### Mother of Vengeance

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#### Summary

After slaying a monster to protect a former friend, Taylor absorbs something of him—and his mutative power, encoded in his genes. Reborn as a monster queen in waiting, the newest member of the Wards faces fear, confusion about her new life...and a rather crazy group of other monster-kings just arrived on Earth Bet, looking to carve out the world for their own kingdoms.

#### Notes

Hello, AOO! Thought that since this is popular enough on both Fanfiction and Spacebattles, I'd post it here, too. Been meaning to get an account sooner or later.

Please note that the next chapters I'm uploading here are straight imports. Including most Author's Notes

Just so you know: I was also learning the in and outs of formatting when I was writing this, so be warned—the first few chapters kind of suck in that regard.

This is also, technically, an import, but given the Fanfiction block and the fact that other sites this is on don't respond favorably, it's a lot of copy/paste for me.

With that out of the way...
I curled up under the covers, still uncertain whether I was awake or in a nightmare. For the love of all that was good and just in the world, I hoped it was the latter.

“Taylor?”

At the edge of my awareness, I became aware of someone calling my name.

“Taylor, honey?”

Oh. My dad.

Slowly, I uncovered myself and, with what might have been a ten-ton weight on my chest, got up, fully expecting a look of fear or disgust.

Nope. Sympathy and empathy. My dad was reacting the way I desperately wanted him too. Which meant this wasn’t a dream.

Then the tears started.

*I couldn’t think. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t even breathe.*

*Dimly, I was aware of hot blood traveling down my arm, already cooling. I also became aware of a look of other shock and dismay on the man-lion’s face.*

*“Damnation. I knew you were a strong one.”*

*Then, looking more disappointed than anything, he fell over, giving me a look at the deep wound my scissors had inflicted on his upper chest.*

*The last thing I remembered before I fainted out the sound of lightning and thunder.*

*“Ms. Hebert?”*

I looked up at the therapist. Yamada, if I remembered correctly. Didn’t know why they got her.

*“Are you feeling okay?”*

“What do you think?” I immediately regretted the caustic aside as it escaped from my mouth. “I mean, no.”
“Taylor, please. You’re not going through this alone.” Yamada gave a comforting smile. “You were scared, you were angry, you saw that monster threatening another student, and you did what you could to defend her.”

“The second, mainly,” I admitted. “Look, I’ll be truthful here-I hate Emma. I hate her with the fury of the sun. I wasn’t trying to defend her.”

It took a second for her to realize what I was implying. “…And you think that you killed the Sphinx for the pleasure of having done so.”

I hadn’t, but I didn’t know what I thought. That made as much sense as any. I felt the pain of tears forcing their way out again, for the fourth time that week. “…Yes.”

“Taylor, I don’t know why you and Emma hate each other—”

“Because she’s a bully!” I screamed, suddenly angry again, but not at Yamada. “She’s a horrible, fucking awful person who has made my life hell for the past year and a half, and that’s after she… after she…”

I looked down.

“Used to be my friend.”

I weight that I didn’t know was on my chest came off. I felt Yamada put a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“And yet what made you angry was the fact that when the Sphinx began to hurt her, you didn't see Emma.”

I looked up at her eyes.

“You saw another student having to suffer her cruelty, and you realized the Sphinx would keep on being a bully, and a murderous one at that. You couldn't stand for that, and that says a lot about you. A lot of very good things about you. Taylor,” she said as she leaned in closer. “You aren't the Slaughterhouse 9.”

I let out the breath I had held for a week. “Thanks,” I muttered.

“And that is our time for this week,” she said as she glanced at the clock. “Since your school leave ends next week, how does Saturday sound?”

“Sounds fine.”

As I left, I suddenly remembered I forgot to tell her about the dreams. Damn. Oh well, I could get to them next week.

It wasn't like they were of the Sphinx. Or even that nightmarish.

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I was dying.
I was dying, and there was nothing I could use in My vast array of magic to heal.

As the armored form of Anduiras strode towards Me, sword in hand, I internally flicked through the scenarios of what plans I could use to escape.

I could exchange My essence with that of one of My generals. Nope, they would die in my place, and I didn’t know if I could plan my way out of a situation I knew nothing about in My current state.

I could distract him and run. Yes, try to fool the god of war into falling for a last-minute strategic feint. That would work. Besides, My workings would probably be destroyed on the off-chance I wasn’t being sarcastic.

So yes, the greatest of the gods was about to die. And My workings would go with me.

….unless.

I had studied apocryphal stories of other deicides on other worlds in preparation for (what seemed at the time) inevitable victory. I knew that the power of our astral forms would do anything in its power to survive, even past the death of the sapience attached to them. Thus why dead gods could be reborn.

From that, I knew that, frequently, the astral essence of a god would embed itself in those worshipers whose qualities their lords prized, in their very genetic code. This was almost certain to happen, given the direct physical presence of My Army. Probably with My rivals as well.

Normally, said power resulted in either nothing worth noting or slight increase of thaumaturgic aura potential, and thus the ability to take on a proper adventuring career…but those instances weren’t intentional.

In the last view moments, I sculpted My essence one last time, as I mentally connected with every mind that had proven itself Worthy to Me. In the space between their souls and consciousness, I spoke one last command as the sword came down, one meant for My essence more than they.

Go forth, and continue My Vision, My noble Children. Go forth, and let no other stop You, for you are My Heirs, my adopted Lineage. I leave the future to you.

As My own soul came apart in a great explosion, I sensed My essence embed itself in My Heirs, and begin sculpting their bodies to match their true selves, free of all restraints, even the weak, soft forms that My brethren had given them.

My last act was a grin.

Ooo-kayyy…wasn’t sure if that was a nightmare or not. Nightmares didn’t end with you winning.

I yawned and dragged myself over to the mirror, feeling a lot better than yesterday. Which is to say, not suicidal. I still felt pretty miserable, but I least I was sure I wouldn’t snap and start killing people.
Huh. Parts of my hair had begun to clump together. I lifted my brush towards them *sweet merciful Jesus that hurt ouch*. I had apparently let my hygiene go more than I realized. Had to get a professional to disentangle that.

I also detected my skin had gotten rather dry on places on my arms, though I didn’t feel uncomfortable. At all. Huh.

I hoisted my backpack, made myself breakfast, made some spare for my Dad (apparently he was still asleep), and proceeded to gather my courage before heading out the door into a crisp night air.

Wait. Back up.

I looked up, and yes, it was still the night. Quite close to being the morning, but it was still technically night. I felt like I had a full night's sleep in, what, four hours? Even more than that, I kept on registering enough light to see by, to the point where only the stars and moon told me it was still nighttime.

Now thoroughly confused, I went back inside.

The strange events didn't stop.

Over the course of waiting for school, my hair began to clump more and more, Not wanting to feel like a hot poker was in my scalp again, I tried to ignore it. This wasn't effective, and well-cultivated survival instincts drove me to keep on checking it, trying to prevent the natural braid from showing to the Terrible Trio and give them more ammunition at a very bad time for me.

It was apparently even dirtier than I thought. It felt...unnaturally smooth. And scaly. I could even swear I felt my hand touching it.

Eventually I decided it would show more if I kept worrying about it, so I did my best to will it to be unseen.

I swore I could feel it adjust to be better hidden.

I suppose trying very hard to ignore the sign of potential insanity, and not focusing on the world around me, is what led to Strange Event #2, when Dad woke up.

"Oh, you're already up YOUR HAND IS ON THE STOVE!"

I yelped and drew back from the hot girdle I had decided to make hashbrowns with out of a desire to repay dad for his kindness in comfort food during the past couple weeks...and felt absolutely no pain. In fact, now that I looked at my hand, I only saw what could have been to a mild sunburn what I was to an elephant.

"No, no, it's okay Dad." My own disbelief in the truthfulness of those words shown through as I showed the hand.

He sighed in relief, taking his portion of the hashbrowns. "Look, honey. I know you want to leave this all behind you, but you can't push yourself like this. Frankly, you're under a lot of stress, and nobody would blame you for-"

"Look, I'm okay Dad!" A bit of desperation was in my voice. "It was horrible, I still feel guilty
about it, but I have to look forward, I'm okay with it—"

"Taylor, you don't sound okay."

No. No I did not. I would have probably called to delay school another day, were it not for Strange Event #3 rearing its ugly head. A brief flash of something that wasn't quite smell danced through my mind if I regained my composure.

"Yeah, you're right. I mean, I've been taking it out on my homework, you on the dock workers, we've all been a little....stressed?"

....How did I know that? And why was I so certain?

Why the hell did I think bringing that up was a good plan?

Too late. A look of embarrassment and pain came to Dad's face. "They told you about that, did they?"

I could feel the blood rushing to my own cheeks, combined with the shame of bringing up Dad's temper. "No! I mean, uh, I guessed...which doesn't mean you've been angry with me, no I just thought that...I'm running out of time see you!"

Thus, for the first time in my life, did Taylor Hebert get to school an hour early. Sans backpack.

If I thought any luck with bullies would improve, well it did. Not very much, and now the school was scared of me.

Emma, at least, seemed to get the idea you don’t stab the people who saved your life in the back. The other two thirds of the Terrible Trio? Not so much.

“Ah, so our local murderess shows her face again.”

Screw you, Madison. Screw you.

“If you’re going to pick up the slack for Emma, please remember that I know that she, unlike you, used to have a soul. To me, your words as empty as your head.”

Madison looked about as taken aback as I was. Where had that come from?

…I wanted more of it, but still, when had I grown a spine?

“S-So?” She regained her composure. “At least my heart isn’t cut open, bleeding out on the tiles—“

“Oh don’t worry your pretty little head, I only aim for the heart. Given its capacity, I’d estimate, oh, five hours before it pumps out enough blood to cause trouble. Assuming the strain doesn’t cause a heart attack.”

Okay, now I wanted less. That was too mean, even for her. She garbled out something unintelligible that might have been a comment about my weight, before sulking back to Emma.
“Sophia was still there, though.

“…When did you become a badass?”

…Okay, not what I was expecting. Still, whatever newfound bravery I had driven me to look in her eyes. “Unlike you, I actually have more skills than looking good in a swimsuit.”

“Hey, I can do more than-Ahem. “ She ruffled her hair a little, breathing in a little to gather her breath. “Actually, despite the tag-along loser seems to think, I’m here to apologize.”

….What.

“Look, I’m going to give it to you straight. I underestimated you. Moment I saw you, I thought you were weak. A prey animal.”

Prey animal? Huh?

Apparantly she picked up on my confusion. “Way I see humans, not all of us are apex predators like we should be. Most? We’re just the herd of people who are, who are strong enough to take life by the horns and be endurance hunters like we’re supposed to be.”

I suddenly understood Sophia, more than I ever wanted to. And understood how loathsome she was as a person. Another echo of almost-scent went through my brain as I gripped my tray tighter

“Good predators? They’re just as cruel as the evil ones, but they take care of their herd. Keep it safe, like a sheepdog keeping dumb ewes from crossing the track and being eaten by wolves. Sort of like you and that man-lion thing.

“So, I was thinking. You aren’t a weakling, so I think if you learned how to stop being scared of hurting other people and show some of those guts with people other than Madison-“

“Everything will be nice and we’ll be friends and it will all be sunshine and unicorns with bloody horns because Taylor and Sophia will be best friends forever?” I didn’t know when I had gotten to my feet. But I was on my feet, almost growling. “Excuse me, but what is the disconnect!? You don’t just get to apologize and erase like, fucking everything that has happened between us!”

“Look, I get that. That’s good, but as hard as it is to believe, I’m honestly trying to help you-“

“I. Don’t. Want. Your. Help.” I spat. “I don’t know exactly what the hell happened between you and your mom’s boyfriend, but it has nothing to do with me, and-“ I stopped. When did I know Sophia had a single mom, and a bad boyfriend for a stepdad?

And when did Sophia drop her tray and look like someone had just stabbed her in the gut?

…Oh God. What have I done?

I stepped back, mortified at the bit of Emma that had shoved itself out of my mouth. Then I became aware of my sprinting to the bathroom.

Scrubbing my hands rapidly and washing my face, I noticed the dry bits had grown a bit, and become tougher. A brief shock of sensation, like smell, echoed through my brain.
Then I heard the sizzling, and saw that the sink had corroded a little under my fingernails (which, I idly noted, needed to be cut). Surprised, I looked up.

My face had changed, even from earlier that day. My features were softer, rounder, and prettier than before. Not by much, but definitely something I would have noticed if I checked. More than that, a strange, greenish substance was drying around my tear ducts. On a whim, I scratched a bit of it off and rubbed it against the wall. There was another sizzle, and the tile cracked.

I was a cape? Well, that would explain the sudden knowledge of Sophia’s family history, but-

There was movement in my hair. I froze.

Said hair parted ever so slightly, revealing an ophidian head with scales the same exact color as my hair. The snake looked around, then tasted the air. I felt the same echo of almost-smell echo through my head, and this time I could make out the individual scents of the bathroom, from the stench of people doing their business to anti-sceptics. Mixed in was the scent of a hundred swirlies, a dozen forced fines to use it, at least a couple assaults.

Had I enough presence of mind to think rationally, I would wonder how the hell I knew what those things smelled like, and why I could smell them. As it was, I was too busy focusing on the fact that a snake now lived in my hair, up until it retreated back into it.

A few minutes later, I became aware I was outside the school, hiding in a bush while breathing rapidly. From how hoarse my voice felt, I think I was screaming for all of that time.

“So, these…changes didn’t start happening until you went back to school?”

Dr. Yamada, bless her soul, was taking in my new body a hell of a lot better than I was.

The mutations didn’t stop over the course of a week. More of my hair clumped and animated into very fleshy snakes attached to my cranium. There were four up there now, each with a mind of its own and constantly tasting both the air and sin unless I told them to stop. The dry parts on my skin had not only completely covered them, but become yellow and very, very tough; I now had bird talons for both my arms and legs now (and thank god for that, as I discovered their toughness as it saved me from a very stupid mistake-the same mistake as to why Yamada’s schedule was now open on a Friday, and why I was now living in a hospital bed). My nails were more claws now—I could cut them, with effort, but they weren’t going to break accidentally now. I also had noticed I only wept acid when I was angry, which was probably a very good thing.

“Yeah.” I scratched a wing. “These came in the day before yesterday.”

“Ah.”

Oh yeah. The wings. They weren’t ugly wings, but they were very large, very tough bat wings. Which also grew over the course of five minutes; one second, I was rubbing my back against a wall to rid myself of an itch, the next wet, wrinkled wings were shoving their way, painlessly, out of the nape of said back (which lead directly to Stupid Mistake, as my control over the snakes slipped and I was overloaded by the alley I was in, and had visions of what happened there. When I came to, Dad was confiscating a knife and I had indents on my left talon). I now officially looked like a mythological monster. Three cheers for parahumans.
Yamada sighed. “Taylor, I know you feel like fate is dealing you a bad hand—“

“More like several.” I had long since resolved to talk to Yamada about my newfound anger problems, but that wasn’t a product; I sounded more defeated than anything else.

“…because you have been very unlucky these past few weeks,” she admitted. “After the whole Sphinx fiasco and you show remarkable recovery, you start turning into a Case 53 with no warning, and become overloaded by your new sense of awful things that happened six months ago. I don’t blame you—given what you described, I’ll admit I would have done everything to get away from that too.”

“What? The alley or my life?” I looked up at the roof. “My mother is dead, my best friend betrayed me, I murdered someone, I turned into a freakish monster as my cape power…Doctor, does God hate me?” I chuckled darkly. Really, at this point I wouldn’t be surprised.

“Actually, I’m going to ask something myself first: Can you use those wings?”

I jerked my head back to the therapist. “I…never thought of that.” Which was the truth; I was in a depressed, confused haze for the past day and a half, I never quite realized that parahumans don’t mutate unless they can use those mutations to some effect. “Is it…legal?”

She helped me up. “As long as you’re in here, and I think there’s enough room to hover, at least. If you need more space, I can ask for you to use the grounds.”

Opening my wings, I hummed slightly to myself while Yamada got out of the way, and flapped.

“Gah!”

I tumbled over my bed, did a somersault, and somehow managed to steady myself before I impacted the wall, my toe-claws making gashes in the floor as my new limbs beat furiously to keep myself steady.

Yamada had to suppress a laugh. “You…may want to tilt them down next. And not so strong.”

Good idea. I willed my wings to face the ground, and made a much smaller motion.

It wasn’t a hover. More of a high jump, only much less strenuous. I did it again, then flapped in midair to brush the ceiling, before coming back to the ground almost soundlessly.

Slowly, I began to giggle, then laugh. For the first time in at least a month, I felt genuinely overjoyed. I could fly! I could actually fly! Alexandria, Glory Girl, Legend—I was walking in the path of the great, and frankly given what I knew of their pasts, I’m pretty sure that I was the most utterly overjoyed to discover that the ground no longer bound me. Finally, fucking finally, my powers came with something that didn’t screw me over somehow. Well, unless I got caught in a jet turbine or something. So no capes, unless you counted the way my wings hung when I didn’t use them.

Yamada was beaming. “And look on the bright side! Besides your wings, your other mutations aren’t exactly ugly.”

Which was true. I could will my snakes to hide, and my talons weren’t actually all ugly and monstrous, just hawk-like. And, uh, my face didn’t stop getting prettier. Or other areas. In fact, I was actually quite femininely beautiful now, just…obviously a cape. You win some, you lose
some. Everything that had happened, all the hell I had been through since I had developed my powers, didn’t seem so bad.

This high probably wouldn’t last that long, but dear God did I ever need this.

But, one last thing.

“Um, Dr. Yamada? Before you go, I’d like to talk to you about these weird dreams…”
The high lasted a lot longer than I thought it would. But I suppose that was a benefit of being a pessimist; you could be pleasantly surprised.

I also guessed my expectations were an extremely low bar to clear, seeing as how my estimated time-to-breakdown was ten minutes after Yamada left. It was closer to two hours.

That's when I discovered yet another downside of my powers; the ability to discover things you were better off not knowing.

Four of the doctors and nurses, for instance, were adulterers. I didn't really care about that (if anything, I felt bad for them), but the smell of adultery put my mind in places I did not want to go, since it also revealed...the favored method of adultery. I had to take a shower after that.

More alarming were the drug addicts. Or the drug thieves, actually. Thankfully, neither was a medical professional, but still, I vowed to never get hurt in this asylum. Or develop insomnia.

The last guy was just plain disgusting. As a prank, a Dr. Sheldon Bixby apparently thought it was a great idea to pour sugar in the director's car engine, resulting in him having to replace it altogether. Apparently they didn't teach you perception of obvious bullying jackasses in medical school, hence why he still worked here.

Even so, I bit back on the bile I had for him, at least for now. I didn't trust the director to believe the word of a freakish mutant over a trained pharmacologist, and in any case I didn't know how competent he was in his professional-

As I passed by Dr. Bixby to get my dosage of antidepressants, one of the Medusa-snakes tasted the air. And my hair, since I had willed them to stay coiled and hidden, but also the air.

Started rumors about you, said you were some kind of "freakish Gorgon wannabe", laughed at a remark about how you were rejected from the Succubus Beauty Contest.

Succubus. A female demon who drained the life of men she slept with and mothered minions from them. Disposable minions.
Screw restraint, Dr. Bixby was dead.

The first part of Plan Extract Jackass from Job was to figure out exactly how much stuff I could gather on him before I went to the director, a Dr. Adler.

