation at my father, who’d turned to look at me.

“I’m listening,” he said, putting both elbows on the table.

Lisa nodded in my direction, and I understood the meaning clearly. “I’m Slenderman,” I said, putting all the cards on the table. “And my power is more like transferring powers than straight up removing them. With all those abilities, I’ve been working under different names for different powersets. I’ve been part of the Undersiders as Apparition, but I’ve also been working alone under the name Arsenal.”

“Which is the source of those nifty Tinker tools you keep pulling out,” Regent pointed out.

“Yes,” I replied.

Bitch brought something else to the table. “Fought Lung.”

“Among others,” Danny added, scowling a little.

I nodded. “Yes. Alongside the Protectorate, I helped take out Lung.”

Regent whistled. “Nice. Fried yourself some lizard?”

I ignored him. “Lisa and Brian have persuaded me to build a team under Arsenal after the attention he’s started drawing. The Undersiders would have to fake their deaths to keep the Boss from coming after us, but after that you’d have a stable job ready. The new team would be vigilantes instead of villains, but considering the most we’d done was fight the other gangs, I don’t see an issue there.”

Brian nodded in confirmation, and Sveta gave me a thumbs up at that.
“Yeah, I see one,” Regent pointed out. “We’re pretty distinctive as a group. Like, no one would be fooled by the dogs or Grue’s shadow.”

“As Slenderman I can mix and match powers to change them. That’s not an issue,” I pointed out.

Regent’s eyes went wide at that. “New powers? Sign me up! I always wanted to be a flier or something like that.” The next second, I saw something click in his eyes. “She’s your Shadow Clone Wonder Twin!” he yelled, pointing at T. “That explains everything!”

“Specific powers are not that easy, but I’ll see what I can do. Bitch?” I said, turning to the last member of the team.

She was clearly not as easily convinced, looking down at her dogs uncertainly.

I had a good idea what she was afraid of. “I’m not going to completely take out your power and replace it,” I said. “Just add to it until it’s different enough. You’ll still have your dogs, I can assure you.”

She nodded at that, then seemed to decide on something. “Fight me.”

“What?”

“Fight me!” she snarled, pointing to the wide area beside her. “Strong leads! Show me your strength!”

I shrugged, then shadow-travelled where she was pointing. My father, who’d kept silent during the entire discussion, chose that moment to rise. “Taylor, that’s…”

Lisa interrupted him with a hand on his shoulder. “She’ll be fine,” she said, and T nodded in agreement.

I had to agree this wasn’t a fair battle. There was nothing either Rachel or her dogs could do to me in shadow form, and that wasn’t even counting the rest of my powers. Still, it was clearly important to her, so I did as she asked. “Ready when you are.”

“Brutus, Angelica, bite!” She instantly yelled, her two dogs growing as she ordered them forward, her third one staying as a guard. I was in shadow state the next instant, then back as a dragon of darkness as big as I could fit in the room a second later.

Rachel didn’t hesitate, and neither did her dogs, Brutus jumping to try biting one of my wings. He simply went through without affecting me, and Angelica had no more luck when she tried biting my knee. The two of them then jumped back and growled.

I answered them with a loud roar of my own, making the entire building shake. The two dogs jumped backward instinctively, and I started advancing toward Bitch. It was clear that she wanted to retreat, but forced herself to stand her ground.

Judas, now a meter high, stood before his mistress, barking and clearly intending to defend her. I simply bent down my draconic head and grabbed him by the skin of his neck, heedless of the bony spikes there. Bitch couldn’t help but back up a few steps as I lifted Judas from the ground, the giant dog now growling pitifully. The other two still tried attacking me, but had no more success than before.
“Had enough?” I asked, the sound coming clearly even with a mouth full of dog.

Rachel visibly didn't think so. She jumped, grabbing onto Judas' back, then flung herself straight at my face. She didn't hesitate, ramming her fist right into my left eye.

It had no more effect than any of the previous attacks.

Worse, she'd put all her momentum into it, and as such fell face first to the ground. She pushed herself into a roll, trying at rise once more, but I didn't let her, pushing her back into the floor with my left leg.

“Call the dogs back,” I said, putting enough weight on her to keep her down. Still, she tried forcing herself up, and her dogs rushed to help her, trying to bite my limb off.

She simply snarled and continued pushing up.

I could see Lisa explaining to dad how Rachel thought, keeping him from interfering. Brian was scowling, but said nothing. I think he understood that there wasn't any other way this could go.

And I wasn’t going to stop now. “Call them back!” I ordered, my voice coming out as a roar, making the room vibrate. I increased the pressure second by second, and before long she didn't even have the leverage to push. She was also probably staring to lack oxygen.

“Brutus, Angelica, back,” she finally whimpered, and only then did I release the pressure, moving my foot to the side.

The two dogs rushed to their mistress, abandoning their attempts to hurt me. I lowered Judas to the ground and let him go, and he rejoined the rest of the canines.

I turned back to human shape. “Didn’t like doing that,” I said as I did so. It felt too much like bullying. Still, she had asked for it. “You’re gonna be okay?”

“Fine,” she growled. She then walked to the table and stood there. “I’ll follow,” she grunted, clearly not liking her defeat.

“Everyone’s in, then?” I asked once I was back at my seat.

There were nods and exclamations of agreement all around the table, including from a source I hadn’t expected. “Dad?” I asked, turning toward him.

“It’s not like I could leave the both of you doing this alone, right?” he said with a slight smile. “I may not be as young and full of energy as everyone else around this table, but everyone needs support sometime. And, anyway, the PRT already thinks I’m part of your team. Might as well make the best of it.”

“You don’t need to do this,” I countered.

“Need?” He replied, then shook his head. “I want to. You’re pretty much all I’ve got, especially after an Endbringer battle like this one. I have no clue if the Dockworker’s Union is still standing, or if there’s going to be work for me tomorrow.”
“Scion dropped Leviathan in the middle of the docks, so you may very well be right,” Lisa added.

“Anyway, I tried supporting you as best I could before, and I’m not gonna stop now,” he exclaimed, and it was clear his mind was made up. “If I’m going to be an official cape, might as well be in your group.”

Brian nodded, smiling. “Welcome aboard, Danny,” he said, extending his hand. I noticed clearly that Brian was looking straight at my father, clearly focusing on his face and not on his current costume.

“Reinforce, actually,” he corrected with a smile. “Seems that’s going to be my official name around here.”

There was a moment of silence as I digested everything around me, only to be interrupted by Danny. “I still haven't gotten an answer to my original question, actually.”

I drew a blank at that.

Lisa came to my rescue. “The contents of Arsenal’s armor, in case you’ve forgotten.”

I had. Thing was, there was only one person who could realistically go and gather it in the current situation. “Dad? Can I ask a favour?”

*-*-*-*-*-*

[T]

Danny didn’t like finding out his daughter's dead body might be inside the suit he was driving to get, but still didn’t argue much about it. He did need confirmation that everything was fine with Taylor from both Lisa and Sveta, and made sure to hug her and me tightly.

As the only known member of Arsenal’s team, Reinforce was the only person who had any right to grab Arsenal’s suit. Sure, Taylor could have tinkered a temporary one, but that would have taken more time than anyone was happy with. Lisa had pointed out that the Endbringer Truce was still in effect, and as such the armor was supposedly safe, but no one wanted to rely too much on that.

Which was why Reinforce was currently driving the Undersiders’ van toward the vacant lot where Arsenal had fallen. I was there as support in case things went south, mainly because I could hide within dad’s shadow near-invisibly. The fact that, while the rain has largely stopped, the sky was still heavily overcast, meant there was very little light to reveal my presence.