Given the sensitivity of my Medusas, I was honestly more worried about finding something redeemable in the man, a place where he had conveniently misread a prescription in the way he had actually recommended it, ignored a religious objection to a life-saving treatment, or overlooked a minor error from someone he liked rather than finding sins I couldn't overlook. I suspected Adler would be all too happy to fire someone who had jacked up her insurance premium singlehandedly, I just wanted to give more legitimate reasons to avoid the headache of a lawsuit.

It was something of a bittersweet moment to discover that no, Dr. Bixby was worse than Sophia. Among other things, he had actually ignored the drug thieves, harassed a nurse, did not understand the meaning of "bedside manner," and was generally a horrible excuse for a human being. On one hand, now I was sure I was on the moral high ground, but on the other, how did this guy avoid being sued for malpractice for so long?

The second item on my agenda was actually gathering said information without gathering attention to myself. Infinitely easier said than done. Besides the fact I was on suicide watch (level one, admittedly, which just meant checking in every couple hours and having an orderly follow me around out of my room, no shoelaces or other possible implements of self-harm allowed), the staff avoided me. I didn't blame them. I had seen my face in a mirror, and even I was a little scared of me. Yes, I was definitely more attractive, but it was a hard, edged beauty that enhanced how freakish I looked rather than downplayed it. I was able to hide the snakes in my hair unless I got mad, and my talons under bandages, but my wings? Trying to bundle my wings under my gown caused a lot of pain and turned me into a hunchback. Not something worth it to avoid attention. I supposed it was good for undercover tracking when I was a hero, but in a hospital on a mission of spite? Not so much.

Thankfully, I also learned something about my snakes; the more I focused them on something, the more I could get detailed information from it, even how long ago it was. The pure-scent ability was shot in a sterile hospital environment (and thank God for that, I don't think I would want to be treated in a non-sterile hospital), but the sin-scent? Not so much. Doing that to Bixby was what allowed me to figure out all the crap he had done in the last six months, and hanging around places he had worked gave context (turns out the two drug thieves had pain problems that they overmedicated, one was actually a war veteran with inoperable shrapnel. I made a note to help that guy when I could).

Which led to item #3; convincing the director of my powers.

"You wanted to see me, Ms. Taylor?"

Dr. Adler was an older woman, mid-50s I guessed. To her credit, I didn't detect much sin-scent from her. Well, I did; she was a chronic speeder and more than a tad of a liar to protect her personal ambitions. But nothing that I really objected to, especially given none of her sins involved mistreating a patient and her foul opinion of hospital bureaucrats.

"Um, okay." I cleared my throat. First things first. "Yamada told you about my powers, right?"

"Yes? Is there something wrong (white lie)?"

The thing about smelling sin, I had quickly discovered, was that I could smell deception as it happened, and the extent of the deception thereof. I had discovered that after I came home from
school after my first Medusa revealed itself, as Dad tried to desperately dance around the issue of my mutations.

Which was sweet, but I also felt terrible about doing so when he was only trying to be nice. So I lied to Yamada about it, which much to my annoyance tripped off my scent. I had to learn to make the snakes stop tasting the air reflexively if I wanted to avoid that for daily life.

"Well, I wasn't entirely truthful…Tell me the most subtle lie you can think of in a list of facts about yourself."

She thought about it. "Okay…I'm named after a Sherlock Holmes character, I've played the violin since I was seven, I failed English in college but got a 3.5 average, my password is a name of a person (half-truth) and I own three dogs."

I rose an eyebrow. Interesting woman.

"The password is a name, but not of a person, or a person, but not a name."

She shrugged. "The latter. So you can detect lies?"

"More than that. You called your boss a 'pedantic, pretentious, pontificating, and self-righteous asshat who wouldn't know real medicine if it popped up and took a bite out his obstructionist, tightwaddled backside, metaphorically speaking', oh…" I let a snake taste the air. "Two-to-three weeks ago?"

Her jaw dropped. "You're a mind reader?"

"No, actually my sin-scent is a lot more precise than I admitted." I sighed. "If it happened six months ago, I can tell you what it was, and if I have enough time and focus, the exact content. Honestly I need to gag these things before I get too cynical." I gestured to a Medusa I had let poke out.

She shook her head. "Okay. I don't know parahuman biology, but I can call up the PRT-

"That wasn't what I wanted to talk to you about." I closed my eyes to steady myself.

"No? What is?"

"It's about your pharmacist. Dr-"

"Oh, Christ."

Steadiness gone. I looked up at Dr. Adler, who was now cradling her head. "What did Sheldon do this time?" she muttered through clenched teeth.

I mouthed wordlessly for a second. "Th-this is a thing? He's actually been a jackass for this long?"

"Oh, hell, yes. Have I told you about the time he poured sugar in my car?"

She knew about that? I felt myself getting angrier. "W-well, why haven't you fired him!? If he's that much of an ass you recognize him by profession, why the f-"

"Because he's the boss' son."

…Oh.
I calmed down. "That would explain a lot."

"Look, even if you couldn't tell I was lying, I'm going to be honest with you." She leaned back in her chair, still rubbing her head. "Bixby deserves to be in our esteemed accommodations and not in front of them. The man is chronically unable to stop himself from acting like a douchebag or persuade himself from one of those practical jokes. He feels horrible after he does so, so he's no sociopath, but believe me when I say the only reason I haven't recommended a leave of absence is that the only person who doesn't realize he has a problem is his father. Note that I am including Sheldon himself in my reference pool."

And now I felt bad for attempting to sabotage him. I looked down. "Actually, I'm sorry for wasting your time-"

"No, no, it's okay. If he's being an ass to a patient, we need to hear this." She looked up. "Well, my sin-scent caught a night with his friends…."

She listened to my explanation without comment or expression. At the end of my laundry list of sins, she cleared her throat. "Yep. Classic Bixby. Didn't know he covered up a drug theft, either, may in fact finally get his father to pay attention; he'll certainly have to leave. I'll have to put those guys into rehab too." She sat up. "Still, why did you react like that? I'm not Yamada, but declaring a vendetta because you overheard nasty rumors about you isn't like you, Taylor. You, and I quote, 'try to vanish' instead."

That…was a really good point. What the hell? I'd heard about mental effects having powers had on people, but still, I didn't pick up grudges like that.

I thought about it for a minute. "…I think it's because he compared me to a succubus."

"Go on." She nodded.

I sounded as uncertain as I felt. "I think….I think it's because of what a succubus does. I mean, it's a sex demon, so for one I'm being called a slut, but I remembered that a succubus mothers children to serve as minions."

"…This is about your mother, isn't it." A note of comprehension came into her tone. Hence statement, not a question.

"I…guess." I tugged at my gown a little. "But it's not just that. I always thought of succubi as treating their children as disposable. Being very cruel and callous."

"Let me guess; you thought you were called cruel and callous yourself, you reacted poorly given your trigger, and decided to confirm that Bixby was being a complete hypocrite and prove that you aren't by extension."

Didn't psychiatrists learn how to be less blunt? But she was right, and I was tearing up now. "…Yes."

"Hey, hey. Don't cry." I felt the embrace. "You're angry, hurt, and scared, but you aren't cruel. You thought he was trying to attack you in some way, and you reacted badly. Nobody blames you, and you helped me get his leash back on."

…Amazing how being able to tell someone was being perfectly honest helped mental therapy. "Thanks."
"No problem. You don't become the director of an asylum through incompetence." She thought a bit. "Hopefully."

I was expecting Dr. Yamada to be aware of what happened between Adler and I. She did not disappoint.

Instead, she herself was disappointed. "You are aware doctor-patient confidentiality exists, right? I wouldn't have told your father."

"...It never crossed my mind," I admitted.

Yamada sighed. "Look, Taylor. You're a very bright and determined young woman, the kind of person that would overcome depression through sheer willpower if that was possible. But it isn't, and I can't help you if you aren't honest with me."

"I'll try."

"Okay then..." Yamada adjusted her ponytail. "You were right to go to Dr. Adler about Bixby. He probably needed that even more than you if she's telling me the truth." She looked up from her notepad. "Still, I can't help but notice you're trying to avoid me. If you're agitated about something, you can be honest."

*Manipulation*, said the sin-scent. I hit the responsible Medusa with a finger. "I've been thinking about what Adler said, about the fact I reacted so poorly to being called a succubus, and why."

"Yes, and?"

I looked down at my claws. "She...wasn't wrong. I hated being called cruel, or callous."

She sat up. "And the reason you're upset about something?"

"Because...I'm not sure he's wrong. I've had anger issues ever since my trigger, and you don't stalk a person for two days and figure out ways to hurt them because you're nice. There. I said it. Thank God."

Yamada processed this information, then smiled. "Well, if you're worried about it, you can't be that bad, can you?"

My mental workings screeched to a halt. After I rolled over her remark in my mind for a while, I sighed and fell back in my chair. *Derp*, I thought to myself. Three cheers for Taylor's brain, missing the forest for the trees. Again.

"And that would be the other part," I muttered to no one in particular. "I get obsessed over these things."

"Hm. So you're worried not only about your anger, but that you can't let go of things easily anymore?"

"Not that true. I was never good at the latter."

"Okay, if that's the case here's an old therapist trick." She leaned forward. "Lets think of a safe word."
My mind flashed back to the adulterers. Dear God, why did I smell that trash can why why why?

"I can tell what you're thinking of, and no, not that safe word. Just something you focus on whenever you feel yourself getting angry or obsessed. Visualize it, attempt to devote every part of your brain on it until you calm down and can think rationally. Then tell me about it."

I thought about it. Anything to do with Mom was right out, then I'd be depressed and angry. Something with Dad? No, I'd seen his temper and that might intrude. So something nice off the top of my head, like…

"Butterflies?"

"Butterflies sound wonderful. Now, about your dreams…"

The rest of the session went a lot better.

"So…Miss Militia."

"She seems to be the official recruiter for Brockton Bay, yes."

I was finally in proper clothes now. Tight ones, yes, but at least they were clothes and not a gown. Probably would have been better if the bit of wing not out of the holes Dad had cut for me wasn't straining against them.

Trying to ignore the pain of this, I looked at the approaching car, and a rather dark though struck me. "…Do you think they'll take…someone like me?"

Dad put his hand on my back. "Just be you, and I'm sure you'll be fine."

A Medusa struggled against the tape I was using as a muzzle, so I didn't know if he was that confident or not. Still, it was the thought that counted. I smiled. "And think about butterflies, right?"

Dr. Yamada, who had decided it was probably a good idea if both of my anti-stressors would present, said nothing, just gave me a thumbs-up.

I breathed in, and focused on the swallowtail in my mind's eye. Taylor Hebert was going to be a hero, and nothing, not Sophia, not my mutations, not my fear, was going to stop me.

I willed the swallowtail to multiply before the other parts of my mind chimed in.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I apologize to any therapists in the audience for completely mangling your profession. And probably Dr. Yamada too, the nicer and saner someone is the harder they are to write for me. There is no quirk I can seize on. Actually had to rewrite this after publishing due to the fact that I didn't know what I was talking about, and I knew it.
Now that that embarrassment’s out of the way, let’s move on to other embarrassments! …Why does Miss Militia have to be sane? I thought Worm was about people fundamentally incapable of facing their own problems…wait, we meet Shadow Stalker later this arc. Nevermind.

What struck me most about Miss Militia—or should I say Hannah?—was how…not intimidating she was up close.

I guessed that was the reason she was sent to recruit new Wards. I knew enough about Armsmaster through my advised research (the other therapist I had between the two weeks I had Yamada was more than a bit unsure of what to do with me, as his specialty was depression rather than capes, but he had a refreshing amount of common sense about parahumans), to know that he was the kind of person you consulted in order to make the Protectorate seem very unappealing. Dragon was an agoraphobic who communicated with the world through her remote suits; warm and charismatic, but definitely not with the human touch through her viewscreens and armor. Beyond that, there weren’t that many recognizable sponsored capes around Brockton Bay (to wit, I learned one called himself Chubster, and I think that would have stuck in my mind if there was a big news report on him).

On the other hand, you would expect the woman whose entire power was to create guns would be…more aggressive, maybe? More like her power?

Not that I minded, but still.

“No bull, please,” I cut off a particularly friendly remark. “I know you’re trying to be nice, but I really don’t need the snakes’ running commentary.”

She looked utterly taken aback. “But I was saying—“

“That I’d be able to live as close to a normal life as possible?” I gave a rather caustic laugh. “Sorry, but I don’t need hypersensitive snake hairs-slash-detective tools to tell me that you don’t honestly think I’ll be able to have a life outside being a hero, or even get a resemblance to the old one.” I tapped a brown, unmuzzled head for emphasis, having taken off the tape at Hannah’s asking as a gesture of her openness. “As it is, you’re just distracting with the smell of you trying to be polite. No offense.”

She paused for a moment, as I realized that this kind of thing probably wouldn’t happen if I was honest about my powers beforehand and oh look at the pretty monarch pin.
“Speaking of which…you say you think those…”

“Medusas. I call them Medusas.”

“Makes sense. Those Medusas smell sins? Why do they detect people being polite? I mean you consciously control them, right?”

“You saw the CAT scans?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Well, you know the Medusas have their own nervous system and brains?” I pulled one out, a surprisingly long distance. Pity they weren’t poisonous, though I could probably use them as part of a grapple. “The theory is that, when the CAT scans are fully examined, they’re going to find more than just a lizard brain up there. Dr. Adler did some tests a couple days ago, and she says they show self-awareness and the ability to coordinate themselves, like dogs. One tried to clean off a dot an orderly painted on its nose, and when that didn’t work another came over to help.” I let it crawl back in. “Dr. Adler told me about the Corona, and they think the snakes are my version. Since it seems that personality influences power, I think it might be because they’re stuck in the state I was during my...event,” I finished lamely, trying to avoid the memories.

Hannah followed along. “And they’re paranoid and easily upset.”

“And they seem to work off the idea I judge everything I wouldn’t like on general principle, no matter the reason,” I said as I sighed and looked at my uncovered talons. “Don’t know why I turned into a Case 53 though-”

“You didn’t.”

“Eh?”

“Case 53s are actually a lot worse off than you. The only personal memories they have is their name, if that. You, on the other hand, have a very loving and supportive father who put you in infrastructure designed to support you when the mutation became overwhelming.”

...So I was still massively screwed over by my power, but at least I was luckier than the other guys? I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“And in any case,” she said as she adjusted her scarf, “the Wards don’t discriminate. The Boston team is led by a Case 53, and as mentioned, you aren’t one.”

“…What does he look like?”

“I refuse to answer that question on the basis that your Medusas may incriminate me.”

I chuckled despite myself. “In any case, I don’t miss my old life very much. About the closest thing I had to a friend betrayed me to befriend this girl with this crap law-of-the-jungle philosophy. Then, just when I get back to school, she acts like it was no big deal, I'm a predator too, let's be friends. Then my snakes activate, and I accidentally bring up her mother's boyfriend, and-“

“Um, pardon my asking, but who is this student?”
I looked up at a suddenly very concerned Miss Militia.

“Sophia Hess? The track team and swimming ur-bitch?”

Now she looked utterly mortified. "You...wouldn't happen to have gone to Winslow, would you?"

Now it was my time to be alarmed. "Yes?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it again before looking away.

She then looked back, looking very sympathetic. The kind of sympathy that one has for someone you just realized is the kicked dog of fate.

“Even if you couldn’t tell if I was lying, I wouldn’t. You may also want to sit down, because you aren’t going to like this.”

I did so, willing the monarch pin to become larger and larger in my mind’s eye.

“Shoot away, no pun intended.”

She told me.

The monarch pin became more of an inferno pin.

Both Hannah and I agreed that I probably needed a few minutes to calm down from “hovering through the power of pure rage while screeching a long stream of profanity that could be heard by the Simurgh” mode.

Still breathing heavily, I exited the interview room, trying very hard to think of swallowtails again. In the theater of my mind, they all shoved their way down Sophia’s throat, causing her to suffocate to death despite going immaterial. Probably not what Yamada had intended, but definitely satisfying.

Speaking of Yamada, she and Dad were rushing over, having heard (and possibly be rendered partially deaf) by my tirade.

“What happened, honey?”

“Miss Militia just told me who Shadow Stalker is.”

“And?”

I collapsed on a chair. “Her real name is Sophia Hess.”

It took all of two seconds for Yamada to put the pieces together from my interviews, before giving me a sympathetic hug, gingerly avoiding the acid tears. “Oh God. I’m so sorry.”

“Wait, who’s Sophia Hess?” Dad looked utterly befuddled.

“The worst bully in school,” I said dully.
It took all of five seconds for him to connect the dots himself. If I didn’t know any better, I would say he spontaneously triggered with the ability to turn purple. “Taylor, please forgive me,” he said as he calmly-too calmly-walked to the door of Hannah’s temporary office, and gingerly closed the door. A minute later, you could tell where I got it from.

I tried to return the hug, but mine was more of a touch. I was still too spent from raging at a cruel and spiteful God and His legion of snickering angels.

She eventually broke the ice. “Taylor, nobody will blame you if you don’t want to work with her-“

“That’s the thing though, isn’t it?” My energy returned. “Here I am, wanting to fulfill my promise to Mom, and do something actually good for a change instead of rot on the exact freaking bottom of the school hierarchy, all ready to join a team and be happy and have friends for once in my life, and guess who’s in the Legion of Superfriends? Sophia FUCKING Hess!” I broke free of her embrace and punched a wall to avoid hitting Yamada instead. The talon-scale absorbed the hit, and actually made a scratch in the tile. If I weren’t ready to become a multiple murderer yet, I would have probably noted that more consciously. “I wanted to become a Ward to escape her and all of her bullshit, but nooo, it turns out she’s our anti-Endbringer cape! Who’s to say the rest of the Wards aren’t like her, huh!? Who’s to say they won’t join fun activities of shitting on the snake-haired, bat-winged…bird-taloned…acid-crying…”

No, no, no, don’t cry, don’t cry, and now I was crying. Damn it.

“…Freak…”

I sank to the floor, ignoring the sizzling as real tears washed out my acid ones onto the floor.

It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair.

I felt a hand on the back of my back. Not Yamada’s. Dimly, I registered the owner’s screaming had stopped.

“Hey Dad,” I said quietly.

“Hey Taylor,” he said hoarsely. Apparently he was even louder than I thought.

“If I may intrude…” I heard Yamada’s heels come up, then my Dad’s hand move over slightly to let Yamada’s in.

Slowly, I felt myself stop shuddering, then rise to my feet. I took out the monarch pin again and begin to rub it, letting the one in my mind flit about imaginary flowers to calm myself down.

When I felt safe, I let myself put the scenario together. First, I remembered just how much the Wards seemed to despise Sophia as much as I did. That cleared up one paranoid objection to the idea of joining.

Second, I thought back to her words that day. I remembered what she said about good predators protecting their herds. I still thought it was a loathsome philosophy from an even more loathsome person, but my Medusas were operational at that stage, and I didn’t get the sense she was lying. So she did honestly think of herself as a hero, albeit one with the most fitting “anti-“prefix imaginable.
Thirdly, I still felt terrible about bringing up her stepdad (in-all-but-name). I had learned long ago about trigger events (thank you, Yamada), and I had a sneaking suspicion that I brought up the worst moment of her life. So I really wasn’t that differahahahaha I couldn’t think that with a straight face.

But still, she may have been a bitch, she was still a heroine, just a brutal one. I could swallow my distaste for her and not cost the Wards a much-needed member or two. Besides, it wasn’t like she locked me in a locker and left me to die or anything, right?