I was surprised to find that Miss Militia was present at the street corner when dad stopped the car. Judging by his reaction, he was as well, although he continued forward as if everything was normal.

“Reinforce, I suppose?” The female cape asked as dad came forward. The rifle in her hand became a knife at her side the moment she turned toward him.

“Indeed.”

“Miss Militia, although I think you might already know that,” she reached for her armband, pressing a button. “Reinforce present to gather Arsenal’s remains,” she spoke clearly. “My condolences,” she added to dad.
He shook his head. “Thank you, but I’m just here for the armor. Arsenal made it through, though not unscathed.” That was the story Lisa, Taylor and I had agreed on.

“Really?” The Protectorate member asked in surprise.


“With that much blood?”

Danny winced. “Like I said, mostly. Parts were left behind.”

Miss Militia winced in sympathy. “I could see why it isn’t him that’s present right now,” she added. “Will he be fine?”

Danny nodded. “Give him a few days with a healing beacon and my powers bolstering his own, and he’ll be good as new. It seems like nothing keeps him down, some days.”

“And… will this technology be available to the PRT?” she asked.

Reinforce simply shook his head. “I have no clue; I’m lousy at this kind of thing. I suppose he’ll need to figure out how come his device couldn't grab all of him before he makes that kind of decision.”

“True.”

“Can I… go in?” he asked, pointing toward the vacant lot, which was surrounded by PRT tape.

“Wait a moment,” Miss Militia answered. “There’s someone coming to verify your identity.”

“My identity?” Danny repeated, to which the Protectorate member nodded.

Danny and I didn’t have to wait long, as Eidolon dropped out of the sky not a minute later. “Reinforce, Miss Militia,” he said with a polite bow of the head. I was surprised to see him here; I would have supposed he'd have better things to do than conduct identity checks.

“Eidolon,” Danny replied, emulating the Triumvirate member. Miss Militia saluted instead. “I suppose you’re the one to confirm my identity?”

From what I could see of his body language, the Trump smiled at that. He also looked less tired than I'd have expected from someone who'd fought waves for nearly an hour. “More like your power, but for capes it tends to be one and the same. I won’t deny that another hit of your ability would be useful. My current powers might have been useful curtailing Leviathan’s waves, but they aren’t nearly as useful for cleanup duty.”

“Glad to help, then,” Reinforce said, extending his hand.

The two men shook, and Eidolon nodded, relaxing at the same time. “That’s Reinforce alright,” he said to Miss Militia, who also nodded.

“You can go in,” she said, walking to the side and untying the tape protecting the scene.
“Let me,” Eidolon interrupted. Arsenal’s suit rose up from the ground, clearly levitated by Eidolon. He brought it forward next to the van in an instant. “One good turn deserves another,” he pointed out.

With Eidolon and Miss Militia's help, it took barely a minute for the armor to be strapped down in the back of the van. A good thing, since the armor was solid and heavy enough that wrestling the thing off the ground and into the van wouldn't have been particularly easy or dignified. The three of them shook once more and exchanged pleasantries as dad left, Eidolon flying back to wherever he was needed.

As we were headed back, I found myself finally relaxing. My presence hadn’t been necessary, which was great, and the battles were over and done with.

With the way the last few weeks had gone, we could use some downtime.
Especially big thanks go to Robo Jesus, Essex, Sury, B.B. Rain, Daecl, Sheikhd, Iny, Archeo Lumiere, LordsFire & naarn for being part of fighting against for the Fanon Empire. Each gets the musical instrument of their choice. Except for Robo Jesus, who gets a cowbell, since he always needs more...

[Hannah]

I sat down in my chair, right in front of my computer, the night sky shining through my window. Protectorate rules were clear: Capes could not be deployed for more than twelve hours in a row without at least four consecutive hours of downtime. Even after an Endbringer battle.

Even if one didn’t actually need any sleep or rest.

Still, I couldn’t deny that some time to center myself wouldn’t be amiss. Today had been one of the roughest days in my life, and I was still kind of in shock. It wasn’t my first Endbringer battle, and it probably wouldn’t be my last, but the emotional toll meant it would likely be the most unpleasantly memorable.

Even compared to that one time Behemoth had nearly fried me.

Losing comrades was always the worst.

Given the nature and length of my career, it was natural that losses among my peers added up to a monstrous total. Of all the Wards I’d served alongside during my time in that organization, the vast majority were no longer alive today.

But never had so many fallen on the same day.

While the media were already crowning this morning’s battle as the greatest victory against the Endbringers in a decade, it didn’t change the death toll among those I’d personally known. People I’d worked with for years, if not more.

People I’d seen grow.

Triumph hadn’t even been out of the Wards a year. Aegis had been but a few months away from the Protectorate position he’d always wanted. Browbeat had barely been a rookie, facing something he had no clue how to deal with. And Vista…

Vista made me think of myself. So young and so driven. I thanked God she never had to face the things I had, but we'd both had our childhoods stripped from us far too soon.

And now she was gone.
Still, I couldn’t deny what the late news on the web were saying. While cape deaths had been, if not
the norm for Endbringer battles, a little lower, the civilian casualties were more than an order of
magnitude lower than after one of Leviathan’s usual attacks. None of the shelters had flooded or
sunk, and Leviathan had visibly focused on capes instead of going after people on the sidelines. The
city itself had taken damage, but nothing compared to the usual levels of carnage that followed an
Endbringer attack. A good part of the region didn’t have power, and most of the Boardwalk was a
loss, but outside that and the new lake, very few spots had taken more than cosmetic damage.

“Miss Militia?” A voice rang out from my computer. “Are you available?”

Dragon. “I am.”

My screen flashed open without my input, showing the Canadian woman in front of her own
machine. “Am I interrupting anything?”

I shook my head. “No, you aren’t.” Something then came to mind. “My condolences,” I added.

Her face fell somewhat. “The same,” she replied, though it was clear this was by rote. “Armsmaster
fought at your side for years. I’m not the only one who lost him.”

It was the truth, but Armsmaster’s passing didn’t have the same impact on me. Compared to the
people I’d already buried, Colin was simply another comrade who’d laid down his life for the job.
Dragon, however… “You were the closest to him, at the very least. There was always a distance
between him and the rest of us.” Arsenal might have become another exception, in time. Had
Armsmaster lived.

I might have thought it was a Tinker thing, but Kid Win hadn’t had any success there either.

She tried smiling at that, but it was a sad little thing. “Kind of you to say so.”

I nodded. “Now, what can I do for you?”

A sound rang out in my room; a chime from my inbox informed me I had a new message. “After
today’s casualties, there have been some changes in the local organizational structure.”

“Right,” I answered. I’d been expecting that.

“Congratulations, Protectorate leader,” Dragon continued.

“What!” I stuttered, grabbing my mouse. Dragon’s screen shrunk to the side, letting me reach my
inbox and read the message there. All the papers were in order, signed by the very head of the PRT
herself, Rebecca Costa-Brown.

“It is of course temporary, pending the approval of Brockton Bay’s new PRT director, but that
should only be a formality,” Dragon explained.

“Director Piggot didn’t make it?” I’d heard the shelter under the PRT headquarters had been
damaged when Leviathan destroyed the building, but nothing about losses there.

Dragon nodded. “I’m afraid not. By the time rescuers managed to remove the rubble, she’d already
succeeded to internal bleeding.”
“How many?” I asked. I’d worked with the PRT for long years, and while I’d never been close to Emily Piggot, I had numerous acquaintances in the unpowered auxiliary forces.

“Nineteen, most of them office workers,” Dragon replied. “Most PRT soldiers were in armor at the time, and survived the short period under the debris without significant injury.”

*I’ll check the roster later, then,* I thought, then realized something. “That means…”

Dragon nodded, having guessed what I’d just noticed. “Yes. The PRT East-North-East lost every level of senior leadership today.”

I cringed. While replacing the Wards’ leadership didn’t tend to cause issues, the same couldn’t be said of the other two posts. Villain gangs had a tendency to test new Protectorate leaders, and changes in the PRT hierarchy had repercussions at every level.

“Will one of the current Brockton Bay PRT managers be promoted?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“I can’t say.” Dragon quickly answered. “With the loss of the PRT Headquarters, it may take some time before anything more than a temporary appointment is made.”

Which meant I was currently the leader of all the cape forces in the city.

Business called, then.

“Thank you for the information,” I replied, intending to dive directly in the reports. I had a lot of work to do.

“Would you appreciate some assistance?” Dragon asked.

I wasn’t going to deny I could use it. Still… “I’m pretty sure you have better things to do than help a single cape on the other side of the continent.”

The Canadian Tinker shook her head. “Not really. I’m not going to get the last batch of components I need today, not at this hour, and Vancouver is much calmer than Brockton Bay,” she explained.

I smiled. “Then I would very much appreciate your help,” I replied. “I suppose you have an updated list of casualties?”

“Yes,” she said, the relevant document appearing on my screen. A second later, names highlighted themselves.

“Brockton Bay capes,” Dragon explained.

I nodded, then cringed. In front of me, black on white, were the names of the youths I’d lost.

"Any... Information on how it happened?" I asked, my cursor indicating a pair of names. I’d seen what happened to Triumph and Aegis, but not how the other two had been lost.

Dragon shook her head. "There is little I can say. Based on positioning data, Vista and Browbeat were separated from the rest of the Wards in the initial rush, and as such missed being teleported out. When Leviathan broke through, they ended up in close range with the beast, and neither were able to disengage in time. Browbeat may have tried shielding Vista in his last moments, as indicated by his
final movements, but we will never know for sure."

"God," I exclaimed, and took a minute to center myself once again. Dragon stayed silent, understanding.

Then I went back to work.

"I see we’re not the only ones with serious losses," I pointed out, face grim. New Wave also hadn’t gotten through unscathed; the public hero team had lost nearly half their number.

"No," Dragon said, then added more. “Every organized group in Brockton Bay lost at least one of their number. The Undersiders and the Travelers took the least damage, with only a single loss each. Empire 88 lost three confirmed along with Fog, who has yet to reappear.”

“This member of the Undersiders is also unconfirmed,” I pointed out.

“Yes,” the Canadian Tinker confirmed. “Apparition’s armband indicated her death, but no body has been found at her last known coordinates, and the largely intact state of the area is proof that Leviathan was never at that location. And since the peculiarities of her shadow power aren’t known, it may simply be that the armband misreported her status.”

“Still, that at least gives us a starting point,” I replied. “Anyway, the Undersiders haven’t yet been a real issue outside simple thievery, and the Travelers haven’t done much except hitting a Protectorate event. They aren’t the real threat.”

“The Empire,” Dragon stated.

I nodded at that. “With their identities revealed and the loss of so many of their number, something will clearly give. I’m more concerned over the fact that Kaiser alone was absent. I wouldn’t have been surprised if few of the E88 members had shown, or even only select cliques within the organization.” I shook my head. “No, only Kaiser was missing, and I wouldn’t see him as someone who ran while his troops fought.” I’d met Kaiser on the battlefield enough to have a good measure of his personality, especially after last week’s reveals. I couldn’t say if he truly believed in the cause he was preaching, but I’d bet my life against him running, leaving everything behind.

He just wasn’t the kind.

“I concur,” Dragon added. “I’d found his absence bizarre myself, but there were other fish to fry.”

I couldn’t contradict that. “Any Ward or Protectorate cape still wounded?” I asked.

The woman before me shook her head. “None. Between Panacea’s presence and Arsenal’s beacons, we lost no one at the triage table. A few are still under observation due to head wounds, but no one within the Wards or Protectorate. Kid Win was the worst hit there, and he’s already back in his workshop.”

“Good,” I answered with a nod. “Now, patrols will clearly need changing, especially considering our new landmark. I’ll take the earliest patrol tomorrow myself, then…”

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

[Doctor Mother]
“…Slenderman left after Scion without a word. The rest of the day was the usual search and retrieval, without anything outside the norm,” Eidolon stated as he finished his report. Both Alexandria and Legend beside him nodded at the summation. He then reached out and drank a shot from his glass.

There had been post-mortem meetings like this one after every Endbringer battle, as Contessa needed to model the behavior instead of relying on her power alone. And this was clearly one of the times where new information would force changes. Of course, Legend didn't know that part.

“So, in short, we have confirmation that the Endbringers are targeting specific capes when showing up somewhere,” I stated, and all members of the Triumvirate nodded as an answer. “Along with two of his targets: Scion and Slenderman.”

“I’d suggest Arsenal as a possible third target, along with a fourth still in the city,” Alexandria added, pointing at the map of Brockton Bay before the group. “Leviathan’s first charge now makes sense, given Arsenal’s initial location. Positioning data indicates that he was beaten back here,” she pointed to another spot, further from Leviathan’s position, “only to make his way back to the combat zone. However, when Leviathan disengaged, it didn’t go after him, but disappeared to track what I suppose was another target. It was found back here,” another point on the map. “Close to none of the capes present. It then resumed targeting Arsenal, and based on GPS information from Arsenal’s armband along with the pattern of devastation left in Leviathan’s wake, it is a virtual certainty the Endbringer chased the Tinker for several minutes. Arsenal only stopped when Armsmaster arrived, upon which the two of them decided to stand their ground, something which led to both being declared deceased, the Protectorate leader for good. Armsmaster might have been another target, but it wasn’t his first Endbringer battle, and I doubt he’d have lasted this long with direct Endbringer attention.”

Number Man looked over the top of his laptop to peruse the data, then nodded. “Arsenal. The facts fit. And, agreed, Armsmaster would be a long shot, unless something new changed the data.”

“Such intent targeting; a change in their pattern?” Eidolon wondered out loud, glass still in hand.

Number Man’s fingers flew over his keyboard as he typed. “Preliminary analysis indicates no. The Brockton Bay encounter was in no way outside the parameters for Leviathan, and even the battle itself was within norms. I’ll have to go over past showings with a fine tooth comb, but nothing indicates this was an isolated incident.”

There was a moment of silence.

“About Arsenal,” Eidolon asked, tapping the display before him. “Should we arrange a visit?”

I shook my head. “Premature. He’s a stabilizing influence in Brockton Bay, and shows no indication of going rogue or villain. He can wait, if he’s needed.”

“Slenderman, then,” Legend remarked, serious.

“Indeed,” I answered. “This is the second time he comes to our attention, and both the uses we could make of him are crucial.”

“Not to mention Scion’s reaction to the man,” Alexandria added.

“Yes, that point also,” I replied. “I doubt the rumors of him being Scion’s opposite are true, given
what we know, but there is clearly a link there.”

“If we’re talking of recruitment, there is another cape I want to bring to the table,” Eidolon spoke.

“Reinforce, I suppose?” Legend asked, a slight smile on his face.