…I didn’t put it past her, but I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Thanking my father (and the woman I increasingly viewed as a mother-figure) I rose to my feet, and steeling myself, went back into Hannah’s room.

“I’m still joining,” I said bluntly.

Hannah, looking more than a bit frazzled after being treated to the infamous secret art of the Hebert Clan Rant twice over, looked up in surprise. “You’re not angry about Shadow Stalker?”

“Actually, yes I am, but I’m a reasonable person,” I said evenly through clenched teeth, speaking from the impromptu speech I had made for myself. “I recognize that she is a relatively effective Ward in her own right, complete lack of worth at being a human being notwithstanding, so I am willing to begrudge her continued existence. If the rumor on Parahumans Online is correct about the reason she was recruited, she may even help save our asses from, I don’t know, Behemoth someday. However,” I said as I leaned on her desk. “We’re going to have to agree on some terms first.”

“If you want her or you to be reassigned, I can arrange-“

“No, not that.” I breathed in, wanting to get the whole thing out in one go. “Let me make this clear; I do not like Sophia Hess. I am not liked by Sophia Hess. Sophia Hess and I despise each other with the fury of a sun that has not had sleep for the past week. Ergo, I wish to see as little of Sophia Hess as possible, and she likewise.”

“Therefore, I ask that if I join the Wards, that I be kept as far away from Sophia as possible. Apart from the introduction and inevitable blowout between us, I do not want to have scheduled training at the same time and/or room as Sophia, I do not want to be put on patrols where Sophia is one of the members of the team, and if possible be dispatched far ahead of or behind Sophia so we do not encounter each other on the job and possibly try to strangle each other. Am. I. Clear?”

The fact that this speech was from a fourteen-year old girl probably didn’t make it sound as serious as I wanted it to be, so I let my Medusas fan out with that last punctuation, along with my wings. I felt my claws dig into the desk.

Much to my own surprise, it seemed to work. “U-Understood. I’ll send the application to Director Piggot. A bit premature, but welcome to the Wards.”

“Okay, good.” I let both snakes and wings drop, yanking out my talons as well. “Sorry about the ‘irate demon’ act, it’s just that…I really don’t like her.”

“I…guessed. Just…don’t do that again, please? You could get Iblis himself to shut up with that
Iblis: The Islamic Devil, and known for whispering ill suggestions into the hearts of man as that job.

Ouch. And…actually really impressive, come to think of it, especially from Hannah. Given the Medusas’ abilities, I was bound for being an interrogator anyway, so I probably needed to augment my lie detector with the ability to play bad cop even better. Yes, and practice getting mad on command to drip acid to really make it effective, maybe tell a few invented stories of the last guy that pissed me off, and-

I caught a sudden sin-scent. Tasted like bullying. But Hannah hadn’t….

Oh.

Oh God.

Think monarch, think monarch, think monarch…

As I calmed down from the potential guilty breakdown, I realized that actually wasn’t a way my power screwed me over. If anything, it prevented me from turning into another Sophia. Good Medusa.

I hoped and prayed that I wouldn’t wake up one day and find I gotten used to my scent, like I had with the minor stink I encountered every day.

“Are you sure about this?” my Dad asked me for the tenth time.

“See previous answers,” I said, rolling my eyes. I had resolved that at least part of this was going to go badly, but at least I had plotted out the possible paths with how badly it was going to go and felt prepared for most of them. “I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

“No really, are you sure? Because I’ll go in if you-“

“No, no, this is something I have to do myself. I can’t have a secret identity when the entire school knows I was found shivering in a bush with a snake growing out of my head, let alone all this.” I gestured to my wings and arms. “You’ll be granted housing in a PRT-patrolled neighborhood, I’ll have plenty of time to unload whatever crap life throws me in there, thank you.”

“O…kay,” he said, obviously unconvinced. “But if you need anything, just call, right?”

“If I’m not too mad to speak, I will.” I smiled ruefully. “See you later Dad. Love you.”

‘Love you too, Taylor.”

I got out, in my “hunchback” disguise (depressingly, I found that caused people to avoid looking at me, if they at all noticed), and took a look at the PRT building, which was…a building. A heavily reinforced one, but it was a normal building otherwise.

I hoped this was worth it. But even if it wasn’t-at least I tried.
Chapter End Notes

Also, the part I have dreaded is coming up-writing Emily Piggot, especially given how Taylor can taste her prejudices and reluctance to interact with an obviously monstrous cape.

(Also, the rumor on Parahumans Online is just that, a rumor. It doesn't have any basis in reality, they just hate Stalker because she's a huge jerk there too).
I had not expected Director Emily Piggot to be a particularly likable individual given my healthy disrespect of the school administration, and how she was the principal of the biggest high school there was.

She did not meet my expectations. If anything, I would have expected her to have happily taken each one and gleefully explain how I did not comprehend how much of an irritating, self-important, politically driven bigot she was if she knew my opinion.

Even before the moment I saw the heavyset Director, my Medusas caught the scent of the actions driven by the contempt of her own charges. More than that was the sheer amount of myopia she possessed if I was reading the scent right (didn’t act based purely on prejudice, nothing in there about being an ass to normals). Yes, Director, please, let’s show that parahumans cannot bully normal people…by bullying the parahumans. Brilliant plan.

At least she seemed to hate cape bullies as much as I now did, so I could at least make her listen to my stipulations for Sophia. I still put on the rubber bands I was now using for Medusa muzzles (and, not coincidentally, could be easily cast off if I ordered them to unhinge their jaw and rub them off in my hair) before I entered the room, as I didn’t have to want to deal with Piggot’s stink and possibly allow my already low opinion of her to show on my face should the Medusas smell her reaction to them.

Of course, after speaking to her for a bit, I discovered something else I disliked about Piggot, one that would probably color a lot of my interactions with the PRT.

“You’re reprimanding her!?”

A stick up her rear with the word “Protocol” on it.

“Yes, reprimanding. Not punishing, reprimanding.” Piggot looked even more irritated than she normally did, a feat if there ever was one. “Frankly, revealing Shadow Stalker’s secret identity to
you is something that would normally get her probation from the Protectorate for months, possibly firing altogether. I declined to pursue that on the basis that it was likely very vital information that I would have granted permission anyway, but she was disinclined in a moment of weakness.”

“But Hannah did nothing wrong!” I let my Medusas fan out again. “She just wanted to-“

“I am aware of that. Sit down.”

Now it was my turn to be intimidated; Piggot knew exactly how to counter attempts to cow her, it seemed. I followed instructions. After she was apparently satisfied that I wouldn’t come back with a cutting remark, Piggot spoke again. “As I was saying, everything would have proceeded in mostly the same way it did in the normal course of events, but what happened afterward demonstrates my point. Smith?”

A PRT member took out a tape recorder and hit play. “...Miss Militia, I just heard something very interesting from my daughter,” said the abnormally calm voice of Dad before Agent Smith had to wince from the power of the Hebert Clan Tirade before clicking it off.

“Based on the fact that Dr. Jessica Yamada was also in the room, I take it you relayed that information to both her and your father?”

I quickly caught on to what Piggot was trying to do. “Nope. Not going there. You are not going to blame the victim here, blame Sophia-“

“I do blame Shadow Stalker.”

One could hear the record in my mind scratch. “Pardon?”

“While she was not responsible for your trigger, I do blame Ms. Hess for provoking such an extreme reaction in you, and if I had any choice in the matter, I would happily escort her to Detroit myself.” She gritted her teeth.

“Sadly for both you and me, she hasn’t managed to dig her own grave far enough for that yet, so I have to settle for a tracking anklet and informing her parent for greater supervision.”

A dozen questions appeared in my head, like “does an anklet even work on her?” and “her mom didn’t know?” but selfishly, the first thing that occurred to me was personal. “You’re taking my side?”

“On this, yes. But back to my point.” She inhaled. “I think this should be obvious, but you can’t inform others of your fellow Wards’ real names and identities. Not even your father.”

I felt defensive again. “W-well, who else!? You try holding that fact in when you feel like your one remaining hope at being somehow capable of a social life was just-“

“Still. Speaking.”

I shut up. Piggot could give me pointers on the bad cop pose.

“Let me put it this way; as it is, you can’t have a secret identity as it is. The fact that Taylor Hebert killed the Sphinx, also known as Ziz Lite, is a matter of public record, as is your rather public breakdown when you began to develop those…appendages.” She shivered a little at the mention.
“Quite simply, Daniel Hebert is going to be under armed guard for the rest of his life, because people are going to figure out they can get to you through him.”

“…I fail to see what this has to do with Sophia.”

“Because now he’s a security risk for Shadow Stalker too, and if your powers were more subtle, he would be placed under armed guard anyway.” She sat back and straight in her chair, the very picture of the unassailable leader. “There’s a reason the unwritten rules exist, why no one attempts a real thorough investigation of identities—because the instant one knows of a parahuman’s real name, one becomes a target for that parahuman’s enemies. People like Yamada, who deal with the real identities of Wards on a daily basis, are trained to resist interrogation and avoid being abducted, but your father? Your father is the manager of employment at a dock. Unless his boss is spectacularly awful and emotionally manipulative, a mundane criminal would happily rip his mind apart to find out Sophia’s identity.”

I felt a pit at the bottom of my stomach.

“What’s more, although both of us despise her, criminals are not stupid. Once they knew the civilian form of Sophia, they could track her, easily, given how her shadow form doesn’t allow her to tell when she’s being followed. From there, they could see her interact with the other Wards in their civilian identities, figure out who they were, and the next thing you know, the Brockton Bay Wards are now on the run from very eager villains, or we’re in the back pocket of, say, Accord.”

I didn’t know who Accord was, but I got the context. I slumped. “I understand.”

“Good. We understand that you need to talk about your problems in order to get over them, but please, if you must unload, unload on a PRT agent, a Ward, or a Protectorate member. Do you understand?”

“Understood,” I said glumly.

“Good. Apart from that, your recommendations for dealing with Sophia are not unfeasible, I just want to go into details first…”

After being treated to the full power of the angry Director, I was half-expecting the Wards to be like Sophia.

Again, I reflected on the benefits of pessimism. When I went down to their training area, the first thing I noticed was the blur which resolved itself into a beaming young girl.

“Taylor right?”

“…Yes?”

“Hi, I’m Missy, also known as Vista. Do you mind if I completely geek out for a minute or are you sensitive about the way you look?”

“…Not…really?”

The next thing I knew, Vista was doing her best impersonation of a teleporter, helped by what spatial warping I could see; I knew it was her power, but I was still amazed at how easily she
managed to be in all places at once given how quickly she was darting about.

“Oh my God, this is so cool! Do you see out of those things? How fast can you fly? Are those claws real? Can you tell what I did last night?”

My snakes were unmuzzled, but oddly, no. Couldn’t have been that important if I couldn’t pick it up. Or any degree of malevolence or fear-this was, in fact, Vista geeking out about how cool I looked.

…Appreciated, but now I felt fairly uncomfortable. Since when did people start paying attention to me?

Eventually, Vista slowed down, and space resolved itself back into its normal state. She was still beaming, although slightly less than before.

“Sorry about that. We haven’t had someone so…unique (half-truth) before. I thought that I’d get a better look, because seriously, you’re a badass.”

“Um, thanks? Er, where are the other-”

“Oh, um, this way.” She turned around and led me down the corridor.

At the other end was the lovechild of the exercise gym from hell and a museum of torture instruments. That batter cage, for instance, instead of a normal pitching machine, had what looked like a many-barreled Gatling gun. The fact that instead it had bean bags instead of balls in the feeding slot was about the only thing that indicated that it wasn’t a particularly nasty form of execution. I still suspected it was used as a threat, however.

The more pressing thing, however, was the group of people in the middle of it. From the blue and silver armor, I guessed the man in the middle was Armsmaster without his helmet on, and I already knew Miss Militia (I felt a pang of guilt when I saw her, but I quickly reminded myself it was just a reprimand), which covered the adults in the room. The other Wards were arranged around them, the silver-and-rust figure of Aegis standing tall in front of Clockblocker and Gallant, with Kid Win standing somewhat awkwardly to the side.

Almost immediately my Medusas picked up the rather cynical motive for the album cover. I jokingly rose an eyebrow. “You do realize I’m only here because I’m joining anyway, right?”

And with that the clock-themed boy doubled over, ruining the pose with his laughter. Wordlessly, Gallant passed him a five-dollar bill as Vista rolled her eyes and Miss Militia muttered “I warned you.” Armsmaster himself did not react, remaining fairly stoic despite his attempts at impressing me falling flat. After Clockblocker recovered himself, he strode forward in an attempt to keep his dignity intact.

“Ms. Taylor Hebert, it is an honor to welcome you to the Wards, and gain your abilities as an investigator.” At least he was perceptive, I thought to myself. “Perhaps you will actually be able to tilt the unsolved crime statistics back in the PRT’s favor despite your inexperience-”

“Colin,” Miss Militia warned.

“In any case, welcome,” he hurriedly finished.
Now I was grinning, though probably not for the reason Armsmaster wanted. I respected his bluntness, if not the ego I smelled. In truth, I kind of felt bad for him, if I was reading the scent correctly; I could empathize with social cluelessness.

“Know that as much as your appearance marks you as a villain to the common man, I can only hope that the Wards treat you as a valued team member despite statistics suggesting that-Ouch!”

This didn’t mean I particularly enjoyed social cluelessness when I was on the receiving end of it. Who were his parents, robotic wolves who gave him cooked pig’s feet for dinner?

Dematerializing her bean bag-loaded air gun, Miss Militia came up beside her scowling teammate. “What my colleague’s lack of any degree of social grace is trying to say is, we hope you will find your term as a Ward a rewarding one.”

“I was trying to avoid tripping her scent…”

“She doesn’t mind politeness, Colin.”

Still scowling, Armsmaster (or Colin, now), waved over the Wards, before leaving himself. Apparently even he realized how bad he was at social situations.

Aegis came around first. “I hope our boss has not made you reconsider your future employment opportunities?”

“Nope.” I smiled, and bit back the remark about Colin’s said lack of tact my power wanted me to say. “You already know me, but I’m Taylor. Nice to meet you, please don’t mind the hands I know they’re rough.”

“Carlos, also known as Aegis. I don’t, by the way-they’re actually quite smooth (white lie).”

I smirked. I suspected Carlos could take the mocking. “I haven’t been officially revealed yet, and you’re already complimenting my skin? Did I suddenly become a romantic comedy protagonist?”

He turned very red, and retracted the hand a bit more quickly than would be normal. “Oh God, there’s two of them,” I heard Missy say.

Gallant next. “Dean, aka Gallant. Please do not make me use the serious beam, I think I might run out of juice between you and Dennis (lie).”

Dennis? “By that name, you mean Clockblocker?”

“The one and only.” The unmasked timestopper leaned in between us. “Also, do the Medusas have a petrifying gaze? Because my heart stopped upon seeing you.” He paused, ignoring the sound of Missy’s hand hitting her forehead before melting into an expression of horror. “My God, the madness is spreading!”

“Fear not, noble citizen, Harlequin will not win this day! Quick, to the cold shower!” I laughed, more in relief than anything. I had expected my appearance to be more of an issue, hence why I spent all week training my sense of humor. Better to defuse the “scary” image with my team as soon as possible, even if I looked like a complete buffoon from then on. At least I would have company. “In all seriousness, though, I’m not a Gorgon. More like an Erinyes, a Greek goddess…” I held my talons in a stalking position. “Of reeeeeeeengel!”
Dennis cracked up again at my bit of ham. Missy, on the other hand, rolled her eyes. “And here I was, thinking I could escape the madness with another girl…”

Dennis stopped immediately, and grunted. “Must…resist…obvious…joke. Want…to…avoid…being…turned…into…Mobius….strip….”

Missy only sighed at that.

The smile on my face was genuine this time. My fears were unfounded, it seemed—I detected no prejudice besides the obvious nervousness around snake hair, which quickly vanished. Perhaps this was still a high school, but maybe I could do it over again here, with actual friendship.

Right on cue, I heard a feminine cough. Not Hannah’s or Missy’s.

I froze, and turned around to face the source, already guessing who it was.

“Sophia,” I said, taking out the monarch pin to rub and focus on.

“Taylor,” said the archer sulking in the corner of the gym.

I hadn’t quite known what to expect from Shadow Stalker when I saw her in costume for the first time. Bitter and angry at me for her humiliation and having Piggot put a gun to the back of her skull, certainly, but she looked far worse for wear than I had imagined. The term “headbutt fight with a concrete wall” seemed to apply, and her costume was extremely dirty and smudged, like she had been living in it for a week. She didn’t look like the bully I had known for over a year, just…sad. I wondered if she had run away from home, given what Piggot said earlier.

Then I caught a whiff of her scent, and my sympathy died almost immediately. This was the same Sophia I hated, just a little bedraggled.

Almost immediately (and to her credit), Missy jumped between us and the air flickered a little as space extended. “Hey! No fighting!”

“Relax, Shorty. I can’t, not without this ankle jewelry acting up.” The obvious counterpoint to that sentiment was left unsaid.

“…Why are you even here, anyway?” Carlos was talking through clenched teeth. I’m ashamed to admit I felt a little thrill at discovering he was just as much of a fan of Sophia as I was, and that she couldn’t do a thing about it.

“Ask the bitch, she wanted to see me during our Big Welcoming Party.”

Everyone looked at me.

“…I wanted to get this out of the way,” I admitted. “Better we have our blowout now rather than during a more critical time.”

“…Really?” Dean looked at me awkwardly, then at Hannah, who shrugged. “She did ask for that.”

“Well, whoop-de-freaking-doo, you got it.” Sophia stood up straight.
She then gave me a look that, if they could kill, would have caused me to explode. “Do you have…*any* idea of what you did to me?”

“Says the bully,” muttered Dennis.

“Shut up, quartzhead. This is between me and the snake-haired sociopath.” She made motions like she was advancing, only apparently stationary due to presumably Missy. “Do you know what my mom thinks about superheroes? Huh? Do you know that I was *kicked out* of my own *home*? Huh?!”

I felt a momentary stab of pity for Sophia. Only a moment though. “At least you still have a secret identity. You just take off the mask and pretend you’re a decent human being, nobody can tell the difference until you open your mouth.”

“I don’t *want* to be normal!” she shrieked. “Normal people—they’re sheep! Victims! I’m the person who *protects* normal people, I want to be a goddamn *hero*, not Slaughterhouse 9 victim infinity!”

“And yet you can *pretend!*” Now I was screaming. “*You* weren’t forced to watch as your body turned into a nightmare! *You* can live in the body that doesn’t send people running away screaming! *You* weren’t confined to a fucking *mental asylum* for a month because you couldn’t turn off your power when you wanted it to shut up so you could *breathe!*”

Missy jerked her head around at the words “mental asylum.” Good news: Doctor-patient confidentiality existed in Ward-world. Bad news: she broke her concentration, allowing Sophia to cross the room, and very quickly in shadow form, rearing for a punch while remaining immaterial to avoid Dennis’ attempt to freeze her.

Instinctively, I covered my face with a wing, feeling a small impact on its bony fingers and hearing Sophia yelp in pain and surprise. Shortly thereafter, Hannah burst into action, quickly wrestling her to the ground. Dean showed up to help her while Dennis recovered his stance.

“Before you take her away and/or timelock her, can I just have one last word?”

Hannah looked at me skeptically, but brought up the struggling Sophia to face me, taser at her back to prevent her from thinking about going shadow.

After checking to see if the acid was flowing, I put on my “bad cop” pose, Medusas and wings fully extended. While I didn’t intend for it to happen, one the snakes hissed, making me even more intimidating.

The color drained from Sophia’s face, made all the more noticeable by her dark skin.

“Listen here, Sophie—I, unlike you, have a mental maturity with two digits in the ‘year’ column, so I’m willing to let bygones be bygones, at least as much as I can. Frankly, I’m sick of being the victim too, and like you said, it’ll be nice to be a hero. But the thing is, I happen to have a better power for solving crimes than you ever will, and frankly, the PRT bent over backwards to allow my stipulations should I be put on the team. Most of these stipulations involve you and my relationship to you.”

“In other words, if you *ever* try this little stunt again, I’ll make a new stipulation that you are stripped of your position, kicked out of Brockton Bay, and shipped to your new home in, oh, Alaska inside a crate filled with angry rattlesnakes. Given certain information from Director Piggot,
she’d happily catch each and every one of those snakes herself and force-feed them steroids to make them all nice, giant and pissed, assuming she isn’t doing so already thanks to aforementioned ankle jewelry.”

I leaned closer to Sophia’s eyelevel, using my own death stare to bore straight through her skull.

“Have I made myself clear?”

“Crystal,” she squeaked.

“Good.” I went back to my normal stance. “You can freeze her now.”

Dennis did so, causing a rather hilarious image as the rather terrified looking Sophia was stuck like that.

Slowly, I became aware of the entire room staring at me.

Oh God, this is the part where they realize I’m dangerous and lock me away again-

“That.”

“Was.”

“Awesome.”

“And scary. But awesomely so.”

…Oh right, they hated Sophia too. As it is, they just had a slow clap for me.

Suddenly, Dennis grinned. “Hey Taylor, can you record Glenn’s face for me when you meet him?”

I looked as confused as I felt. “Who’s Glenn?”

“The PR guy.”

…Oh. I already sympathized.

Chapter End Notes

Was going to have an exploration of Taylor’s power set here, but that can be overviewed with Glenn, since he’s going to examine her tests to think of a good image for her.
Chapter Notes

And now, the final chapter of this Arc! The pieces are set, let the dominoes fall!

…and possibly ruin Glenn’s character too. Honestly I hadn't actually reached his point in the narrative yet at the time of this chapter's writing (I know, bad idea to make a fic of something you haven’t finished yet), but I did read his part in his intro chapter. Working off of that, both because I don’t want to spoil something for myself that much and because I am a fairly lethargic person and don’t know how to write energy without being annoying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Usurper 1.5

Much to the surprise of absolutely no one, the first thing Glenn Chambers, head of Image, did upon seeing me was cry a little. Not literally, of course, but the expression absolute dread combined with the flavor of the lie contained in “Ms. Taylor, it’s an...honor to work with you,” I got the sense that he was dreading trying to find a good PR that didn’t result in part of my efforts to stop crime involve “being used as a guest star in stories of less than comforting things that happened to bad little boys” even more than I was. After all, I could use fear at the very mention of my name, he could use a new job.

Of course, I didn’t actually feel any particular degree of kinship. From the degree of his scent, I also got that he was bossy, somewhat manipulative, and basically what his job demanded of him. Still, he was honest, and for once (among the mundane, anyway) I didn’t detect the instinctual fear most people felt upon seeing me that usually colored their polite-deceptions. I suppose working with Case 53s did that to you, there were people a lot more horrifying than me (I could thank my power at least for that). Or at least he had seen a picture of me beforehand and prepared himself, which was actually quite thoughtful. So I didn’t dislike him either.

Of course, the Official PRT Protocol Stick was affixed firmly to him as well, in a somewhat different manner than Piggot.

“No. Just no. Just because I have breasts now does not mean I get a boob plate. No.”

“I can’t argue with market research, Taylor. Studies show that, if you’ll forgive me for coming off as a little creepy here, showing a little cleavage makes a female heroine more approachable.”

His slavish devotion to statistics.

“It’s not you I’m worried about with the creepy, it’s the legion of salivating perverts out there. I've seen the banned post section of Parahumans Online, and the 4chan cape board. I have no desire to ever see that ever again, much less imagine me on it.”
If you’re a cape, you’re on there anyway,” he said, looking sympathetic.

“Touché,” I admitted. “But boob armor just isn’t viable. I’ve done my own research, and it actually makes it easier to hit vital bits and hurt yourself if you fall.”

“That was out concern with Vista,” he admitted. “Then we remembered we have several Tinkers specializing in physical materials and we were able to figure out a way around that. It’s subtle, but hers deforms around blows to absorb and deflect impact, meaning it’s actually better armor.”

I tried to think of a direct retort for this, but unfortunately I was not fluent in Tinkerbabble, nor did I think Glenn was. I already hated Tinkers. “Which brings me to my next point, and the core reason: I’m not Vista. I don’t have an age complex like she does, I’m fine being fifteen. To me, I feel...exposed.”

He mulled this over for a minute. “…How about a backless costume? It’s practical given your wings.”

“Better, but no. These things are pretty hardy and can regenerate themselves pretty quickly, but Miss Militia wasn’t eager to see if they were bulletproof or could regenerate from having the bones blown off. If you really need me to be sexy, shape will have to do. Fully armored shape.”

“Oh, we can work with that. But...Taylor, can I talk about Miss Militia for a second? About you to be precise?”

And here comes the fallout. I took out my monarch pin. “Go on.”

“She’s…worried about you. You seem perfectly nice normally, but whenever Shadow Stalker is bought up, you go, frankly, ballistic, crying acid everywhere and getting your snakes to hiss at people until she goes away, then you act like nothing’s happened.”

I rubbed the pin a little harder while biting back desperately on my defensive instincts. I did not need to piss off the PR guy. “I know. I’ve had a chip on my shoulder ever since my trigger, and I don’t know why. I don’t fly off the handle like that too often, but yeah it’s a problem. I’m trying to let go of it.”

“And that’s a good thing too. I’ll admit, I’m no school counselor, I’m the embodiment of peer pressure.” I chuckled a little at that. “But the thing is, and I apologize in advance, is that you just don’t have the power set to be hot-tempered in public.”

Okay, that was a new objection. “Huh?”

“I mean yours are primarily defensive in nature.” He took out a file, probably intended to show he was reading my file to make sure, but given the scent of manipulation, he probably memorized it already. “Those wings are just one part of it, even if the main part.”

I nodded. It was only after the whole confrontation ended that I realized Sophia was still immaterial. It was a situational power, but damn if it wasn’t useful. “You’re talking about my ability to ignore heat.”

“And your apparent ability to ignore any negative side effects of chemicals, which implies your biology shuts down poisons too.” He turned to the testing page. “It says here you commented that when the Environmental Simulator was at full Sahara mode, you still felt, and I quote, ‘like I’m on
a beach’, and that the only effects on your physical form when exposed to open flame was a slight ash smudge from where you had worm the body monitor, not including the melted plastic.”

I rubbed the talon where that was. Honestly, getting that thing off was more painful than it actually melting. Poor Colin had a conniption when he realized his gadget’s warning signal had only gone off because it wasn’t functioning anymore. “And then there was the Super Coffee Incident. That was embarrassing.”

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**Two Days Prior:**

“Hey guys! What we gonna do today?”

Missy was less enthused than I was, on the basis it was seven in the morning, and she had just arrived. More than that, she was confused. “Taylor? Is that you?”

“Better than ever thanks can we go to the tests already?”

Now Carlos was confused. “Taylor, this is strength tests. You hate strength tests.”

“I know I know I’m just bored and going a bit stir-crazy can we do something already?”

It should also be mentioned that I was literally flying around the room at this point, jumping from ledge to ledge as it became uncomfortable. I didn’t notice, actually, on the basis it felt like my nerves wanted to escape my skin. I needed to move, which I accomplished using various aerial acrobatics, including somersaults.

Now Dennis was gawking. “Did the Merchants come when I wasn’t looking? Should we be checking the water for speed?”

“Beats me I don’t know I just drank my morning tea and an hour later it feels like my brain is electrified oh God give me something to do I’m going crazy over here-“

Suddenly, Dean Beam! I felt mercifully calm.

For five seconds, then I felt my head turn into a Tesla coil again. “Nope not working do you have a higher setting-“

“All right, hold everything!”

Colin came barging into the room holding a syringe. “I put my coffee in the break room while I was putting on my armor, someone drank it-“

All finger pointed at me, including my own (while doing a handstand, my Medusas helping with balance, on the Gatling Batter). Colin stopped and gaped.

“Sorry your coffee tasted like tea I’ll make it up to you later-“

“Do you feel nauseous?”

I blinked, “Uh, no, just like there’s a nuclear reactor in my skull if that thing detoxes that would be really nice-“
“Dizziness, hallucinations, fever, increased heartbeat?”

I checked my pulse. “Slightly on that last one, feels like I’ve been exercising nix on the others can I get the detox now-“

“Coffee is a bit of a misnomer. That’s a specially concocted mixture of caffeine, heart drugs, and antidepressants I sip throughout the day to avoid sleeping as long as possible-“

“Well the punishment fits the crime I’m sorry can you please get rid of this-“

“I specifically added a slightly toxic chemical that gives it the bitterest taste imaginable so that I’m not tempted to take more than a sip.”

That comment penetrated my caffeine-induced misery. “But it tasted like tea it doesn’t sound like you to forget adding-“

“I’m wondering if we haven’t already tested a new power.” He looked at the syringe. “This isn’t a detoxifying agent. It’s a heart attack treatment.”

It took me a second to get what he was saying.

At least I finally fell over.

Present:

“So yeah, ultimate liver, and thank any gods that exist for that, even if I was twitching for the rest of the day.” I smiled apologetically. After relief and scientific curiosity had worn off, Colin realized that he was now missing coffee and was about to lose a lot of time to sleeping like a normal person. He was not happy.

“Which also fits with your theme. About the only directly offensive power you have are those acid tears, and those only seem to break down inorganic substances.”

“Good for trying to get past armor and walls, not much for actually hurting people.” Actually discovering that it wasn’t that I was immune to my own powers had been a relief. No need to worry about holding back to avoid giving people potentially fatal acid burns, and there was a lot of things you could do with the ability to precisely melt structures and armor, even though I suspected a lot of them would result in an angry Piggot pointing at the costs for property damage.

“And therein lies the image problem.” Glenn sighed as he put down the file. “Your powers are nonlethal by nature, and it won’t be long until people figure that out. Trying to act like a maniac when your very nature prevents you from carrying out those threats is...comedic. Not something you want in an interrogator, and the worst of both worlds since you’re scary anyway.”

I nodded. Far less damaging to induce the fear of violence rather than actually resort to violence, both for moral reasons and because it resulted in less lawsuits.

“Way I see it, superheroes are generally divided into four categories, which I’ve based on ye old venerable 80s print comics. Don’t laugh, the icons are very deeply ingrained in culture as silly as they seem today.” He took at a well-worn set and placed them in the desk. “You have your Spider-
Men, the person who’s just like you only with powers. You, I’m sorry to say, don’t have that option. Even if people come to like you for your personality, they’re going to see your snakes first, and the vast majority probably doesn’t want to have autonomous pets growing out their skulls.” He took one, a comic with a parahuman in a red and blue costume covered in a black web pattern off. “You have your Supermen, the people we look up to and follow by example. More possible, and there’s going to be elements of that the way I see it, especially for Case 53 and synthetic rights—you’re neither, but you’re, if you’ll pardon the term, alien enough to be an icon of how human they really are. Unfortunately, I also happen to realize that your power influences you to be more aggressive, and you’re one bad PR stunt away from losing that image utterly and being hated for it.” A different red-and-blue parahuman was removed.

“This leaves Batman and Green Lantern,” he said as he gestured to a man with a rather menacing black costume in a dramatic pose, and an uniformed parahuman focusing light through a ring. “Now, Batman here is the World’s Greatest Detective, a brilliant planner not afraid to use intimidation to clean up his home city of Gotham. Part of it is that he isn’t a parahuman, just an extremely well-trained man with a lot of resources (though I wouldn’t be surprised if he qualified as a Thinker), but the other part is that, whatever else you may say about him, Batman Doesn’t Kill.” I could hear the capital letters in that aside. Seemed Glenn was a bit of a fan in his youth. “While Superman can take any threat without preparation, Batman’s shtick is that he plans for everything so that it comes around to the same difference. He’s the intellectual hero, the person who has everything under control and, despite how frightening he is, you can take comfort that he has your best interests at heart.”

“Now Green Lantern, he’s more like Armsmaster—”

“A man with the superpower of saying the exact wrong thing at any given time?”

“Minus that aspect, thankfully. Back to my point, Green Lantern’s an Air Force pilot who was put into an interstellar police corps. His theme is duty and utter fearlessness. Yes, he is an idiot because the writers couldn’t figure out weaknesses of that ring of his that he could overcome in clever ways, but he’s the gung ho hero. The brave one who backs down in the face of nothing, and will stop at nothing to ensure the Earth is safe.”

He slid both comics towards me. “So, here’s my idea Taylor-do you want to be like Batman or Green Lantern? What kind of image do you want people to make of you, the ultimate warrior or the ultimate detective?”

I mulled it over in my head. “Well, for one you seem to favor Batman.”

“Guilty as charged. Shame DC shut down after Hero showed up.” He smiled sadly. “Would have been fun to see him deal with parahumans given what we know of…empowering events (white lie) and his own past. But I won’t quibble-frankly you’d make a great Green Lantern too if you ask me. They looked for fearlessness.”

Yeaaah no. I may have gotten out of a bad place, but I still prayed for those strange recurring ones of being Azrai, because while I got the sense he wasn’t the kind of person I’d like to know, the others tended to be nightmarish memories of the Sphinx.

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October 11, 2010:

The part of my mind that was still mine wondered if I hadn’t completely gone insane. Well, that
part of my mind that wasn’t screaming at the other parts to stop gazing in adoration at the man-lion idling examining my school papers.

“Hm. For one on the cusp of adulthood, you are quite an intelligent one. You’ll make a fine khorseti alif and conversationalist after I tutor you for a bit. Perhaps in low magic as well.”

“Thank you, my king.” Good, I was still in control of my actions enough to be acerbic and angry about what he was doing to me. I prayed that I would remain that way, and his power didn’t cause you to love him even as he used you.

Apparently he heard the venom in those two syllables. Rather than being annoyed, he laughed, a sound between a deep belly laugh and a growl. “And a feisty one too! Not too many can resist the power of my aura to any degree, you’re in a quite prestigious group. Oh I will have such fun molding that will.”

Molding. Like I was a bunch of unworked clay. Like I was a pet to be trained. I wanted to scream at the Sphinx, wanted to hurt him. Unfortunately, I wasn’t exactly in full command of my mind at the moment, so all I did was smile and thank him. Thank him! Honestly, I was glad I was pissed off, I was too angry to be scared.

“As for you…” he said as he turned to Emma. “You’re not very-“

The screeching of an owl interrupted him. “Oh for the love of the gods.”

He glanced in the direction of the sound and made a motion with his hand paw, almost outlining a shield, while muttering something under his breath. I could see a shimmering dust suddenly vanish.

Right on cue, the armored form I recognized as Dragon rounded the corner-and smacked into an invisible wall. She hit it a few times, before bringing out a saw and began cutting desperately.

“Even if you figure out some manner of breaking that, I have more than enough energy left to drive you as mad as your apprentices.” The Sphinx smiled. “I would make sure they haven’t managed to kill each other yet.”

Dragon paid him no attention, only adjusted the saw to a start cutting a hallway wall in desperation.

“Back to my new servant-you’re not the brightest, are you?”

“No, your excellency. I’m not the smartest girl in the classroom, just fairly average in that department.”

“But your father is quite wealthy, yes?”

“Very.”

“And he dearly loves you?”

A look of fear passed over her otherwise placid face as Emma realized what he was implying. “I hope. Haven’t seen any reason why not.”

And of course he’s a kidnapper. Why wouldn’t he be a kidnapper? He had made his appearance by
unleashing all the big cats at a zoo for what appeared to be his own amusement and to see how the
PRT responded, why wouldn’t he kidnap someone and demand money?

“And quite powerful as well, too. Yes, your father will be a fine partner.”

“He’ll be so pleased to serve you, my lord!”

“Cheer! Excellent, my new hunting grounds could use a gardener too.” The Sphinx smiled as he
bent down to allow Emma on his back. Looking like it was the best thing in the world, she climbed
upon his back and stroked his ears. He literally purred at that.

I think that’s what finally catalyzed me from merely hating the Sphinx to actively loathing him.
The man-lion was more than just a bully, he was a power fetishist who reveled in his domination
of other people, making his victims joyfully endure his sadism, and thank him for it.

And that smug smile on his face—he would keep doing it, keep forcing people to dance to his tune,
keep making them want to stroke his ego. Part of me wondered if he left part of my mind intact
deliberately just so he could imagine me screaming at him from a prison in my own brain. Just
because he could.

And just like that, my rage and fear suddenly…weren’t. In fact, I felt clearer in the head than I ever
had before.

Calmly, I recognized that the part of my mind currently leashed by him seemed to be rather
suggestible. Hoping against hope, I told it that the master probably wanted a mane trim at some
point. Thankfully, it was about as stupid as I gave credit for, allowing me to fish the scissors out of
my pack.

“And now, for you,” he said, turning around. “I would put those down. Your will is commendable,
but your body is not. You’ll just hurt yourself.”

The leashed-me tried to drop the scissors, but me-me had already guessed that he would say that. “I
couldn’t help but notice your mane is a bit on the wild side, great Sphinx. I was thinking that I
could tame it a little.”

His eyes widened for a bit, then he smirked. “Willful, intelligent, and helpful. I chose a prodigy,
didn’t I?” He looked at Dragon, who was still trying to get through the wall. “You may want to
watch this,” he said as he performed another gesture and Dragon…froze. In mid motion.

“And now, a little off the shoulder, if you don’t mind.”

Wow, this guy was an idiot. Ego did that to people I guessed. Still smiling, I took my scissors to
the purring man-lion…

And with all of my will, opened them as wide as possible, given him a nasty cut on his neck.

“AGH!”

A paw instinctive swiped at me. It wasn’t too bad a cut, but it felt like it tore away the lock on my
mind that prevented most of me from taking action against him. Whipping into action, I rushed to a
damaged locker, wielding my scissors like a knife.
“You…little…BRAT!”

The Sphinx, all civility gone from his face rushed at me, and I stabbed-

There was something warm running down my hand. Opening my eyes, I got a good look at the Sphinx.

From this close, I noticed how…not-leonine he looked. More like an older man in a really good lion suit. Yes, he had a tail, fur, and mane, but his paws were hands, his musculature was that of a human, and his face didn’t have a split lip or anything one would associate with a cat.

That wasn’t what drew my eye though. What drew my eye was the scissors embedded in the upper left of his chest.

I couldn’t think. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t even breathe.

_____________________________________________________

December 10:

Yeah, looking back upon it, the only reason my mind could do anything other than wet itself was that the Sphinx reminded me of a worse version of Emma. I was too angry to care, especially after he started leering at her.

And now that I think about it, would Green Lantern’s employers care? Actually now that I thought about it I wasn’t that scared was I and Glenn was still waiting for an answer. Delay that revelation to next mandated therapy session.

Besides that little epiphany, I knew exactly what I wanted to be beforehand, and I still did. I wasn’t that violent by nature anyway; the Sphinx’s own recklessness in bullrushing at me, plus luck, doomed him and saved both me and Emma from death and/or horrifying slavery.