“Yes,” Alexandria said to the Protectorate leader, before turning to the group at large. “Even if temporary, a second trigger at will is something we can’t pass by. Boosting Contessa or Number Man’s power might give additional insights on the formula’s workings, not to mention possibly breaking through the limit on Scion and the Endbringers.”

“I was about to suggest the same,” Eidolon pointed out.

“It might even be possible to recruit both Arsenal and Reinforce at the same time,” Legend pointed out. “Based on their interactions, they are clearly part of the same team, and for a while, at that, judging by the details I noted. And, with what Reinforce said, there should also be another two members who didn’t participate in the Endbringer battle, for whatever reason.”

“A secondary Cauldron team might be a boon to operations,” Eidolon suggested, “and that’s not saying what a Tinker could bring to the table on the science side.”

“More numbers on the ground could only help compensate for the discrepancy in cape numbers,” Number Man added, not looking up from his screen.

“Agreed,” Legend replied, only for something to ring on his belt. “Duty calls, it seems,” he said sardonically.

“We’re mainly done here,” I answered, catching a signal from my side. “At least, nothing that can’t wait until tomorrow. Recruitment will require planning anyhow, and not one done at this late hour.”

The Protectorate leader nodded. “Later, then,” he remarked, rising from his chair. “Door! New York Skyline!”

The requisite opening appeared right behind him, and he was gone not a minute later.

I turned to Contessa, who I suspected had engineered the alarm. “Something urgent?” I asked.

“Slenderman’s blocked, as he’s been for the past few weeks, and he’s not the only one,” Contessa explained, and everyone leaned forward at those words. “The same is true for Arsenal and Reinforce”

“Any other blocked contacts in Brockton Bay?” I asked after a second of silence. “Battery, Coil?”

The Thinker simply shook her head. “Short goals are working. Anything longer than a few hours starts changing without stopping.”

The two remaining members of the Triumvirate looked at each other, clearly unsure. Contessa is such a critical part of Cauldron’s inner workings, and now an entire city might be blocked? That was a scenario for a disaster.

“We need better eyes on the city,” I ordered. “Between Reinforce, Slenderman and that mystery target, there is too much going on to let our control slip. We need people on the ground, in all
No one argued.

Alexandria nodded and smiled. “Actually, there is some good news there. There is a new opening in Brockton Bay, and we have an agent that’s perfect for the position…”
Corporate Restructuring 11.1

Chapter Notes

Especially big thanks go to Robo Jesus, Essex, EdBecerra, LordsFire, hance1986, goodpie2, oso, Tcuisine, daensh, Silver719, Nox_Umbra, Ruisu56, Archeo Lumiere, DarkMagyk & Kemayo for joining Betavania. Each gets the mask of their choice, with Robo Jesus & Essex getting an extra one for their extra-devoted help. No taking the one from The Mask Of Winter. I like the Underworld staying where it is.

[Taylor]

The post-Leviathan meeting broke up quickly after my father and T left to grab Arsenal's armor. Both Alec and Brian left before he was back with Arsenal’s suit, and dad didn’t stay long after we moved the armor (and the van, actually) back inside, just long enough to make sure I was ok. Rachel and her dogs stayed in the corner for a while before she made her way out, leaving me with only Sveta and Lisa. T had gone with dad to make sure everything was fine at home.

“Well, I’m gonna hit the tinkering bench,” I said as soon as the area below me faded, proof that T had built her own. I inclined my head toward my workshop as I did so. “Anything else you need to discuss beforehand?”

Lisa shook her head. “Taylor, you’re a bad liar. I’m not gonna leave you alone to deal with that,” she said gesturing towards the mangled armor, before obviously being struck by a new train of thought. “At least, not unless you order me out, oh fearless leader.” I could easily hear the teasing in her voice.

“What?! I’m… I’m not lying!” I backpedaled.

“So you’re not going to open Arsenal’s armor, and see if it can be fixed?”

I sighed and hung my head. “I can’t hide anything from you, can I?”

I had indeed been planning on opening Arsenal’s armor, and trying to see if anything could be salvaged, however unpleasant it would be to deal with - my - remains. I’d learned some time ago from a TV show that dead material got more difficult to remove as time went on, so I planned on dealing with the issue as soon as possible.

I wasn’t going to say I was looking forward to it, though.

Sveta reached forward and gave me a one-armed hug. “You don’t have to deal with this alone, you know?”

“And I already know what’s inside, anyway,” Lisa pointed out while trying not to look queasy. “Seeing through objects does have its disadvantages.”

A quick check revealed that, yes, I was missing Perception. T must have given it to Lisa, which
made sense considering the situation.

And it’s not like I had room to take it back right now, anyway.

I tried to dissuade Sveta, since Lisa already had seen the contents of my armor. “You don’t need to see that, Sveta. It won’t be pretty, I’m sure.”

The girl shook her head. “It can’t be worse than looking in the mirror was before I met you.”

I cringed, and then nodded. I’d forgotten about Sveta’s old body, and couldn’t disagree that it was quite probably worse than anything we’d find. “Ok,” I finally acquiesced. “If you’re sure.”

“I am,” she said with a firm nod. “How are we gonna do this?”

Based on what little I know, I didn’t want to open it here. Whatever smell was released might linger for weeks. “Let me grab a few tools, then I’ll move you both, ok?” I asked while heading into my workshop for my tools. I added a lamp to my mental list of necessities, because I doubted the lights would have survived the Leviathan’s tidal waves.

Less than a minute later we were a mile away in an underground parking garage. The place looked like either Leviathan crashed into it, or one of his waves pushed something through. Broken ceilings, dripping water and a few sections which had collapsed in on themselves entirely meant the site was sufficiently structurally unsound that it’d likely ward off any gawkers. The fact that one of the cars was still honking and flashing its lights due to its alarm going off would help cover any noise we might make, the debris and overturned vehicles would make it harder to spot us, and the area was more than large enough for the three of us and the armor.

“I’m burning these clothes afterwards,” Lisa pointed out as she remanifested, but didn’t take her eyes off Arsenal’s suit. A waft of the stench from an overflowing sewer close-by made me suspect I’d want to do the same.

The armor wasn’t made to be removed from the outside, so it took a few minutes before I was able to gain access. The smell hit first, mixing with the odors of overflowing sewer water, spilled car oil and gasoline. Not decay, luckily, but sea salt mixed with blood, along with other things best left unmentioned. I grimaced, as did Lisa, though Sveta seemed unaffected.

Then I had the front plate off, and got a good look at myself.

I was pale.

So pale.

I wasn’t very tanned naturally, but my corpse was several shades lighter, especially when compared with my own hand. Worse was its face, stuck in a rictus of… something I couldn’t describe. I stood there, shocked at the expression, while Lisa reached forward and closed its eyes and mouth. A part of me couldn’t help but realize rigor mortis hadn’t set in as she did that. Sveta simply hugged me, and I focused on that, trying to push back the creeping horror of my last moments in the armor.

Compared to that, the red tinted water now pouring out of the armor wasn’t enough to have an impact.

Sveta was the one who removed my corpse from the suit, pulling it out with her enhanced strength,
carefully avoiding to tear it or leave pieces of flesh behind. The back was where most of the wounds were, pieces of the armor having twisted inward, often with sharp edges. The biggest of those had made a three inch wide slash just above my pelvis, probably the reason I hadn’t been able to feel my legs.

She dropped the body right beside me, and I gulped as I realized what the next step would have to be.

I was going to have to cremate my own corpse.

I forced the bile threatening to come up back down, and reached for my most powerful tool, the plasma blowtorch I’d made - what seemed like so long ago - for the bank robbery. It was powerful enough that it would leave nothing behind, no trace that could identify me.

Taking a deep breath, I brought the torch to life, the foot long blade shining far brighter than the lamp in the darkness of the garage. Inch by inch I lowered the blade toward my corpse’s extended arm, deciding to start with the extremities.

Then the blade finally touched dead skin and ash exploded everywhere.

The hand vaporized instantly, burnt particles going every which way. I had some in my clothes and in my hair and, given my eyes were tearing up, clearly some had gotten there too. I forced myself to continue despite my watering eyes, pushing the blade closer to the elbow, when I realized I suddenly couldn’t feel anything.

Why couldn’t I feel anything?

The smell of seawater hit, and I found I couldn’t move, couldn’t feel my body. The darkness was total, I could barely breathe and I could feel water in my lungs and the pain in my head and…

“Taylor! Snap out of it!” Lisa yelled. Her voice seemed so far away.

I snapped back instantly, and realized I had somehow fallen in Sveta’s arms. The torch was out of my hand, and it had burnt a gouge in the floor before deactivating.

“That…” Lisa said softly, and I realized just then her hand was on my shoulder while she moved in front of me. “That was what I was afraid of.”

“What… What happened?” I forced out. My voice was slurred and everything seemed a little dark around the edges.

“You… you just went completely limp,” Sveta replied, breathing hard. “I managed to push your torch away before it fell on your leg, and it did a number on the floor.”

“You had a flashback, Taylor,” Lisa added, completely serious.

Really? I was just…
I spent a moment just sitting there breathing, getting the unnecessary shaking under control. *When did I start shaking, actually?*

That done, I twisted my head to shoot a quick look back toward my corpse, and I couldn’t stop the dry heave this time. I spat what little I brought up on the ground, as far from Sveta as I could manage.

Then I took a deep breath, sputtering for a moment as I accidentally breathed in more ash. I grit my teeth, as this had already taken much too long, before reaching for the blowtorch once more.

Lisa stopped me, grabbing my arm. “No.”

“I can’t… leave things like this,” I forced out. “If someone finds it, there’s gonna be lots of questions, and I can’t…”

The Thinker shook her head. “I mean ‘no, not that way,’” she specified. “Isn’t there some kind of grenade or something similar you could use? Bakuda had dozens of grenade types, and I’m sure at least a few of them would be perfect in this situation.”

“I’m not like Bakuda, I'm…” But words Lisa had said interrupted my train of thought, possible methods flashing through my mind. Most weren’t viable in the current situation, but some…

I turned back toward the suit, and started working my way into its guts. I’d already decided that I’d be making a new one, since this level of damage wasn’t gonna be easy to fix, so ripping out a few parts here and there wouldn’t set me back that much.

With the power supply out (and repaired), it was easy to make something that wouldn’t leave anything behind. Just channel the power system into an easily destabilized energy containment unit, add a triggering module…

Using the components I had access to, I had the device built in less than thirty minutes.

I made sure the three of us and the remains of my suit were on the other side of the garage, behind an abandoned car, and that I had Sveta’s approval before I triggered the explosion.

What followed was an intense flash as a sphere of light and heat bloomed in the parking lot for an instant, the air cackling in answer, only to be gone the next.

There was now a three meter wide crater where my body used to be, and nothing but dust in the air remained. The floor was still smoldering, but given the dampness I doubted it would be an issue for long.

Lisa whistled in appreciation at the damage done.

“I didn’t think it would be that easy. Thanks for the idea, Lisa,” I said once everything was done.

“My pleasure,” she replied. “Much better than getting all that ash everywhere in my hair.” Beside her, Sveta simply nodded.

I shivered at the reminder. I would need a shower after that, for sure. The two then put their hands on my shoulders while I grabbed the armor, and we were back to base within moments.
“Taylor, you said that powers change depending on the person, and you’re clearly not Bakuda,” Lisa said, looking straight into my eyes. “So spill, how were you able to build a bomb like that?”

Even Sveta looked like she wanted an answer.

“I can make Tinkertech energy generators, right? Well, I just tweaked the one I had on hand so it would fail explosively. I… hadn’t actually realized I could do that.” I’d be a lot more careful building power supplies in the future, that’s for certain.

The toughest part was done, at least.

Lisa started preparing to leave, then stopped. “I’m going to hit my own place,” she said, looking back at me. “Want to come with me and borrow my shower?”

“I’ll be fine,” I replied. I had a lot of work to do.

Lisa then looked at Sveta, who slowly nodded. “Then, I’m gonna wash away all that sea water. Toodles!”

I waved in answer, then I shadow-dragged the remains of Arsenal’s armor to the workshop, built a power zone to free up T, and started working. I saw Sveta sit down in the corner of the room, but focused elsewhere.

It would be easy to dive directly into making a new suit of armor, but I quickly realized there were other devices I needed more urgently.

Like communications.

I’d tried calling home to gain an idea of what the state of the house was, only to get an out of service warning. Given that T and I would have to trade areas for the foreseeable future, that was a priority.

I thought about dropping some powers instead, but couldn’t find a way to go about it. I doubted one of my combined sparks would mesh well with Sveta, Brian or Lisa, which meant only two possibilities remained among my social circle. Rachel was already going to be a hard sell about changing her power, so dropping a spark in that direction without extensive testing backed by analysis enhanced by dad’s power wasn’t recommended, and a single open slot wouldn’t fix the fact that T and I needed an active Area just to counter the headaches anyway.

So communication tools it was.

It actually went easier than expected. It took but fifteen minutes before I had an acceptable blueprint; the first three ideas I’d gotten were either too invasive, too unwieldy, or too expensive in terms of resources. The model I selected was easily made, and while simple it had enough security that hacking wasn’t going to be an immediate issue.

The first one took the longest, at a couple of hours, but once the coding, prototype and testing were done the rest took twenty minutes apiece. Before the sun went down I had enough for the entire team with some to spare, with Sveta in the corner already having hers.

Then I started planning for version two of Arsenal’s armor. If it wasn’t for Sveta bringing lunch and coffee, along with T interrupting me at eleven, I might have worked through the entire night without noticing.
But I felt much better now, so I counted that as a win. At least, after I finally got my shower.
Enormous thanks go to Robo Jesus, Essex, EdBecerra, LordsFire, Nox_Umbra, naarn, tmitchem, bool1989, Giygas, jderig, Regent_Of_Armenia & Sheikheddy for joining Betavania. Each gets a box. Warning: Box may contain all the sins of man, an asshole demon named Yomi, Solid Snake, Akari Kanzaki, or other such random contents. You have been warned.

Robo Jesus & Essex getting an extra thanks for their before the Beta Call itself. I wouldn't have been able to do it without you both.

[Taylor]

“Ahh, trouble sleeping?” Lisa asked, concerned. She then turned her head and added, “Alec, if you say what I think you’re about to, I will hurt you. Bad.”

“I wasn’t gonna say anything,” he replied with a disingenuous smile. Of course, nobody believed that.

I simply nodded. While falling asleep hadn’t been much of an issue, I’d woken up drenched in sweat multiple times due to barely-remembered dreams. I had a good idea what those were about, and I was glad not to remember them.

It was near 2 o’clock the next afternoon when everybody met once more at my base. Power was still out in a lot of places throughout the city due to blown power substations and downed power lines needing replacements, but the generators I had built with that at least.