I picked up the Batman comic, careful not to damage it. “I won’t have to call myself Snakewoman, will I?”

He chuckled. “Unless you have a better idea?”

“Actually, I do. I originally was searching for cape names with Clockblocker-“

A look of absolute dread came over Glenn’s face. I could see him preparing to write a resume already.

“And Vista.”

Now relief.

“I wanted to name myself after the Furies, but then I noticed the existence of the Three Blasphemies. I did, however, find a link to another Greek goddess of divine vengeance; Nemesis.”

He rose an eyebrow. “You cannot be serious-“

“I’m not. I noticed she had another name: Adrastea.”
Glenn went silent for a second, mulling it over as he proceeded to apparently conduct an invisible orchestra of wind instruments (specifically the dog whistle).

“…Not bad. Obscure enough so people won’t instantly notice, and not something one associates with a supervillain. Light and airy on the tongue, but also carries your intimidation factor and your implacability to those who research it. Not what I would have chosen, but nobody seems to like mine.”

I couldn’t resist. “Correction-nobody likes the names your committee comes up with.”

“Ha ha. Though actually, we could use that sense of humor…”

Well, this was new.

Rather than the Azrai dreams and subsequent power fantasy, or nightmares involving a man-lion, this…was also probably a nightmare.

All around me, a black and blasted plain of dark, stony earth extended, broken up by various military fortifications, new and old, damaged and pristine. I got the sense this place was a site of frequent battles, to the point where this place was either being torn apart by war or preparing for the next engagement, never at peace.

As I looked around I also noticed something…strange about this battlefield. First and most obviously, the sky was an angry red. That was the most alarming, particularly because as I stared at it in disbelief, I saw equally red-and-orange meteors streak across it, more like fireballs than space rocks, made even more noticeable by the fact they were apparently clear, only sunless.

After tearing my eyes from the sky, I examined the battlefield around me. Most of these things, I could see in a modern battlefield. Trenches, for one. Burned-out vehicles for another. Forgotten casings for bullets, too. Realizing another thing that appeared in modern battles, I took to the air. No death-by-landmines for me.

Alighting on one of the vehicles, I noticed something else strange—all the trenches seemed to contain weapon racks. This wasn’t so strange, except besides guns, I saw swords, maces, and pikes. Which made absolutely no sense, of course, unless this was a battlefield composed entirely of Brute parahumans.

In fact, the more I looked, the more I saw little anachronisms. A discarded pistol next to a dagger. A piece of torn chain mail next to what looked like an exploded mine. And then there was the stuff I didn’t know, like the weird, rune-covered platform inside of this tank I was perching in. The runes looked harsh, dark, and…oddly comforting. Like I knew who made them, and I trusted them.

“The Abyss are you doing, soldier!?”

Surprised, I spun around. And tried not to scream.

The…creature before me looked like something out of a depiction of the devil crossed with a dragon. A giant, humanoid lizard body was born aloft by great, surprisingly quiet bat wings (not unlike mine, what little of my mind that was not taken up with flashing my life before my eyes noted). A pair of horns rose majestically from its scalp, framing a twisted face with many, perfectly even sharp teeth drawn back in a snarl. A spiked chain was wrapped around its left arm, and its scaly onyx-black torso was covered in modern body armor. A patch with a picture of a snake biting
its own tail while shedding its skin was tattooed on its right arm, with the same harsh-but-comforting lettering being written under it.

“I asked you a question, soldier!”

Huh, the voice was female. And otherwise normal sounding, if harsh. Kind of like the Director.

“…Uh, er, I’m not-“

“Nevermind! Get back to the regiment!”

“I don’t-“

“I SAID-“

“I’M DREAMING, AREN’T I?”

The creature’s face twisted in even more rage, as it…she inhaled, presumably to scream at me for being a deserter from some army. Then, a very loud beep.

“Ergh, you’re lucky, angel wannabe.” She took out what looked like a perfectly normal walkie-talkie, resized for her, and turned it on. “Yes, Strategist…what? She isn’t? Well then-ooohh. She’s the psuedo-got it.”

The creature put away the transceiver, and landed. An almost complete transformation in her demeanor occurred as she gave an award-winning (and sharp) smile as she held out a claw. “My apologies, Miss. I mistook you for…someone else (half-truth).”

Wordlessly, I shook said claw, too shocked to do anything other than follow directions.

“We’ve been waiting for you. Frankly, it was starting to get boring waiting for your astral self to show up, so thank you. I’m not at liberty to exposit much more, but the gist is welcome to your home away from home…plane.”

“A-astral? Home plane? Guh?” Since when were my nightmares trying to welcome me? ...Since when was I a lucid dreamer?

“Ah, Clueless. Never change.” She laughed—a genuine laugh, not a cruel laugh—before turning serious again. “Here. The razorvine told me you use some kind of moth pin to-“

“It’s a butterfly,” I said numbly.

“Butterfly, my mistake, to help you focus. When you desperately need some backup, please imagine you rubbing that, it’ll make your help request high-priority.”

I looked at my hand. A grey…medal?…covered in the same runic script, with the picture of a handsome man with horns on it.

“Archduke Dispater awaits your response. And your body should be waking up in three…two…”

“Gah!”
Contrary to the movies, you did not catapult upwards in bed when agitated when you woke up. You just felt really tense and confined for a second as your body struggled against the paralysis of sleep before realizing you were having a dream.

...And that was certainly a dream’s dream, one that only grew more vivid as I thought about it.

What was that?

Where was I? Who was that monster and why did she suddenly turn genuinely nice (I could detect the scent of manipulation, but it tasted like Yamada’s well-meaning)? Why did some “Archduke” keep an ear out for what was presumably my using the “medal”? What did she mean by “Your home away from home plane?”

More than that, now that I mulled it over, why did some deep part of me take her at face value?

Chapter End Notes

Did you guess at what rather famous AD&D critter I was drawing parallels to with her immunities before I name-dropped Dispater?

Also, did I screw up a little with the Sphinx, was that particularly OOC for Taylor? I wanted to show she’s less damaged and less underconfident than after the Locker of Filth, so… I did.
Interlude 1: The Tenebrous Tower

Chapter Notes

Gentlemen, behold!

The first time I write a focus character other than Taylor! And infinitely nicer than in canon! I am running out of ways to joke about my inevitable failure, and should really stop being so pessimistic!

(Also, last imported chapter for a few days. Six should be enough on your plate for a while, see if people like it here. Also, the title was changed to reflect the rest of the Interludes' naming scheme).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Interlude 1: The Tenebrous Tower

Hate.

Sophia Hess, also known as Shadow Stalker, understood the emotion of hate very well. Hate, along with its siblings of bitterness, envy, and anger, were her constant companions, and had been for a while. Hate for the rabid predators that rotted her city from the inside, hate for the prey who followed those same predators blindly, hate for the Wards, too blind to see the real dynamics of the world, hate for Taylor, who dared to pretend to be prey when she was obviously one of the most vicious and fearsome predators there was, hate for the father that had abandoned her and mom, hate for-

She shut down that line of reasoning very quickly. Following that particular path of hate usually led to hate for Sophia Hess, and then she’d remember what she was like before she awakened her real self. That never ended well.

Of course, Sophia had to stretch her imagination to figure out how she could feel worse right now, but frankly at this point being reminded of the girl scared of her own shadow would probably push her already shaky sanity over the edge into permanent uselessness. Learning to compartmentalize like that was a survival skill.

Of course, sometimes it helped to have something as a crutch. Which is why she was currently fighting off a migraine and avoid the lights getting in her eyes.

“Honestly, Stalker, you can’t keep on coming to me like this,” muttered the ex-Dr. Sheldon Bixby. “Sooner or later, you’re going to have to go to a real hospital instead of trying to treat injuries with fistfights. Or lose your mask in one.”

“I’m fine,” she said, almost believing it herself. “None of them even got close, E88’s currently
sleeping off a bender and tranq bolt in front of the police station.”

“Doesn’t excuse underage drinking, and possibly getting into a bar fight where you instinctively dematerialize.”

“Point. So I drink at home.”

Bixby said nothing, only rose an eyebrow and pointed at the tool shed in the back of the Barnes’ yard.

“In the rent home,” she corrected.

“So, you’re fine being a homeless derelict mooching off the rich? Wow-shutting up now,” he quickly said as he realized the first part of that joke was probably not what Sophia needed to hear now, if not the least because of her reaching for a crossbow. Instead, he dabbed more antiseptics on her arm.

In all truth, she only chose Bixby as her Secret Personal Paramedic because she needed to talk to someone whose life had also been ruined by Taylor. Emma, unsurprisingly, was unwilling to listen to her rant about the girl who had save her from horrifying imprisonment, and Madison suddenly grew a conscience when she realized just what was happening to the victim of her “jokes.” Thus, ex-Dr. Bixby.

She was disappointed. As it seemed, the idiotic pharmacist seemed to think he was at fault for what happened to him. What, he was a bit of a jerk who nevertheless cared enough about his friends to cover up for their lack of a prescription, that wasn’t a crime.

(Actually yes it was, but Sophia never really saw the harm in stealing when it didn’t harm anyone. There was more pain drugs in the world, and contrary to popular belief, she wasn’t a sociopath—a soldier who was forced to retire due to an injury was worthy of the benefit of the doubt when treating his pain. The other not so much, but drug addicts were the prey among prey anyway, so she didn’t see the paradox).

As it was, his father shared Sophia’s opinion that his competence as a doctor outweighed his indiscretions and was attempting to get his license back. Said father was also a believer in economic independence to an extreme degree, so Bixby had to take up back alley first aid work, which was how Sophia met him, whilst suffering from being shocked in shadow form via fence plus carelessness.

To his credit, he would allow her to wear a ski mask while treating her, though part of Sophia’s mind idly wondered how long it was until she got an injury on her face that he had to remove it entirely to get to.

“…Speaking of the shed, why are you in there? I thought the PRT building had apartments.”

“It does. I don’t use them.”

“…Why-“

“I. Don’t. Use. Them.”

And that line of questioning ceased.
The next few minutes in the back of Bixby’s truck passed in silence. Eventually, Sophia finally asked the question she had mulled over for two weeks. “How do you manage this?”

“How do you function while knowing you fucked up?”

He stopped mid-bandaging. “You’re telling me you’re sorry about Ta-“

“Not her. The Sphinx.”

“I still don’t-“

“I mean I failed against the Sphinx! I completely failed!” She was shouting now. She would have risen, except the pain had other ideas. “And then I failed at trying to get the actual winner on my side!”

“You’re still upset about that? It happened months ago-“

“I know,” she said, gripping the back guard tightly. “I know it happened months ago, I know it wasn’t my fault, so why am I revisiting it now!?”

“Shouldn’t you be talking about this with your actual therapist-“

“No. Why should I? I’m not a wimp, I don’t need coddling from people whose job it is to coddle the wimps.”

“Uh-huh,” said Bixby, utterly unconvinced. “So you’re just going to happily go schizophrenic and wallow in your own filth-“

“Shut up.”

“Right, sorry.”

“I just…what is wrong with me? I’m the goddamn Shadow Stalker, I don’t get sad like this. I punch and/or shoot the problem until it goes away.”

“Maybe because this is a problem you can’t do either to?”

“No shit? Wow, I never thought of that, dumbass.”

She paused and mulled it over for a second.

“And…” She sighed. “I think Em-er, my friend forgives me more than I do.”

October 11:

Couldn’t get out, couldn’t get out, couldn’t get out...

And as suddenly as they appeared, the visions stopped. Shadow Stalker blinked to rid herself of the
fractal Sphinxes dancing around her vision, and realized that….

Oh.

“Sorry.”

“No problem,” Gallant squeaked in pain from the arrow, and held out a hand for the antidote.

Not missing a beat, she tossed him the anti-sedative and silently prayed Clockblocker didn’t notice, before rushing off.

Okay, freak, very funny. We’ll see how funny you find it with one of my special arrows…up your…

…Tail?

The closest thing to her was Dragon, apparently struggling against invisible bonds as her concrete saw spun in the air. The next was the bleeding, probably dead Sphinx, with the unconscious form of Taylor Hebert lying on top of it, with what looked like an indoor storm crackling in the air above her.

That wasn’t what alarmed her though.

No, that was the screaming of Emma Barnes, currently flattened against a wall with an animal fear in her eyes.

Sophia immediately rushed to her friend, only to run into some kind of invisible wall. She went immaterial, and when that still didn’t seem to work, she phased around through the hallway.

“Emma! Emma I’m here!”

Instinctively the terrified schoolgirl threw a punch at her savior, then realized who it was when she failed to connect. Sophia immediately rematerialized and locked her in a tight embrace.

“It’s okay. He’s gone. He’s gone.” The mantra was just as much for herself as it was for Emma. The hug was returned, except this was really more of a pincer grab for dear life. The wetness of tears dripped through what breaks in the costume there was. “Oh God…Oh God…Sophie…Oh God…he-“

“You’re strong, Emma, remember? You’re gonna be fine, he’s just another ABB-“

“No, n-nuh-no, worse. He…Oh God, Sophie, he-he did s-something to m-my brain…h-he m-made me want to g-g-go with him…I-I w-w-was g-g-going to sell out m-m-my Dad, and, and I was so happy…Oh God.” Then the crying began again.

“Hey, but you got him, didn’t you?”

“No…nuh-not me…” She pointed at the unconscious girl. “S-she t-t-tricked him somehow…cut him…s-s-stabbed…”

She couldn’t continue.

Two things ran through Sophia’s mind.
One, that was actually really impressive. Maybe Emma was right after all.

Two…

Did she just lose to Taylor? Seriously? Oh, come on. She let began to let go of Emma to get a closer look and confirm-

Another shudder went through Emma’s body before a string of incoherent syllables, gripping tighter.

A pit opened in the bottom of Sophia’s stomach as she realized what she was prioritizing over a traumatized friend.

Even as she hugged the shuddering Emma closer, all Sophia could think about was how she put her own pride over a person who needed her more than anything right now.

December 12:

“You didn’t tell me yet.”

“Huh?”

“What you did afterwards.”

Sophia opened and closed her mouth behind the ski mask, then looked away. “I…tried to get Taylor and my friend back together. I felt that…look, I’m the cape here, but she was the leader of our little gang, and that if she tried to approach Taylor herself, she’d get punched in the face. So, I and the idiot,” she said, emphasizing her opinion of Madison after that fiasco, “tried to chat her up after lunch, mend some bridges. Of course, thing about the idiot? She’s really kind of dim when it comes to other people’s feelings, she’s the kind of person who’d happily throw a person in a bunch of, I don’t know, used tampons and think it was all in good fun.”

“So what does she do? Start by calling her a murderess. I tried to remedy the situation after she got Madison to back off, but then those freaky snakes of hers acted up and learned about my…family problems.” She looked down at that. “By the time I snapped back to reality, she’s off in the woods freaking out and I can’t try again on the basis that the PRT and her dad came to take her away.”

She looked out at Emma’s place. “Then things got worse. First, my friend and the idiot start thinking we’re responsible for what happened and run away from me. I then learn she’s bound to become a Ward when she gets out, and I start losing it because I’m worried she’ll dredge up my past again. Then…”

She pointed at the anklet.

“The events that led to this.”

It was times like this that Sophia remembered a mantra she used to say to herself, and recently came back in fashion.

Big girls don’t cry.
November 28:

Truth was, Sophia didn’t see the point in keeping her identity away from her family. Yeah, she was an angry young woman, and a violent one at that, but that was no reason to avoid admitting “yeah I lost my cool and nearly killed a guy, I’m training so it won’t happen again.” She would not mourn anybody she killed, but she never actually killed anyone (despite what she told Emma), and that “incident” was the result of her not knowing that you still bled when pinned to a wall like that. Hanlon’s Razor.

And, contrary to what she claimed, her mother knew. Her mother was the one she confided when she first became the shadow, in fact, and it was only for legal reasons that she pretended otherwise.

That was a mistake then, and it was a mistake now. Not that this occurred to her at this point.

She tried to work her mouth for a second. “W-W-What?”

Her mother pointed at the door again. “You heard me. Go. Leave. I’ve been way too permissive of your behavior for way too long. They have rooms at the PRT building, and I heard that they’re keeping a closer eye on you anyway. If you’re so independent, try it for a night or two. Who knows, since you’re so goddamn strong you may even like it.”

“I…huh…why?” Her lower lip began to quiver. “But-“

“But what? I talked to Ms. Piggot, you seem to have gotten the idea that bullying is the way of the world. So unless you start apologizing, to me, and to Taylor, right now, consider this a different perspective on the matter.”

“I….I…” Part of her, the part of her that was still her before her trigger, wanted to take up that offer, to run to her Mom and beg forgiveness.

Characteristically, the way Sophia actually reacted was anger.

“…Fine! I don’t need you! I don’t need the Wards, I don’t need anyone! Good-fucking-by!“

And with that, she dematerialized, going straight through the wall behind her, pausing only to gather her cloak, crossbow, and mask. Then she ran, far away as she could, stopping under a bridge.

Rematerialized, a fuming Sophia rested against the overhang, checking her crossbow-an easy task, one she used when trying to think about something.

When the “clean crossbow” rite didn’t work, she decided to test the bow on her home cellphone.

Her Mom said it, not her. She was the strongest Ward. She didn’t need them, she was only on there because of a stupid. She didn’t need anyone. Not her mother. Not her loser teammates. Not even…

…Big girls don’t cry, big girls don’t cry, big g-girls…d-don’t….

Oh fuck it. Eyes stinging, she dialed up the person she stopped herself from discounting.
“Um, Emma, it’s me. Sophia. Can I crash at your place a bit? Please?”

That last word was a calculated gambit. Sophia Hess did not ask nicely for things. Not unless she really needed them.

“And then of course, the bitch asks to see me! Just to rub it in!”

“Mm-hm.”

“I mean, who does that!? I told her I got kicked out of my house, and she tells me she has worse problems! Her goddamn dad is living with her, on base!”

“And then?”

“Why do you think I’m not allowed to go solo at all anymore? I tried to get her, hurt my fist on that wing of hers. Then I discovered she’s gone scary as Hell itself, and then it turns out that, in what, five minutes, she’s got Deeeenn….Clockblocker on her side, and when I wake up, it’s to a glowering Pig. Then, when I somehow go back on the Wards, they’ve all taken her side! Great team loyalty, guys! Please take the psychotic newbie over your faithful, hypercompetent ghost archer, it’s not like I’m homeless or anything.”

“Have you tried going back?”

The rant came to a sudden stop. “Eh?”

“From the sound of it, you took a maternal warning seriously, and then stewed in self-punishment and misery for two weeks.”

Sophia rose a finger to respond…then realized that her mom didn’t know her Wards cell number.

“Come to think of it, why are you sleeping in that shed? Alan isn’t heartless, he’d let you stay in the house, so long as you got new clothes.”

Sophia…did not have an answer to that. “I…like the small spaces?”

“Have you eaten breakfast with Emma? Tried to talk to her? Basically acted like an actual lodger instead of a hermit who happens to live on the manor of the house of Barnes? Hells, why are you using me as a doctor, when it’s costly and probably illegal?”

“…”

…Dear God, what the hell was wrong with her!? Sophia cradled her head. After that stunt, she’d be surprised if her Mom wanted her daughter back given how her frequent head injuries seemed to have killed most of her brain cells. Hell, she’d be wouldn’t be surprised if she up and died right there. Here Lies Sophia Hess, Died of Forgetting to Breathe.