“So, does anybody have anything urgent to bring to the table before we start?” I asked, looking around at the seated capes. My gaze went from Dad on my left to Sveta standing at my right, looking at everyone in turn.

Nearly everyone shook their heads, not saying a word.

“Weren’t we getting new powers?” Regent questioned... with an unusual degree of interest, “’cause I can’t wait to stop having to walk everywhere.”

“That’s why you want to fly?” Sveta asked, turning toward the lackadaisical Master.

“Yeah, and?” he countered.

I shook my head. “That’s for later,” I pointed out. “There’s a few steps necessary before that, and even then Brian will be the first to have his power changed.”

“I will?” he countered, while Regent inched forward. “Why Brian?”

“Given his situation,” I explained, “he’s the one who needs the most solid cover. As such, I plan to have him go out as a vigilante cape before being ‘recruited’ to Arsenal’s group. Given that I plan on that happening before the Undersiders’ last sighting, that should help muddle the tracks.”
Brian and Lisa nodded in agreement.

“So, what steps are necessary?” My father wondered.

I sighed. I didn’t like the idea, but it was the only way I’d figured out that would let me go forward. “People,” I said. “We need more people. I have too many powers right now to do anything, and I need to give some away before I can work things out for the Undersiders. So, I need people without powers who wouldn’t mind joining this group.”

“More combatants?” My father asked.

“Not necessarily,” I replied. “I just need people who can hold my extra powers while I work on those who need their power changed, and maybe a few powers I can’t match to anyone once I’m done. I’m fine with them being part of our group in name only, and not fighting at all.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone digested that.

“Five would be best,” I added, “given that this would free all my extra slots for sure. Three is probably the least I’d need to actually work things out.”

"Slots?" Regent drawled in a querying tone while lazily raising his hand as if to get a teacher's attention.

"Um, that's kind of a complex topic," I stuttered. "It has to do with how my power works."

"Mind if I field this one?" Lisa interceded with a grin. "I think I can boil it down to the basics pretty fast."

An affirmative gesture from me and Lisa got into the meat of things, "Taylor has five slots for stolen powers, which manifest differently when transferred to new people. Going over that limit is unpleasant. Skidmark's power allows Taylor to make an invisible zone that enhances powers, including her own capacity to hold powers, so that lets her safely hold ten powers so long as one of her bodies stays in the zone. Powers can also be jigsaw puzzled together into bigger powers, so Taylor can fit one super-power into a single slot provided all the pieces fit together. The problem is that Taylor is holding way too many powers Frankensteined into too little room to properly sort them out."

"About that," Regent interjected with a bit more animation than normal, "I thought Slenderman needed to touch his victims? It didn't look like our creepy crossdresser was touching anyone when she had her little freakout yesterday. And it certainly would've made the news if a whole bunch of capes got Slenderman'd at the Endbringer fight."

"That was kind of a shock to me as well," I admitted. "Apparently I automatically gain the powers of any cape that dies near me, even if that takes me over my limit."

Everyone digested that bit of information for a moment before Sveta raised her hand. “I… might have a possible. I’ll have to see him beforehand to make sure he can be trusted to keep our secrets, but given what I know, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was perfectly happy with getting powers.”

“I can probably find a good four also, at least,” my dad pointed out. “Leviathan’s water shadow did a number on the dockworkers’ union building, and I’m not sure it’ll ever be rebuilt, given the city council’s opinion of the union…”

“That would be perf…” I started, then noticed Brian thinking. “You have someone in mind?” I asked him.
“You… can control what powers you give, right?” he sought to confirm.

“Somewhat…” I replied. “It’s not an exact science, but given the number of options I have, whoever joins up will have a lot of choices.”

“Your sister,” Lisa said with a nod.

“Yeah, Aisha,” Brian replied. “I don’t like the idea that she might get mixed up with cape stuff, but I’d feel a lot better if she had something to protect her from whatever my mother and her boyfriends could end up doing to her. It would be a weight off my back.”

I nodded. “As long as she passes through our screening…” I waved at Sveta, who nodded. “I have no issue with that.”

Brian thought for a moment, then nodded. “That makes sense.”

“So, since Brian’s going first…” Alec said after a moment. “I call dibs on second!” he exclaimed.

I automatically began to counter Regent’s assumption, then thought for a moment. Brian was first for certain, but the order after that wasn’t something I’d thought about. Sveta didn’t need her power changed, since she’d barely been seen three times with the Undersiders and her powers weren’t the flashy kind. Dad’s power needed not to change, given he was already known outside the group.

Which meant three candidates for second.

Rachel was in no hurry. In fact, I was certain she feared what could happen. Making her go second didn’t seem like the right idea.

And about Lisa… I thought, turning to her.

“I’m fine with going third or last,” she said, clearly having guessed the thoughts going around in my head.


“Nice!” He exclaimed, extending his hand for a high-five.

“Anything else people want to discuss before I start?” I asked, ignoring his shenanigans.

This time, nobody said anything.

“Ok. First, communications,” I said, taking out five of the devices I’d built yesterday. That was enough for everyone, given that Sveta, T, and I already had ours. “With the phone networks down for the moment, we need to be able to reach each other in case of emergency. These are water-resistant, inconspicuous, and have a large enough range to cover the entire city.” If not the entire state.

I then explained how to work them for the next ten or so minutes. Lisa, of course, caught on near-instantly, and Brian wasn’t far behind. The rest had more issues (or were less interested).

“Next…” I started, only for Lisa to interrupt me.

“Sorry,” she said, “But how are you planning for the Undersiders to ‘go out’, per se?”

“I was about to get to that,” I replied. “Everyone here agrees that Coil won’t let the Undersiders fade away without a word?”
“Coil?” Brian said, surprised. He then turned toward Lisa. “Coil was our boss?”

I cringed as Lisa nodded. With all that had happened, I’d forgotten that Brian and the rest of the Undersiders hadn’t been aware of their Boss’ identity.

“We weren’t the only ones,” the Thinker added. “The Travelers are also under Coil’s thumb, and I know for sure that he has moles in the PRT, if not in all the groups in the city.”

Brian took a deep breath, then continued. “Based on the man’s reputation on the Boardwalk, I’d say no. I wouldn’t risk it, anyway.” Sveta also nodded to that, and none of the others said anything against.

This launched a good hour-long discussion on how to go about it, along with when and where to do so. Lisa ended up in charge of the last, as per Slenderman’s usual pattern he needed to be seen on camera.

The meeting broke up shortly after that, with everyone going their own way. T claimed the base’s workshop, which was fine with me.

I had something else planned.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

“Good day Dragon,” I spoke out to my laptop using Arsenal’s gruff voice. Rebuilding my suit’s voice modulator had been the issue of ten or so minutes, even if as a separate part.

Checking the state of Arsenal’s Lab had taken longer. It was much closer to Leviathan’s path of destruction than my base had been, and I’d found the place had an inch of water covering most of the floors. No power, either, though whether that was due to the water or the ruined state of the surrounding street was something I didn’t know yet.

One advantage of all this was that I had no fear of Dragon seeing what I looked like; my laptop was the only object with power in the building, and I’d physically covered its camera beforehand.

“Good day to you also, Arsenal. Glad to hear from you. Judging by the tone of your voice, your recovery is going well.”

“Somewhat,” I answered. “Still not back to one hundred percent.” That was the truth, though not in the way the Tinker probably expected.

“I have at least some good news for you,” Dragon offered. “Your mace has been found, and seems to be in relatively good shape considering what it was used for.” Indeed, I would have been surprised if it wasn’t damaged in some way at least; blocking Leviathan’s attacks wasn’t conducive to remaining in good shape.