Not hearing an answer, Bixby pressed on. “Listen, I’m not a psychologist, though I know them. From the sound of it, though, you seem to think you’re the ultimate lone wolf. Which is a rather
stupid concept, as wolves are pack hunters. You also seem to remind me of this fantasy story I once read.”

Okay, now she was caught too off-guard to feel embarrassed. She looked at him quizzically.

“Yeah, you probably feel the urge to take my lunch money now. Point is, one of the gods in that story? He’s the big bad evil guy, the guy responsible for all ills in the world. Truth is, he always came off as the morally superior one, because unlike the other gods he didn’t just dust off his creation, say ‘good enough’ and pretend there wasn’t any flaws in it, to resist the fact that things change because that’s the nature of time. But I digress. Point is, he’s dead, and yet he’s still a major character, still the driving force of every subplot in it. Want to know why?”

Sophia smirked. “Until your little fanwank is done, I don’t think you’ll let me.”

“Fan…? Nevermind. Point is, the reason he was so effective even death didn’t stop him?”

He looked directly into Sophia’s eyes for this.

“He trusted other people. He trusted that he wasn’t the only one who could complete his vision, he trusted that his friends and servants wouldn’t fail him-basically, he realized that the path of the loner is not the path of the strong—it’s the path the real wolves, the pack ones, like to patrol for easy prey. You’re not protecting yourself by driving everyone away. You’re marinating yourself in steak sauce.”

Sophia wanted to laugh at that (the power of friendship makes me a better hunter? Come on), but she stopped herself and mulled it over.

And mulled.

And mulled.

And mulled until she realized something else: Exactly what had she used as a crutch during these last two weeks?

More importantly, who had used her as a crutch the month before?

Slowly, she began to giggle, and then laugh. Seems those stupid, saccharine shows had a point to it after all.

But now…her family. Hoo boy.

“Well, thanks for the advice doc…but I think I have to face the music now. It’s death metal in the key of scolding. Thanks for restarting my brain, Hermit Doc.”

“No problem…and where did you get that nickname, anyway?”

“Because you work out of a truck, and your name is Sheldon, get it?”

It took him a second, then he laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”
As Sophia made her way up to Barnes’ house to bid adieu and, presumably, make a rather apologetic call to her mother, Dr. Bixby leaned back in his truck bed. “Hermit Doc…actually rather clever. Must be Madison’s influence.”

Then his mildly amused expression became one of confusion. What was that vibration-

Oh yes. This thing. Taking out a slender black cell phone, Bixby opened his texts.

Crochet_Countess: B-man’s got order 4 us. Would be nice if i knew what Grease looked like.

A second, then;

Crochet_Countess: Greece, sry.

TFTD: Would not bee the foist of us too suffer automobile correct. (Would not be the first of us to suffer autocorrect.)

TFTD: Four example. (For example.)

Bixby smirked. These fellows were what kept him sane these past few years, even if they both needed a couple seconds to understand in texting.

D.Phil: I take it we should not have consulted a mundane firm for your visor repairs, eh Garril?

TFTD: And won with know since of scaled, it seams. These tingles make my ayes shrink. (And one with no sense of scale, it seems. These make my eyes shrink.)

Israfil: We feel your anguish, one of the seas. We almost had to consult the one called Leet for a screen that would not yield under our royal nails.

Crochet_Countess: Khaba, spoilers! Serisly!

D.Phil: Don’t be too alarmed, Jeru. The Righteous is occupied with the Foolish Knights.

Crochet_Countess: Yer still usin code words, Mag.

D.Phil: Just because I know she is not does not mean I am in not the habit of not being paranoid. Especially with the Light above us.

Crochet_Countess: Gd point. So, how goes the mission?

D.Phil: Very, very well. It helps the shadewalker seems to have broken free of the False Dark. She now recognizes that she is no stronger in solitude than she is as a person.

Israfil: And of course, your Arts of thought had nothing whatsoever to do with this epiphany?

D.Phil: Suggestion alone could result in the revolution of mental health in the Mandate once this Province’s psychiatry is released to the Palaces.

TFTD: And its Emmy grants will insure tears a Giants the manned for it. (And its emigrants will ensure there’s a giant demand for it).
Crochet_Countess: Boy, id sure like this provinces Emmy grants. 

Israfil: You shall have to pry them from our chilled, stilled talons, one of songs.

D.Phil: All right pupils, you are embarrassing Grandfather. Speaking of which, I told his story too. Seemed to resonate with her after another dose.

Crochet_Countess: Uh, you said u were the paranoid 1?

D.Phil: ...This is the shadewalker we are speaking of. I would be surprised if she even remembered I exposited on “nerd things” next week, much less the content.

Crochet_Countess: Rgt, stupid question. Spekin of capes, how goes lil’ sis byond my product orders?

Israfil: Quite splendidly, actually. We have noted a silver cord extended to the Palace of the Wardens through the Sacral.

TFTD: Tank Gramps. I’m Biggs and tough, but I am knot so stooped id to think I am cape able of toking on the Tide. (Thank Gramps. I’m big and tough, but I am not so stupid to think I am capable of taking on the Tide.)

TFTD: Id is a Ward? (Id is a word?)

Israfil: Actually, he is indeed, but he dwells in the city of San...please hold a minute.

D.Phil: I will lend you some books on this wonderful sage named Freud. Good for a laugh if you’re not easily offended.

D.Phil: In any case, we return to our work, and await the reveal of the Magician.

Crochet_Countess: Hope she likes my part! ...Serisly, what does B-man mean by “Greece?”

Israfil: It is called an Internet search, one of songs. While you are there, you can remind us of why you were the infiltrator besides your lack of obvious Sacraments.

TFTD: And wall there, get sum butter eye censors! Waterproof ones! (And while there, get some better eye sensors! Waterproof ones!)

Dr. Bixby rolled his eyes. Family, eh? Couldn’t live with them…

When he was sure no one else was observing him, the pharmacologist entered his truck, and after a quick check, removed his ring of disguise.

The cloaked man was almost completely hidden by the shadows of his cloak, apart from hands that seemed almost too old to be alive-and only almost because they were attached to a seemingly living person. He silently thanked the real Dr. Bixby for providing a cover, before willing the ring to forget that face.

The Magian proceeded to alter the runic diagrams on his dashboard, and vanished into the Shadow World. Sadly, one of the downsides to being quite foreign to this little world was a lack of driving ability, and at least the Otherworld had no cars.
Before you ask, no they don’t always type like that. Crochet_Countess is trying to text quickly so she can get back to work, TFTD has a problem with his eye sensors when typing things out using them, and Israfil…actually does talk like that normally. She’s a bit vain. I also decided to not do that again in future chatter when it didn’t go over so well (Countess’ txtspeak used to be outright illegible).

Also, I get sick of councils of villains just being mysteerrrious and creepy, so I made them normal people trying to avoid the gaze of [IF YOU HAVEN’T GUESSED WHO THIS IS, YOU DESERVE THIS REDACTED] and having a hard time breaking out of it.

As for Sophia, I get the sense she was a perpetual victim who went power mad after triggering, a more subtle, controlled form of going Carrie White. She has good qualities (her genuine friendship with Emma, her sense of moral duty that drives her to at least try to be a hero), but most of them have been largely suppressed. I’m showing them slowly, ever so slowly, show themselves again now that the high has finally warn off and she realizes they won’t protect her from pain.

And yes, Taylor did not detect that lie two chapters ago. Sophia believed it herself, after all.
Chapter Notes

Been a bit, hasn’t it? I try to upload when the main fic has a new chapter

Also, I’m going to nip this in the bud now—a skort is a real thing, it’s a pair of shorts with a skirt sewn over it (or a woman’s culotte, technically, though I doubt Taylor cares). Glenn’s a cynic, not a creep.

I tried to put the dream out of mind. Easier said than done; like my recurring dreams, the one about the mood-swinging army monster only seemed to grow vivid the more time I gave it. Actually no, it was vivid enough to the point it felt like I was recounting an actual trip I took to a surreal battlefield and accidentally pissed off a scaly drill sergeant until her boss cleared things up. In fact, I remembered only feeling scared when I saw her growling at me, I just felt lost (as in, “crap I should have paid attention to that aisle number in the supermarket” lost not “oh God where in Hell am I” lost).

Even more oddly, try as I might, I couldn’t quite think of her as looking “demonic”, like it was a contradiction in terms despite looking kind of like the Devil. Demon-ish, certainly, but demon? Something about that world being used as a full description unsettled me on a deep level. Dream logic, I supposed.

Of course, what Dr. Yamada taught me to do was open up a little to my shrink. This guy wasn’t her (thanks to a rather idiotic policy, she wouldn’t be coming by officially for a month, and I didn’t feel like I had enough trust to push my luck and saunter through the giant loophole that left open), so I told him about it and to refer it to her.

Sadly, the interview ended before it got anywhere (who was the idiot designed that policy?), but he said something about symbolizing my nervousness with joining the Wards and my mixed feelings towards Director Piggot. That seemed as good an idea as any, so I internally went with that (ignoring the part of my mind that went but you hate Piggot, why was the monster lady so nice after she calmed down?).

For the moment, I did. I was too busy inspecting my costume to think about it.

Seems Glenn had taken the Greek idea to heart—I looked like an actual Erinyes now, if women were allowed to wear armor in Sparta and one of their painters made a picture of one.

Much to my initial dismay, it also seemed he was determined to put in fanservice somehow—the design was a bit too form shaped, especially around my waist (even after my mutations, I still didn’t have that great a figure). At least the thing I realized just after I left, revealed leg just above the part where they were still vulnerable skin rather than Brute bird scale remained an unrealized fear-while I still had a battle skirt (or rather, a battle skort), it was tastefully long (and armored) enough to show no naked skin. No arm or leg guards beyond cosmetic cloth wrapping though, but I could forgive that—it would just be redundant given my talons.
As for the armor itself, most of it was the color of bronze painted black, though one touch told me it was something else. Something heavier, though nothing I couldn’t adapt to. The torso came in three pieces, the front went on first followed by shoulders with slots for the wings to fit in, then the back with the proper holes. I made a note to practice getting that one on in a crisis. The skort was something I put on over it, and surprisingly tough too-must have been more Tinker tech. Taking a look at it in the mirror, I realized the silver and bronze embroidery was actually a pair of serpents meeting in front of my chest, giving the overall effect of my wings actually being a cape when at rest.

What I found most interesting was the helmet. It looked like a classic Corinthian (Spartan style, the fully covering ones with a noseguard that made sure that everything except the eyes were covered), same overall design as the armor, with the snake heads here being over my cheeks while framing my face. I could also flip open the cheek plates to show my face and breathe, a perk of modern manufacturing I’d bet many a hoplite would kill to have.

That wasn’t the interesting bit. The interesting bit was a series of four slots, arranged in a pattern in the back of my helmet. After I put it on, I quickly realized why—they could be both exited by the Medusas, causing them to hang in such a way that they looked like braids when at rest, or be sealed by them if they slithered back in, the pressure of the coiled snake hairs causing them to slam shut. Airtight shut, which shut them up due to lack of scent. How I didn’t know, but it was an extremely insightful innovation. Had to thank someone for that. After thinking about the Sphinx for a second, I made another discovery—this metal was resistant to my acid. Excellent, I could just open the face and dip my fingers in if I needed to break something inorganic.

I took a look over myself. Huh, I looked pretty badass—slightly like a supervillain, especially given how the spear they gave me looked pretty real (which it was, but the blade wasn’t sharp, that was a taser and delivery system for various nonlethal poisons, the real pointy thing was spring-loaded inside the “blade”, all components of which were unleashed by squeezing the right part of the spear). I guessed that intimidating, intellectual heroines had a pass to get the really cool costumes.

“Taylor? You done in there?”

And I had been checking myself out in a mirror for the past five minutes. I caught the embarrassing whiff of my vanity as I opened the door for Missy.

Her expression, although slightly hidden by her mask, became one of surprise, then one of mock horror. “Who are you and what have you done with the bespectacled girl that was in here?”

I smirked despite myself, and opened my helmet. “Missy…help. The metal….lives…”

“Have no fear citizen, no tin can is capable of resisting—wait you’re in there. Crap.” She laughed, then was cut off after she looked at my face. “You’re still wearing glasses under there? Isn’t that a bit uncomfortable?”

“Yes, but not nearly as much as contacts.” I took them off. “I can still see fine enough without them. Also, can you tell me how you did that teleportation trick, Carlos? I could have sworn I was talking to Missy a second ago.”

At this point, my teammate had long since buckled in to the idea of there being two amateur comedians in her life, so she just sighed. “Just be serious for once in your life during your reveal speech? We have enough similarities to Dennis already.”
My mood immediately soured. Oh God, I was going to speak. In public. On television.

I drew the monarch from its hidden cavity and rubbed rapidly.

I decided to defer to Glenn’s script in this case. He was the more experienced here, and while he was a bit too driven by studies that really did not improve my image of humanity, he was the extrovert who managed to be likable despite his excesses, so I simply memorized the script, no matter how creepy I was going to seem.

“And now, please allow me to introduce the hero of Winslow…”

The spokesman’s eyes widened in mock disbelief as he saw I was not in my “official” spot, waiting to be introduced. I was, however, in my actual designated spot for my intro.

Internally rolling my eyes at the hammy nature of what I was about to say, I leaned into the mike attached to my interiors’ helmet for volume.

“I work at my own pace, Mr. Michaels,” I said in the most serious voice I could muster. “I’m quite capable of introducing myself.”

“Oh, um-yes.” Michaels waited the confused mutterings of the crowd to die down before my cue, doing his best to look a little nervous at the “sudden” sound of my voice. “I-It appears she wishes to introduce herself. Ahem.” He sidestepped away.

“Citizens of Brockton Bay. Please direct your attention to the top of the building at seven o’ clock.”

They did so, and gasped.

After dramatically brooding for a few seconds, wings wrapped around me like a cloak, I spread them out to full stretch, revealing my spear as I did, before taking off to dive off my ledge, and then do a flyover.

I almost screwed up as the bevy of camera flashes caught me flying overhead, but thankfully I had been trained for that. It took me days to get that stunt just right, and even then there was a cushion under the ledge.

I landed, crouched, directly behind the podium, back facing the audience, both for the dramatic effect of me turning around after I relaxed my wings, and the much-needed thumbs up from my Dad and Armsmaster out of view of the public.

I strode up to the podium with a complete(ly faked) confidence, opened my helmet to reveal the cold glare of a soldier, and leaned forward into the proper mike. “Greetings, noble citizens. I…am Adrasteia.” As I said that, I did a small bow, apparently showing an archaic formality for my mythic image.

I let that hang for a bit to settle in before continuing. “Once, I was Taylor Hebert, the slayer of a
monster in all senses of the term. I remember her quite well, her iron will, her intellect in turning
the Sphinx’s own strength against him. But that beast,” I emphasized the word with a snarl of
disgust, “took one last victim with him, with a curse that twisted her over the course of an
agonizing week into a creature just as alien in form as he. No, Taylor Hebert is dead, lost to the
dying throes of the Sphinx. I was born from her pyre.”

I didn’t mention the fact that that was probably true of most trigger events, given how traumatic
they were.

“It...hurt, at first,” I admitted, allowing a brief flicker of pain and thus, humanity to dance over my
face. “As Taylor died and I was reborn, I screamed. I cried. I hurt in every possible way, as my
body changed into something terrible and wonderful. But as the pain died, and my mind swam into
consciousness, I realized the gift I had been given. I learned that these little things,” I said as I ran
my hand down a Medusa “could detect the smell of crime, of monsters who still looked human.
My limbs had hardened into near invulnerability, my body had learned to ignore the heat of even
molten magma and the most toxic of poisons. And of course,” I stretched my wings to finish that
statement.

“Of course, most did not see that. Most only saw the face of a mythological monster, and ascribed
the mutation of the body to that of the mind.” The flicker of pain that showed this time was
genuine. I was kept out of sight by my dad for that initial week, and the staff at the hospital trained
themselves to avoid the knee-jerk reaction, but I remembered the fear on my classmates’ faces as
they saw the Medusa for the first time, their flinching back from me as I was rushed home in a
PRT van. “And yes, I was angry at them for running away. But my father, Daniel,” I gestured
behind me, “was there for me, and as the fear and confusion ebbed, I realized what I did not smell
among the majority of humans; I did not smell the casual cruelty of the Sphinx. I did not smell the
quiet loathing of the world so many cynics, in their fear of changing the world for the better,
ascribe to all humans and so claim it is conveniently impossible. I did not smell the selfish fear of
pure cowardice when I showed myself, only fear for their families and friends. I saw the true nature
of humans in their inner darkness, and there is nobility even there.”

“So, I decided that I did not hold the fear of others against me. If I am fated to be separated from
normal humans, a monster at the edge of the firelight, then let me be a guardian monster from the
things that chose that darkness. Let me be the wrathful spirit that hunts murderers, the black hound
that guards the souls of the dead from demons, the urban legend that criminals know, in their heart
of hearts, only comes for them. A being who avenges the weak against the strong.”

“Hence, Adrasteia the Inescapable. For I know what you did, and nothing in this or any other world
will stop me coming for you.”

I took off before anyone could ask any questions and people realized Adrasteia was actually kind
of bad at public speaking.

“Nice work!” Glenn was happy with my performance, which I took to mean that I actually did a
good job rather than the innumerable flaws I saw with it. “I think several crooks are turning
themselves in right now (white lie)!”

“Eh, don’t flatter yourself. You’re the guy who did the whole ‘swoop in from the nearby building
and give the spectators a view of you in flight’ thing. I just followed the script.”
“In any case, good work. You’ve acclimated the world to expect you to be a little inhuman,” he said, not noticing my wings grow tense at that, “but also that you emphasize with normal people and, since you could rely on one at a time of need, that compassion is the way to treat an emerging parahuman. I won’t lie and say you’ve made a big dent yet, but assuming you’re any good at your new job, you will.”

I smiled. “Thanks Glenn.”

“No problem. Now, I have to be going, there’s a new Case 53 in Florida, and they’re always rather difficult to get good PR for. The Case 53, I mean, though Florida also has a bit of an image problem. See you someday.” With that, Glenn tipped an invisible bowler hat, and made his way to a waiting taxi. Which struck me as incredibly lacking ostentation for Glenn, but I supposed limos were a bit of a target for parahuman thugs looking for an easy, rich target.

Next was Colin…being Colin. “You performed to more than adequate measures. I suppose congratulations are in order.” This was all said in a monotone that I assumed he thought was praise, given the lack of a scent. Again, robot wolves. “Any criticism?” I asked.

“You could be less of a brooding grandstander. And yes, I am aware of the hypocrisy of that sentiment, thank you.” And then he left. Of course. I wondered if my “disarming humor” put me in the same category as Dennis. In that case, I wondered at the mental fortitude needed for him to not have a psychotic break and come up with a scheme to singlehandedly kill an Endbringer or something equally harebrained.

Dad was a bit more competent, in that he actually gave me some degree of praise that actually worked like praise. “You did great, Taylor. Even I was a little intimidated.” He then realized what he just said. “In a good way.”

The fact that I initially felt my ego swell at realizing I just scared my father, the guy who knew I was psychologically incapable of hurting him, was more than a bit unnerving, though. More power effects on my personality, or had I grown a bit more power hungry than I realized? Being showered with attention after being a bullied ghost probably did weird things to your psyche. Yet more for Yamada.

Despite hints of my growing megalomania and/or enjoyment of my rather dark image, though, it seemed like a good day. The first of the rest of my life, and nothing could bring it down.

Carlos grinned apologetically. “Whelp, looks like the police department read your file, Taylor. Seems like you’ve been asked to help with the investigation of a ritualistic murder.”

Was this going to be a thing? Because if this was going to be a thing, I needed to be less optimistic.

“Fine. Any hints on what the ritual involves for tomorrow?”

“You have to do it tonight, they were delaying until your reveal, beginning a day ago. They’re worried about the scent losing potency if allowed to linger for more than that and possibly losing hints. And it involves organ removal.”
I resolved to immediately begin thinking of my pre-trigger life, starting now.

Chapter End Notes

Behold, the first part of the vague outline arcs! Hopefully this will keep up the quality index despite being slightly unsure of what happens next.
Dusk in Brockton Bay. The moonlight twined through the buildings like a woman caressing her scarred lover’s hair. The street I had found myself in was one of his more recent wounds in that simile, a dark, jagged rent with a spot of red seeping out. The body was leaning against the east wall, not even hidden, like the killer who had torn the poor sap’s chest open was proud of what they did. Showing it off to whoever saw like some kind of crimson painting at an exhibition themed after human horror. I didn’t quite know what was going on yet, as I had just gotten out of the van, but my gut was already telling me two things:

One, I should stop giving myself a noir internal narration.

Two, I really shouldn’t have eaten before we left.

The driver smiled in sympathy at my retching. “It gets easier (half-truth). Thankfully, we don’t deal with these sickos on a daily basis.”

“You’re not the parahuman detective,” I replied, hoarse from queasiness. “I probably will.”

“Ah, well, you’ll get used it (half-truth).”

Nodding as I flipped my face plate on to not show just how green (in all senses of the term) I was after my showing earlier today, I stepped out, calmly and with purpose. Calmly and with purpose, just like I was advised.

A grey suited detective ran up to me. “Adrasteia. Good to meet you in person, I’m Officer Bennett.”

I shook his hand, ignoring his instinctual shudder as he realized what my talons felt like. “Well met. I’ll keep this brief: Why did you ask for me? A serial killer is a monster among the worst of them, but I understand you’re competent enough yourselves at that.”

“Technically, this is the first murder we’ve had, so not a serial, but…take a looksee.” Bennett walked over to the body. More specifically, the part near the body where the victim’s organs were, all laid out neatly and carefully. “First, of course, is in fact that this is the first time this particular MO is sighted, and I’m going to take a wild guess and say our dissector is the kind of person who’d happily do this again for whatever reason. Second is the trophy.”

“Trophy?” I tried to not to retch with that word. First case, and I get a mutilator who likes to take mementos. Grand. How copacetic.
Bennett gestured to a suspiciously empty spot in the circle of organs. “His liver is missing. Behavioral analysis hasn't come out to say why yet, but I had this case a couple years back. Perp owned dogs, and was also a canni--”

“Right, don’t wanna know! I’m only fifteen you know!” As soon as the words escaped my mouth, I instantly regretted them. “Great job Taylor, break character on your first outing.”

And then I realized I said that out loud. “Crap, don’t tell the force I’m not the miniature Margaret Thatcher of Brockton Bay in real life, Glenn will kill me.”

He suppressed a laugh. “Hey, hey. Take it easy, I never bought into all that pomp. Frankly I’m relieved you aren’t that brooding and serious in real life, I’ve met Armsmaster already.”

“Thank you.” I flipped open the helmet and leaned over a sewer grate in case the chunks I was sure hadn’t come up yet flew out. No contaminating the crime scene. Thankfully I had gotten more control over my stomach by then, so only a wet, ragged cough for me. “All right…you met Armsmaster? What’s he like to non-Wards?”

“Blunt. Generally charismatic but if you talk to him for more than five sentences he usually manages to accidentally insult your mother.”

“Why am I not surprised? ...Anyway let’s get this over with. Any other reason you were so determined to get me?”

“Here.” Gingerly, the detective led me over to the actual body, handing me a bag. “Take a look at the torso cuts.”

Trying to hold back my remaining dinner via the most fake smile in the history of smiles, I did so. “Looks like he was…torn apart. Urgh…”

“That’s because, quite simply, he was. Lab says that this guy was torn apart by claws, like some kind of bear got him. Thing is, the tearing was incredibly precise, like the unsub (that's short for unspecified subject, by the way-our quarry) was shoving the skin and muscle out of the way without using a scalpel. Lab also says the organs were torn out by the same method, precisely but with claws. That takes both incredible strength and medical knowledge, so we’re thinking para. Hopefully not a bio-Tinker, but we can’t predict if this guy’s simply very sick or shopping for parts until we find him, and we think those snakes could help us be warned before we call in the Protectorate.”

“Got it,” I wheezed into the bag. Please let this not be Bonesaw, even though what I knew of her suggested this would even more horrifying if she were around. I willed the Medusas to come out, and after doing a quick scan on Bennett as a test (seems he had been hogging more than his fair share of the donuts and got other people to buy them for him. Boo), I focused on the corpse, letting the snakes do the seeing for me (as I really, really did not want to look at it any more).

Obviously, the first scent was his murder. Three days ago, just like in the report. No surprises there, except for one. “He was ripped open after his death. Actual cause was a poison arrow to his heart, was removed during his dissection.”

“Huh, you’d think a perp looking for organs would care more about the state of them. Continue.”

More hissing, and actually a big surprise. “I’m getting the scent he was actually killed somewhere
else, then moved here for dissection. Motive was that the…unsub didn’t want people to find her-hunting grounds, and the blood would have risked that the authorities were alerted. Uh, I’m not getting her appearance, um, she came up to this guy after he was dumped, apparently shapeshifted due to lack of tools, and uh…”

The Medusas went back into their helmet. Nope. If I look at it, I’ll imagine it. Nope. “Sorry, but I don’t want to vomit on the body.

”

As I opened my eyes, I saw Bennett scribbling. “Got it. So we have a Changer?”

“Yes. Scent suggests she could have used scalpels but is paranoid about the theft being detected-really nervous about leaving a paper trail.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“As far as I know…wait.” A Medusa came out again, and tasted something strange. “Here’s something. Apparently she hired someone to help transport the body. Drug crimes, it smells like. Owner of this scent’s also female, made a deal with the unsub. Stealthy transport and escape, far beyond what a normal car could possibly do. Tinkertech, I think?”

Bennett looked up. “Squealer,” he stated.

“Who?”

“She’s a Tinker of the Merchants. Specializes in vehicles, though how she managed to create a stealthy one is beyond me. The unsub must be paying her a lot.”

“Ah. Those guys.” I nodded as the name of the parahuman drug cartel from my briefings came back. Already I didn’t like them, and now I liked them even less.

I followed the scent of the Merchants’ machinist over to the curb.

“Yes. Unsub paid her here, seems like she also owes Merchants a favor for drug debts. Doesn’t smell like an addict though…I’m new at this, but I’m going to guess you’re going to find drugs in his system that aren’t from deliberate use.”

Even the detective shivered a bit. “Death by overdose. Now I’m a little queasy. I’ll put out an APB on Squealer and the Merchants, say they’re working for a ritualistic and highly sadistic killer. May finally Birdcage them and get them out of our hair forever.”

I wanted to object, that the Birdcage was a fate worse than death, but I had been briefed on Skidmark and his crew. Given the general scum they were from their briefing, I really could not feel for the anarchic, thuggish curs.

…And when did I start thinking of anarchic as an insult? They were that, but I didn’t have a particular grudge against the concept of anarchism in general. It was stupid, given how people needed rules to function and frequently only threat of punishment got some people to behave, but I could respect people who rejected all authority in general.

Shrugging at both Bennett and my new sense of maintaining the social order, I stood up.

“Probably would have to throw the unsub in there too. I’m going to take a wild guess and say a
person who consults a drug dealer for poisons isn’t someone I’d want on the streets, ever again. See you around.”

“Hopefully with Tums.”

“I’ll remember those.” Gag prevention smile in place, I went back to the PRT van. “Let’s go,” I told the driver. “Back to HQ. I think I may have discovered my first supervillain raid.”

First item on the next day: Drills and prep. I supposed Piggot wanted me to show off a little to cement my image, and Skidmark was not judged to be a villain that would likely cause any degree of fatality. Worst is we’d be blown into a garbage bin in front of a camera.

Still didn’t mean we shouldn’t be prepared for actually semi-competent Merchants, however.

“The main thing to worry about with Trainwreck is that his rushes are completely ignorant of his own strength, and he’s likely to forget about a little thing called ‘self-preservation’ when coming at you.”

Emphasis on “semi”.

“Thus, it’s probably a good idea to take him out first, and make sure he doesn’t see you. He can’t rush for you at all if he doesn’t see you, and he’s not so dumb as to rush for random columns or cunning enough to bring down the building on you.” Armsmaster then clicked the slide to the warehouse the tip had said the Merchants were hiding in currently, and began to point out good hiding areas depending on where Trainwreck was at the moment.

I nodded, and took notes. Along with my own annotations and fallbacks (if there’s something heavy in area C3, Aegis can use that to distract him and draw him to a place where he can’t hit anyone, if there’s “customers” we need to announce our presence beforehand to scare them off, things like that).

“Mush, on the other hand, is your typical Brute, even if his body construction makes him technically a Changer. He isn’t a tactical fighter at all, he just throws together a bit of extra plating around his fleshy bits and starts smashing things. The main threat is him getting in the way more than anything.”

“Uh, quick question?” I piped up. “Can his trash-limbs be severed?”

“As far as I know…” Armsmaster thought for a second. “…Actually, they may be. I remember one report about a finger being broken off, and it stands to reason if the rest of his body is made of softer materials, so can the rest of it.”

“Does it retain shape?”

“…The report didn’t say. And no, I am forbidding you from specifically planning for Aegis to hit Mush with his own arm while making bad jokes about him hitting himself.”

“And you wonder why we riff on you…”
“Clockblocker, cut it out.”

“Nah, not the idea,” I muttered, scribbling out more scenarios.

Armsmaster grunted skeptically, then went back to the power point. “Last and probably least is Squealer…”

I was snapped out of my planning trance by an elbow from Kid Win. “Adrasteia, you’re stealing the position of team idea guy. Stop it, you have to switch power sets first.”

I half-smirked before going back to scribbling. “Believe me, if you get my powers, you also get my award-winning looks. I’m okay being the team martyr on this count, particularly given how you’re a lot better at finding uses for lasers than I am.”

A brief pause, and then my teammate cleared his throat a bit too loudly. “Yes, I suppose that if you had my abilities we wouldn’t have awesome lasers (half-truth).”

I stopped, then looked him directly in the eye. I hadn’t had the Medusas out to sniff for personal issues (it was actually in case the team got any funny ideas about personal touches without alerting the rest of us, ala Gallant inviting Glory Girl again), but this was new. “…You want to talk about something?” I said, trying to imitate Dr. Yamada.

“No!” he said, a bit too loud.

Which in this case, meant Armsmaster heard that. He sighed and looked at Kid Win. “I know it seems cruel to take apart the car gun, but-”

“Sorry, wasn’t commenting! Sorry!”

Armsmaster sighed, then went back to the thing I should probably be paying more attention to.

Quietly, I tore out a blank sheet and wrote “talk t/ KW a/b laser lie after M raid,” which I stuffed in a shirt pocket, to be put on my banister.

“…You don’t think this is a bit excessive?”

Aegis tilted his head at the vast array of notes I made, along with two diagrams and a flowchart.

“It pays to be prepared. Frankly, I don’t want to be caught off-guard and end up having to work on instinct. Which is to say, something is going to go wrong anyway, in all likelihood. If so, I want to have the plan be something we can steer back to when things go off the rails.”

“I don’t mind that, so much as…” He picked up a note. “’In case of unstable roof, avoid supports until only Trainwreck or Mush is under them’? Don’t you think that’s a bit unlikely?”

“It’s an abandoned warehouse, it’s likely to have rusted, and there’s heavy snow out there,” I muttered as I adjusted my helmet. “Stranger things have happened.”
Clockblocker picked up one of his own. “If marijuana is stored, keep Armsmaster and Kid Win away from hidden alcoves, fire may ignite and provoke inhalation? That’s a zany comedy scene, Addie, not something that happens in real life.” He thought for a second. “It’d be awesome, but still.”

“It’s still not healthy for your lungs. And in case it is something that happens in real life, do you really want Colin to make a press release while stoned?”

The look on everyone’s faces told me that the thousand images I meant to engender occurred to them. “…It still probably wouldn’t be worse than Clockblocker’s reveal,” Vista admitted.

“True, but I don’t want to deal with him after he comes to and realizes he insulted the mayor’s mother on live television, do you? Especially if Kid Win’s responsible.”

“Got it. Aim away from the lil’ green angel,” the Tinker in question responded.

“Okay then, as far as I know, no unexpected events are going to occur, unless a teammate would like to admit anything…?”

I swept the room.

“No.”

“No.”

“Resisting impulse to burn weed anyway.”

A grunt in the negative. I bristled a little at the owner of that voice, but I ignored her existence for the moment and for the sake of the mission.

“Nope.”

“Nothing at all (lie).”

I spun around to face Gallant. “I could smell that, Dean.”

Gallant looked incredibly nervous suddenly. While he attempted to speak up, his beams fired at nowhere, revealing the pinkish-grey hue of…embarrassment I think? I didn’t see why he’d be embarrassed enough to lose control like that, unless…

My expression fell faster than my stomach. “You didn’t.”

“She was so upset on the call! She needed a shoulder to cry on-“


“But she can help! I mean, she can stand a hit from Train-“

“Sorry, not dealing with this.” I grabbed Gallant’s cell and shoved it in his face. “Call her up right now, apologize, and say she can’t be there right now, New Wave is an X-factor I haven’t accounted for-“
Gallant looked down. “She’s already on site, planning to meet us there. She’ll get pissed if I tell her she has to leave, and you know how she gets.”

I flipped up the phone, and handed it back. I had heard Glory Girl and Gallant arguing from down the hall, and smelt both were usually in some state of manipulating the other into not leaving and then feeling horrible when they realized that’s what they were doing. I thrust Yamada’s business card to his palm, and muttered about “screw therapy rules, she can pay for private sessions.”

I then went back to my note table, swept all of them off, and began scribbling anew. “Okay, so we’re going to have to improvise, and this is what we’re going to tell Victoria…”

As it was, the ride there passed in silence, much to my own relief. Nobody felt like chewing Gallant out more than he already was doing so himself.

That, and Clockblocker made him wear a note with “THERE IS NO ‘HORNDOG’ IN TEAM”, on the visor of his helmet on the way there. An idea I supported wholeheartedly, as shown by the handwriting. I did not need a notoriously bullheaded extra teammate with a chaotic love life popping up randomly, so I fully supported this otherwise minor punishment.

At least there was a silver lining. One part was Glory Girl’s aura and invincibility, but the more important thing was that it was likely Panacea was with her sister, and thus could be joining us too. The healer dramatically increased our flexibility in tactics more likely to cause severe injury. Still couldn’t resort to head blows, but I didn’t think she would mind fixing a damaged organ or two.

The real trouble is that, well, I didn’t know if the Dallons were paying attention during my reveal. I was keeping out of sight during Victoria’s spat with Dean, and Amy wisely stayed far, far away from the PRT at that time. Which meant it could be that they were seeing Adrasteia for the first time. Adrasteia the mutant. Adrasteia whose costume emphasized her dark nature as a noble monster. Adrasteia who, if Internet news was any indication, was being heralded as a new, somewhat darker image of the Wards as effective heroes rather than random icons.

And I was going to be in the vicinity of Lady Monochrome Morality and Her Amazing, Just As Absolutist Sister. I really hoped they didn’t cause me to be hospitalized on my first mission before it properly begun.

...Though given how one of them was a hospital, that was less of a concern, but it would still hurt.

“Thank you for using PRT Express, we hope you have a nice ass-whooping.” The driver chuckled at his own bad joke, then pressed a button to open the car door. Vista got into position quickly, a speed born of experience.

“Okay, first order of business is finding New Wave for briefing. Gallant, you text your girl, tell her-”

“Already done. She’s a block due east of here, Panacea’s healing some drug addicts hanging around their base.” And with that, Gallant proceeded to spin around to face East…

And I grabbed him with a pair of Medusas. “No. Your relationship troubles can wait until after the
mission. Amy trusts you, you’re introducing me to her.”

“Oh come on! She trusts the rest of us too-”

“And yes, I’m still mad about you phoning her in when she has no reason to be here. Since you can beam her if she has a panic attack on seeing me, I’m grounding you to peacemaker duty until after the mission, at least. Clockblocker, Vista, you go get Victoria.”

“...’Grounding?’” I couldn’t see his face, but I suspected he was trying to keep it straight.

“Yes, grounding. I’m the dark hero, that means I’m Official Ward Disciplinarian. Don’t make me start handing out demerits.”

“Yes, Mom.” Vista sniggered herself, before she and Clockblocker ran off.

Gallant rose an eyebrow behind his visor. “...You are aware you’re the junior member, right?”

“Yeah. I am,” I admitted. “But Yamada told me to redirect my anger issues into productive uses, being the drill sergeant seems as good as any.”

“Whatever you say, miss.” But he went in Panacea’s direction anyway. I took to the air both to follow him unseen and to watch for any incoming enemies.

About five minutes later, Gallant shot a beam into the air to notify me of finding the white-cloaked medic. I looked down to give him a thumbs up, then landed in an out of the way area to listen for my cue.

“...on your head?”

“My dunce cap. Wards weren’t happy I let Vic come. Especially the new girl, she’s already the planner of the team and, I quote, ‘New Wave is an X-factor I haven’t accounted for.’”

“She said that!?” A giggle. “What is she, a female clone of Accord?”

She hadn’t been watching then. Damn.

“Actually, she’s...I’ll let her explain. Adrasteia?”

I walked out from the corner. “Hello, Amy Dallon?”

A girl with dark hair and freckles turned around, obviously surprised at my sudden voice.

Her eyes shrank into her skull as color drained out of her face.

Hoo boy.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!”

“Amy, don’t scream-”

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!”
“Amy please listen-”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

I motioned at Gallant.

“AAAAAAAAAAAA-gah!”

“Amy, I’m a Ward!”

The color returned to Panacea’s face as she stopped cowering. “You...are?”

“Just revealed yesterday. I’m the female clone of Accord.”

“Oh.” The look of fading fear melted into one of shame and remorse. “Oh God, I just really came off as an insensitive fuckwad there, didn’t I?”

“I was prepared for it,” I said gloomily.

“Oh God.” She cradled her head. “I’ll make it up to you-”

“Hey, it’s okay.” Feeling somehow older than the sixteen-year old, I put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m used to it. Name’s Taylor, or in armor Adrasteia.”

“Taylor?” Her eyes lit up. “Hey, your last name wouldn’t be Hebert would it? You’re not the one who referred a certain veteran with otherwise inoperable shrapnel to me?”

“It is. And I didn't know you got him, but that’s true too.”

“Huh. Small world.” Apparently Amy was less of a follower of news than I thought. She grinned shyly.”So, on to Skidmark then?”

I gave my best “rogue” grin. “Let’s get that crass mother-”

Thump. I suddenly felt an aura of pure, sisterly rage behind me. A literal aura.

I reviewed the situation. First, Amy had screamed pretty loudly, so I wouldn’t be surprised if Victoria heard her, or if she instinctively hit some kind of warning beacon during her panic attack. Second, I had my claw near her neck, and had instinctively wrapped my wings around her to comfort her. Third, the costume and snakes.