“Indeed, that’s good to hear,” I replied. “Anything else? I’ve been pretty much cooped up at home so I could recover a bit, and it’s not like my place currently has power.” Another incomplete truth: my father’s house currently had neither power nor phone, but my base was in a much better state.

The Canadian Tinker sighed. “Nothing good, unfortunately. Most of the eastern side of Brockton Bay is in ruins, and close to two-third’s of the city is currently without power. The sewers are also not working, and most of the city’s water purification facilities are offline.”

"On the cape side, even worse news: the Teeth have returned to Brockton Bay,” Dragon continued. “They’ve made their presence known by impaling Kaiser in front of the Medhall building, and taking
over the skyscraper as a base of operation. They’ve already hit two of the convoys carrying supplies from Boston, and the last was taken over by Hookwolf and other members of the E88.”

I shivered. While the Teeth hadn’t been an issue in Brockton Bay as long as I’d been alive, I’d read enough about them to know that they made most of the gangs look nice in comparison. Kaiser and the Empire at least pretended to possess civility, and even the ABB were more about controlling territory than fighting. The Teeth, from what I’d read, were the equivalent of the Merchants, if the Merchants’ prime drug had been violence, and were led by a monster that somehow survived his own repeated deaths.

“Yeah, that won’t… help the current situation much,” I replied.

“I’m sorry,” the Tinker said. “I forgot to ask for the reason why you contacted me.” She visibly thought for an instant. “You require materials, I suppose? Metals, electronics and the like?”

“I do.”

“Unfortunately, given the current state of Brockton Bay, sending valuable materials is a risky proposal. Between the gangs and damage to the infrastructure, I doubt I could get anything to your workshop reliably.”

I scowled, then something came to mind. “Do you have any warehousing company that you’ve used and trust close to Brockton Bay?”

She typed a few commands. “The closest one to Brockton Bay I’ve had business with is in Boston. Would that do?”

I grinned. “Perfect. I was planning on going to Boston in the next few days anyway, so receiving my order there wouldn’t be an issue.”

Dragon smiled. “I’ll be waiting on your order then. Anything else?”

I thought about discussing the Leviathan battle, but decided not to in the end. She’d been close to Armsmaster from what I’d seen, and his death was probably too fresh. “That will be more than enough. Thanks.”

“Glad to hear from you, Arsenal. Take care of yourself, and good tinkering.”

“The same to you,” I replied. “See you.”

The window showing the Canadian Tinker faded to black, then closed. I quickly shut the laptop down, given that I didn’t currently need it, and it wasn’t like I could plug it in to recharge.

Anyway, I had work to do. This place needed quite a bit of applied elbow grease, and it wasn’t going to fix itself without help.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

I unfortunately didn’t do as much as I expected. My father called me an hour into my cleanup operation, and asked for me and Sveta to come home in the next thirty minutes. I wondered for a moment what he wanted at my base, before I understood he meant our house.

Realizing that I felt more at home in a formerly-abandoned building than in the house that I’d been living in for all my life was a bizarre feeling.
Still, I shadow-traveled to the base and grabbed Sveta. She was unsure of herself, given it would be the first time she’d be at my father’s place. I told her not to worry, given that it wasn’t any place special, and we made our way there using my Shadow abilities, dodging all the broken streets and the enormous puddles therein.

We both appeared in a shadowed corner of the back porch, and quickly made our way inside. “Hi, Dad!” I called out as I entered, suspecting he wasn’t alone. Sveta added, “Good day, Mr. Hebert,” as she stepped inside behind me.

“Hello Taylor, Sveta,” he called out from the living room. “I expected you both later.”

Oh, right. He had said thirty minutes, and that was barely ten or so minutes ago.

“And, Sveta, no need for the mister treatment,” he added. “Call me Danny like everyone else.”

Sveta nodded as we entered the living room, which was illuminated in candlelight. As I’d suspected, my father wasn’t alone there; four more people were seated on our couches, three I recognized and another whose name I could guess. I turned to Sveta beside me, who nodded after a good look around the room. No risk there, at least.

“Hey Taylor,” Kurt called from his spot, while his wife Lacey waved. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it. Ever since the…” He then stopped, realizing what he’d been about to say.

Ever since the funeral, I completed mentally.

There was a moment of silence as no one knew what to say. My father was looking down, Kurt was holding his mouth as if he was afraid of saying something else, clearly kicking himself for ruining the mood, and Lacey had just slapped him on the shoulder.

Luckily, Alexander came to the rescue. “Your father is saying you’re looking for workers?”

I nodded, happy to have something else to talk about. “Yes.”

“What kind of job can a girl your age offer?” The last person in the room asked. Judging by the voice, this was Mike, who’d been Dad’s secretary for the past two years. “You’re what, fifteen?”

“Nearly sixteen,” my father countered before turning to me. “As you probably guessed, this is Mike Johnson, who’s been answering the phone for me for a good while.”

“I recognized the voice,” I pointed out.

“Can I echo that question?” The curiosity was thick in Lacey’s words.

I took a deep breath and thought. How do I bring the subject up?

“It’s not anything… illegal, is it?” Kurt asked during the silence as I worked out how to tell them.

I shook my head. I wasn’t even planning on them fighting or doing anything other than maybe some clerical or janitorial work around the base. The main qualification they needed was trust. “Nothing illegal. Actually, I could pretty much get anybody for these positions, but the fact that my father trusts you all is a big bonus.”

“I did notice however that you didn’t actually say what these jobs were,” Lacey pointed out as the others watched.

“Uhm-” I responded as eloquently as I could.
“Just spit it out Taylor,” Alexander said, exasperated at my reluctance and hesitancy, while dad, traitor that he was, rolled his eyes and laughed at me being put on the spot like this.

I took a deep breath as Sveta put a comforting hand on my shoulder. “I’m a cape,” I finally said.

I could see Kurt and Alexander blink. Lacey stopped in the middle of what she’d been about to say. “Huh?”

Mike, however, was thoughtful. “The locker, I suppose?”

I nodded, surprised. I wasn’t expecting a non-cape to know this kind of thing. The Protectorate and PRT tried to keep mum about such information as much as possible, and capes didn’t like talking about it.

“You want us to join a gang?” Kurt exclaimed.

“No, not at all,” I quickly retorted. “When I said a job I meant a job. With how my powers work, I need a number of non-cape assistants to help me manage things.”

“That’s bizarre,” Lacey pointed out.

Mike sat forward, his gaze piercing. “What is it your powers do? We need to know this if we’re going to be helping you with whatever it is you need help with.”

“Go ahead,” Sveta said in support from her place beside me.

“I can take and give powers,” I quickly explained, watching the four dockworkers stop as if frozen. “In fact, I can even grab powers without wanting to, when a cape dies close enough from where I am.”

“Leviathan,” Mike muttered, realizing the cause of the problem.

I nodded. “Yes. I have a limit, and Leviathan’s visit means that I’m currently overloaded. I need to give away powers right now.”

“And that’s not something you can just drop on anybody,” Danny pointed out.

It was surprisingly Kurt who responded first. “I can see why you’d want to keep that part secret. If the gangs heard...” he let the words hang.

Lacey’s eyes went wide as something clicked in her head. “Taking powers... Holy shit, you’re Slenderman!” she exclaimed.

I cringed, somehow expecting the world to crumble around me.

But no such thing happened. “You’re the boogie man of all capes?” Alexander replied, covering his mouth to hold back laughter. “The number one most feared cape in the entire Bay is Taylor Hebert?!”

“Fifth in the entire US actually,” Sveta said with a smile.

I couldn’t help but drop my head in my hands and mutter.

Everyone had a good laugh about that, even my dad. I just blushed and hid my face.

This wasn’t the kind of thing I wanted to be famous for!
Still, that one comment lightened the atmosphere. There were smiles all around when the laughter faded, and the panic I’d been fearing was nowhere in sight.

Mike was the first to get back to serious stuff. “OK. Levity aside, how is this going to work?” he asked. “I mean, I really wouldn’t mind helping, but with the state of the city we need real jobs, jobs that’ll pay enough for our families to live on.” He shook his head. “I like you kid, always have, but I have my own children to think of. And I don’t see either you or Danny here…” he waved in dad’s direction, “having the money to hire the four of us long-term. And right now, that’s the kind of jobs we dockworkers need.”

Kurt and Alexander nodded to that, and Lacey clearly wasn’t disagreeing.

I turned to my father. “What’s Mike’s yearly salary?”

“A little more than thirty thousand dollars a year,” he quickly answered. “A little more for Kurt and Alexander, a little less for Lacey.”

“Hey!”

“I’ll give you a raise to fifty thousand a year to work for me,” I quickly put on the table. “And include whatever health benefits you want with that.” I could pay that for two years just using my share of the bank job, and that was not even talking about the money from my contract with the Protectorate and PRT.

“What,” both Kurt and Lacey exclaimed in chorus. The two others said nothing, clearly having no words, though Mike had this look on his face as if he realized there was more here than what was said. Alexander was just sitting and watching, curious and kind of anticipating what was coming next.

Of course, I wasn’t going to point out I’d attacked a bank. “I have more than one identity as a cape, given that I can’t go out as Slenderman all the time. I’m working with the Protectorate as Arsenal, and I have a contract worth millions with them to provide tinkertech medical devices for their use.”

“You fought Lung,” Alexander pointed out.

I nodded. “I wasn’t alone, and I wouldn’t have survived if it wasn’t for the Ward present or the Protectorate heroes arriving. But, yeah, I fought Lung.”

“Girl, if you weren’t underage, I’d buy you a beer for that alone,” Kurt said, and was glared at by my father as Lacey and Alexander laughed. “You don’t know how bad it was when the ABB came calling in the docks, and I’ve seen the guy once; I wouldn’t want to take him on even if he wasn’t a cape.” All the dockworkers nodded at that.

Then something clicked in Mike’s head. “Wait, didn’t you grab and take that singer’s power over in Boston? On the same day?” I nodded. “Sheesh, you work fast kid.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that.

Lacey looked around at the rest of the group, who nodded. She then turned to my father. “Danny, we’ve trusted you about salaries for years. Tell it to me straight; can we trust Taylor to put her money where her mouth is?”

He looked at her straight in the eyes, and nodded seriously. “I’ve seen the device she built, and the hospital workers nearly fought me to keep the one I’d brought. I was there when Leviathan attacked; because of those and Panacea, every person who arrived still alive at the triage table survived the
experience.”

“Damn,” Lacey whistled.

It was Alexander’s turn to figure something out. “You’re a cape, Danny?”

My father did pretty much as I had, and hid his face in his hands.

“What do you...” Lacey started.

“Would Taylor have gone to us if there was a better choice available even closer? Would Danny be in on it and so sure of himself if he hadn’t already gone through the process?” Alexander explained. “Hell, what was he doing outside a shelter during an Endbringer battle if he wasn’t a cape?”

The dockworkers turned to Danny in an instant.

I decided to rescue my father from that. “I’m to blame for that,” I pointed out. “I learned I could give powers to non-capes by doing so, and I don’t think you need three guesses to figure out how that happened.”

“When was that?” Kurt asked as the rest sat forward in curiosity.

“Weeks ago,” my father muttered, head still in his hands.

The four union members looked at each other. “I didn’t see any difference,” Mike pointed out.

“Same here,” Kurt confirmed, and Lacey beside him nodded.

“The process doesn’t have any effect that anybody noticed,” I explained. “Dad didn’t notice he had powers for more than a day after I gave them to him by mistake.”

“More than a day?” Lacey exclaimed. “Danny, what kind of power did you get? I don’t see how someone could manage to miss punching out walls, firing lasers or flying around.”

“His power only works on parahumans,” I added as an explanation.

“I boost capes, okay?” my father exclaimed, still hiding his face. From this angle, I could see him blushing up to his ears.

Payback, I thought with a smile.

“I suppose that’s rare,” Mike pointed out. “I’ve never heard on anything like that, at least.”

“Very rare,” Sveta added. “He’s assuredly in the top ten Trumps in North America. Maybe even worldwide. Especially as his power doesn't include the sort of drawbacks normally seen in similar powers.”

“Gee Danny! You’re moving up in the world!” Kurt exclaimed.

“Oh god.”

Everyone laughed at that, even my father a little.

Then there was a moment of silence. Thankfully it wasn’t one of those awkward silences though.

“How does this... power transferal process... work?” Lacey finally said, pointing out the elephant in
Danny’s head rose, and he had a mean smile on. “What, afraid?” he said, looking right at her. “It’s literally indescribable,” he added, faking a shiver.

She gulped. This clearly wasn’t the answer she’d been hoping for.

I shook my head at my father getting his own revenge, and strode forward. “Tag, you’re it,” I spoke as I poked her in the forehead. I instantly transferred my Earth/Horde/Spectre trio, which I supposed was the least lethal powerset I could currently grant her.

“Wait, wha-”

I’m Slenderman
“You’re now a cape,” I exclaimed.

There was a moment of silence. “That’s all?” Lacey asked.

I nodded.

“Well, can you describe it?” my father pointed out with a smile.

“There wasn’t anything to describe!” she countered as she glared at dad.

“Exactly,” he replied.

Lacey quickly figured out she’d been had. “You… You mean, mean man! I should hit you for that!”

“I offer you a better, higher paying job and this is all the thanks I get?” My father muttered out loud. “I’m so disappointed.”

“I also feel very disappointed,” Alexander said, interrupting the two. “I was expecting flashy lights, explosions, maybe even confetti.”

“We could always go with ominous gestures, monks chanting in the background, gothic costumes and the like if you prefer,” Sveta said, smiling brightly.

I turned to glare at the former Case 53. Clearly, she’d been playing too many videogames lately. Either that or spending time with Alec. Yeah, I could always blame Alec for things like this.

“No need, no need,” Alexander quickly added. “I was just… expecting different.” He turned to Lacey. “Any issue?”

“I can… feel something below us, but nothing outside of that,” she quickly replied. “Nothing that’s a deal-breaker, at least.”

“Mike?”

“I trust Danny,” the man answered. “And I can’t say I couldn’t use an extra twenty thousand dollars.”

Alexander nodded. “We’re all in then,” he confirmed to the nods of everyone.

I released a long sigh. That was a lot of pressure off my chest, right there. “I’ll need your help tomorrow, when I’m modifying the powers of the rest of my team,” I explained. “I’ll have your first paychecks, in cash, ready by then.” I hadn’t placed the money from the bank heist into a bank account yet, especially given that I had no way as Taylor Hebert to explain where I got it. After the
payout from the Protectorate, it had remained in the base as a hidden slush fund.

I then gave them an address and a time to meet, waved and walked out. Last thing I heard behind me was Kurt asking his wife, “What is this new power of yours anyhow?”

Maybe I should grab back that last power before I leave? Another day at full slots wouldn’t be an issue now.

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