This was going to hurt, wasn’t it?

Panacea apparently realized this too. “Vic, it’s not what it looks-”

Too late. I suddenly found myself flying at a wall. Without any input on my part.

I braced for impact.
“So that’s what happened,” I finished, rubbing a healed but sore wing.

Thankfully, my body generated mass of its own with regenerating my wings, so the fractured bone in it was a non-issue, Amy just had to steal some from the meaty bits.

Glory Girl, on the other hand, was trying to make herself as small as possible while not going anywhere near my eyes. If Amy was ashamed by her initial reaction, Glory Girl was despondent (I wasn’t sure if the incoherent babble of syllables I heard was due to the headache or Victoria trying to apologize in five different ways at once), a problem only compounded when I smelled her aura activating in the key of “pity me”, and, not thinking, told her to cut it out. Of course, it then turned out she had the same misfiring problem as Gallant, and I ended up making her feel even more ashamed of her behavior. Go me.

“Huh. So the Merchants are working for an S9 wannabe?” Amy sighed. “Great. Just great. We’re off to help with a serial killer problem, and we end up earning a perfectly nice girl’s eternal enmity. We’re sorry, by the way.”

“For the fifth time, I forgive you.” Actually no, I was still pissed, but I couldn’t fault Victoria for wanting to protect her sister. “Nothing was permanently damaged.”

“She’s still upset about the concrete in her lungs though-”

“Clockblocker,” Vista warned.

“Right, sorry.”

“...Hey wait a minute,” Victoria suddenly spoke. “I can see Aegis being posted somewhere else with Kid Win to keep an eye on the warehouse, but guarding is more of Vista’s specialty. Why isn’t that archer girl here?”

Silence. Green tears in my eyes, I muttered “Personal reasons.”

It took a second for the elder Dallon to catch on. “Oh. I won’t press, don’t worry.”

Gathering my composure, I flipped the helmet back on. “Thank you. For now, let’s go bust some drugs.”

Glory Girl smiled. This was what she was used to. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter End Notes

In case you haven’t noticed, this is the chapter where I start cracking on the fix fic aspects. Doesn’t mean it will be easy or altogether successful.

Also, a bit more of Taylor’s growing diabolical instincts (aka, GET IN LINE, CITIZEN).
I am a writing machine...with block. This is my first action scene in...ever, I think. And writing someone who’s only creative strength is in swears. Spoiler alert, Skidmark may be a little less colorful than he should be.

The next part of Operation Goods Devaluation (wow, Clockblocker was rubbing off) was what was supposed to be stealthily taking positions for a surprise attack.

What actually happened was that the next part was convincing Glory Girl that stealthily taking positions was actually more rewarding than a full frontal attack in the long term.

This was about as difficult as it sounded.

“What do you mean, wait?”

“Funnily enough, we mean waiting by wait.” I was actually cradling my forehead now. “Not all of us are invincible.”

“I am!”

“And frankly we’re worried about the Merchants suing us.”

“So? It’s not like they’d hold up in court. They were healed by sis and they’re the guys working for a serial killer with an incredibly nasty MO.”

“Ritualistic killer,” Aegis piped up, sounding just as resigned to this as I felt. “Not a serial yet. And it still pisses off Piggot.”

“The sky stubbornly remaining blue pisses off Piggot,” Panacea chimed in. I had to agree there.

“Thing is, though? It’s pretty well-known that Adrasteia planned this out, and furthermore that Gallant let non-Wards come along again,” he said as he glared at the at-fault teammate, “so I’m already breaching protocol, and you know very well that a breached protocol to the Director is as blood to a shark.”

Victoria was fuming now, though careful to avoid releasing her aura. “Well, so what? I’m a good outside cape, and I get the sense she’s smart, so what does the Pig care!?”

“Because I’m new,” I guessed. “Really new.”

Both Dallons looked at me in surprise. “Really?”

“Really really new,” I finished. “As in, was revealed two days ago new.”
“You were!?” Amy did a quick scan of my costume. “Well, I guessed, but…you were openly revealed two days ago and this is your first mission?”

“The second, actually,” I admitted. “The first was the investigation. By all rights, I shouldn't be the brains of the operation, I was just given the time of day because I made that many notes and plans.”

Aegis shrugged. “She’s good at preparation, as far as I can tell.”

“Well, that explains why we hadn’t heard of you,” Glory Girl winced slightly. “Minor villain group called the Undersiders have been acting up, we tried to investigate.”

“Emphasis on tried,” Panacea finished. “All we got was that they're guarding shipments for some mysterious patron these days, and have embarked on a petty crime spree to distract anybody who’s tailing the escorts. Like us.”

Undersiders. That named jogged a memory. “Win? Weren’t those the ‘phantom trolls’ you were complaining about?”

“Yep, those phantoms.” Kid Win looked annoyed even at their name. “Thing is, they never get directly involved, one of them shows up to trip some security systems in a high-risk, high-value target and then run far before we ever get the alert, but leaving blatant evidence they were there. Things like a member waving at the vault camera before leaving or a graffiti saying G+T+R+B Declaration 1: KICK ME on the back of the bank president’s favorite suit. Something that shines like a signal flare despite no violent or larcenous crime being committed.”

“Hence, we think that they’re trying to distract us for when the shipments are shuffled around.” Victoria finished. “Of course, we managed to corner Grue, the leader-”

“You did?” I said, suddenly interested.

“...except the darkness he generates dampens powers, and the guard who was helping us is a severe nyctophobe who needed the bravery aura really bad.” She sighed. “Amy and I thought his entrails were being pulled out through his skull the way he was screaming, and while we were distracted, Grue shows off his magician skills and makes himself disappear.”

Hm, that sounded a bit too lucky to be unintentional. I pulled out my notebook and wrote down Grue’s power. “Anybody on the Undersiders who can puzzle out fears and timetables?”

Panacea looked thoughtful. “Actually...there might be, but if so we haven’t found him or her. Best ideas are either Tattletale or whoever R is, we know Bi-sorry, Hellhound’s power already.”

I looked up, amused. “Not a nice girl, I presume?”

“No, I mean her self-chosen name is Bitch. Hellhound is the PC term.”

Clockblocker snickered. “Believe me, I’ve run that joke to the ground already.”

I made a quick note to investigate Tattletale’s known crime scenes and to research the parahuman-known-also-as-Hellhound, before putting away my notes.
“So, back to the matter at hand, it’s going to come out that the greenest of green members was one of the authors of the attack plan sooner or later, and you were invited along without Aegis’ knowledge. If things go even more off the rails, the janitorial staff is going to be very grateful if you get my meaning.”

It took her a second to catch on, before nodding. “Okay, we do it your way, if only for Gallant’s sake. Hate to imagine smelling him after having to scour a toilet for weeks.”

“Good.” And a really good point actually. I’d hate to smell me.

Thankfully, The Part of The Plan That Was Originally Step One went off fairly well. Yes, Glory Girl was awkward when trying to move quietly and out of sight, but Panacea, as part of being a pacifist who usually found herself near violence, proved to be an excellent guide.

“Oof!”

“Sorry sis. Trying to avoid the-”

Plink. Rattle.

“..Soda can. Who leaves those things on windows?”

I wasn’t sure if the sigh I heard was Panacea, me, or another Ward. We only had one spare radio, and given how Victoria was probably the one we’d need to relay orders to more, we gave it to her.

Which meant that it was currently being pocket dialed due to the way system worked. And that meant the entire network was on, due to the same reason for rotating therapists: PRT Competent Preparation, trademark.

Having a friendly guide to the fine art of stealth to someone who was hard to miss when sleeping (and groundbound by necessity of the guide's powerset) only went so far, it seemed. At least Aegis caught on to this and assigned her to the back row, far away from where her catlike tread (or hover apart from random things at head height, apparently) would possibly ruin the mission.

“Radio’s on,” Vista muttered.

It took Victoria a second to apparently realize where her voice was coming from. “Shit, sorry.” Then silence.

I briefly considered calling her up again to complain, but it was a waste of effort. Besides, I was nearly in the Merchant warehouse.

“.and I’m saying, what are you talking out of your ass about now? Elf-fucker says she’s, and I am quoting here, ‘humbly offering a slightly different deal, one that both of us will find profitable,’” like she’s some kind of Darth Bitch…”

And if the briefing was correct, the head honcho was on his patrol.
I switched on the radio. “I’ve got Skidmark’s voice,” I whispered.

“Sure it’s him?” said Aegis.

I held the walkie-talkie towards the swearing for a second.

“And then Little Miss Dicktip Ears gives that shit-eating smirk of hers, and…”

“Confirmed. Could you get a better view?”

Thankful for the apparent soundless landing I apparently knew how to do, I winged up to the top floor of an abandoned tenement farther away from the warehouse and took out my binoculars.

“Visual confirmation on Skidmark. He’s talking to Mush on the west side.”

“The battlefield control and the big-scale brawler,” said Clockblocker. “Sounds...actually intelligent. Skidmark creates an arena for Mush to pulverize people in. Apparently they have nootropics there.”

“...What?” came the confused voice of Gallant.

“Neural enhancers,” I said. “Something that makes you smarter.”

“Huh. Think I could swipe a couple for the next test?”

“Leaving aside the idiots, want me to get them?” came the voice of my nemesis.

“Take the shot, Stalker,” said Aegis.

Through my binoculars, I saw Sophia’s shadow form jump to the rooftop of a building about a block from mine, readying her crossbows for easy fire one after the other. Seemed she planned to get them both in two shots.

True to the terms of the deal, I hadn’t really seen that much of her after our big fight. Just passing by on my way to tests and training, trying very hard to ignore the other. I tried to put her out of mind, focus on her raw competence as a hero in prep for this moment, but years of ruthless bullying didn’t go away in a month and a week.

Surprisingly, I didn’t feel the need to quietly mock her, though a dark part of me hoped she’d miss on at least one.

No such (lack) of luck.

Skidmark and Mush whirled around, the Merchants’ leader opening his mouth to say something that would probably melt my ears before his eyes crossed and he fell over, followed by his crony, spewing what debris he had managed to pick up in the couple of seconds before the Tinker-made toxin got to work.

Sophia made a blowing noise over the radio, as she held a crossbow to her face for presumably my benefit. “Hey, don’t look now, but it’s jackass season. Watch your back, donkeys.”

“More like giant targets,” I felt slip out.
“Adrasteia, cut it out,” Aegis snapped. “You may hate her, but she’s also the barrier between you and the grim reaper, so rub that monarch of yours and get back to the raid.”

“Oof! What was that for, Vista?”

“To stop the joke you were about to say. Don’t encourage them.”

I bit my tongue for the team’s sake, and was a little surprised when Shadow Stalker remained silent through all of this.

“Okay, so Skidmark and one half of the Merchants’ thug squad is down. We advance?”

“I’d say,” said Aegis. “Okay, so here’s the plan—”

“Vic, what are you doing?”

Everyone stopped for a second at Gallant’s voice. Looking at his general area, I saw a certain blonde teenager floating up to the window.

“Glory Girl, stop it,” Aegis said.

Glory Girl gave no indication of hearing him. Instead, Panacea’s voice came over the line.

“Um, don’t look now, but sis said that since you gave the order to advance…”

I felt a migraine forming. “Gallant, I know you’re a sweet guy and all, but can you be less of a pushover when your girlfriend’s involved? It might save your relationship someday.” I groaned. “Alright, here’s the contingency I made on the way here…”

I had expected total chaos after Glory Girl was introduced, and I was not surprised.

I was surprised she had crushed Squealer’s car first. My recent experiences with her had convinced me she had the mind of an ox in more than one way, none of them complimentary. One enemy down, and the living sore on the rear of feminism (who wears the kind of thing she was currently?) knew it. She had actually put on the handcuffs Victoria had thrown her before crouching in a corner to await pickup.

Unfortunately, her foresight only extended so far, as evidenced by one guy who was apparently so stoned he didn’t notice Trainwreck charging over him to get at spare machine parts to form his robot arms with.

“Panacea, you’re on,” I muttered into radio.

“Got it.”

I flipped my faceplate on and extended the tranq injector in my spear.

First shot. Ham voice: On.
“Trainwreck, you are already defeated. Surrender now, for your scent had been caught by-”

I felt an impact on my wing, shaped like a box. So that didn’t work. Oh well, it was a prototype “Big Entrance” anyway.

“So, you’re that ‘Inescapable’ bitch,” said a voice I assumed was Trainwreck’s. “Heh. You look more like a lost cosplayer than-FUCK!”

Ah, first shot connected. I lifted my wing to give a thumbs up to Kid Win.

The arm Win blasted was easily repaired by a bit from what looked like Squealer’s workshop, minus arm gun. I forgot the hand signal for “attack”, but thankfully experience overcame young talent here, as he quickly opened fire on the array of parts. Aegis came through a window, carrying Vista. He joined the fight after setting her down on a stable ledge. Gallant and Clockblocker charged in the back door next, with the latter creating cover from a convenient tarp for the other to duck in and out of. Shadow Stalker came up next on her own ledge, gearing up for another snipe job.

I knew all this, because I was under explicit orders to avoid getting involved and instead observe team dynamics in a real world situation, only backing up if called upon and getting civilians out of the way. Seeing as how Panacea was right on Team Gallant’s tail and doing a perfectly good job of that herself, I just brooded and observed. Travails of the Newbie, I guessed, and I really didn’t want to push my new member privileges than I already had.

Trainwreck was a surprisingly more intelligent combatant than I would ascribe to the Merchants, in that he fought with any degree of cunning or tactical acumen. And I had to admit, he had some pretty good ideas about the whole thing. After being hit by Kid Win, the addition after repairing his arms was a pair of car doors to serve as armor for his torso (I could hear Sophia curse over the line when that happened). Next, he rushed for Squad Gallant, apparently realizing both members were the bigger threat that he could actually injure.

Of course, the term “damn with faint praise” was applicable. He apparently didn’t realize that, thanks to Vista, he was moving hilariously slow. Not unlike a cartoon representation of slipping on ice from my perspective.

So, I just decided to settle in on my railing perch, an oddly birdlike mannerism, and-

I felt the railing shake as Glory Girl punched a support holding the roof over Trainwreck. Huh. Great minds thought ali-the hell!?

Beneath the rapidly crumbling roof, a junkie, a rather sad looking fellow who didn’t seem aware that there were other people around him, let alone a fight.

I wasn’t even aware I had taken to the air until I was dragging the guy out of the way. Not quickly enough, but enough to save his life.

A blood-curdling scream signified that his lower half wouldn’t be so lucky under normal circumstances.

“Panacea!”

“Oh God. Here we go again…”
As I helped Amy and Aegis (apparently he heard the guy) dig out the junkie’s lower half, my mind internally repeated what she just muttered.

Here we go...again?

“The fuck was that, Gloryhole?”

Amy had stabilized the guy’s vitals and was now working on his nervous system. The problem with that was that a bit of roof had somehow managed to get into his leg, hence why Panacea was taking longer than normal; she had to fish that out somehow.

Which gave me ample time to chew out Victoria. In my estimation, she deserved that nickname right about now.

She bristled. “Well, I didn’t see him-”

“You could have checked!”

“So, I didn’t. But you saved his brain, so Amy’s fixing him, no problem-”

“Which brings me to my next point…”

I pointed my spear at Panacea for emphasis. “When I called for her, she was complaining about this happening...again. Care to explain?”

Victoria looked unusually shifty. “Well...er…”

Even without the smell of growing deception, I could sense the reluctance to answer that question at all. “This happened before how many times?”

“...Once or twice (lie)?”

Somehow, I managed to shove back the power of the Hebert Clan Tirade until I got the context.


“Um…”

She looked away.

“Look, I don’t know my own strength a lot of the time, and-”

“That guy could’ve died!” I shouted. “You don’t get to go ‘shit, my bad’ and give a half-assed apology!”

“But sis is there! She can fix anybody I hurt!”
I had a sudden epiphany about how Glory Girl operated. I felt the acid streak down my face. “She can fix—she can fix!? Vicky, newsflash: You. Are. A superhero. Not some two-bit action lead who gets to brood about hard women making hard decisions and then being praised by the narrative for being morally right the whole time!”

Victoria looked up, eyes narrowing. “Says the wannabe villain whose plan revolves around being a coward!”

Okay, that did it. I held up a claw. “First—I wasn’t the planner, Aegis was, being, oh, our leader and all, I just advised when he was asking around the table and I was the only one who piped up. Second…”

I leaned closer. “We were acting stealthy to prevent exactly this! If you hadn’t shown up, this guy would have been scouted long before the attack and we would have lead the Merchants out of a zone of potential collateral damage instead of charging in like a fucking lemming!”

“Well,” she said, meeting my gaze behind the visor, “You’re new to being a hero, but I have a mom who’s a superhero, and she’d never—”

“Yeah, she’d never.” My Medusas were hissing now. “But I’m not Brandish. I’m also not rich, I don’t have a cape parent, and I don’t even have a mom—”

She looked a little shocked at that, before she turned back to her expression back to a scowl. “Well then, you don’t understand what it’s like to have that pressure of not disappointing your Dad then if you’re at all selfish—”

“Your life has its own celebrity columns following it!” I couldn’t hold back the Rant anymore. “There are WEB PAGES dedicated to following your every move, and you GO ON RECORD stating you love the attention!”

She was getting mad again. “Well, excuse me if I kind of feel like acting heroic for said columns instead of sneaking around to stab people in the back—”

I was going to hate myself for this later, but she needed to have some sense slapped into her. “Yes, because acting heroic solves so many more problems than being restrained.” I pointed at the wing still regenerating from Panacea’s emergency reallocation.

Victoria suddenly turned very red and looked down at her feet. “...I see your point,” she said sullenly, as I caught my own scent again. I just hoped I hadn’t ruined a potential alliance here, with Amy especially.

Or was going to. “No. No, I don’t think you do.”

I flipped open the helmet to reveal my acid tears. No pose this time, I was doing this for her, even if it hurt.

“Take a look at him, Vic. Take a good long look.”

The image was rapidly losing its effect due to Amy finally getting the shrapnel out, but the unfortunate’s body was still twisted.

“See that? See that guy, who if it wasn’t for your sister may have been, I don’t know, paraplegic
for the rest of his life?"

"Imagine if that was Gallant. Or Amy."

Glory Girl looked taken aback by this. The man groaned as Panacea jerked up in surprise at the venom in my words.

"Actually, you don’t have to imagine it right now, because the way it’s going? That’s exactly what’s going to happen. You’re going to make a stupid mistake someday, and your maid won’t be there to save you from your own idiocy, either because she’s somewhere else fixing a different mistake or because she’s the victim. You’ll cry, you’ll beg, you’ll be desperate for someone to clean up your mess, but guess what? Nobody’s going to clean up your mess like they have a hundred times before in your spoiled little rich girl world, and then maybe it will get through that golden ball of yarn you call a brain that there is such a thing as cause and effect, and then maybe you’ll understand my position a little better."

The druggie finished healing, and Amy rushed in. “Hey, hey I fixed him there’s no need to get up in arms about it-”

“Stop defending her.”

The younger Dallon paled a little bit and backed off.

“You know how I triggered? How I became a monster?”

I didn’t wait for an answer. “I. Killed. Someone.”

A small gasp from both.

“I was trying to protect someone from harm, to stop a villain, just like you, and guess what? Through no intention of my own, I ended up taking someone’s life. I don’t care if he deserved it or not, I don’t care if it was justified, but Taylor Hebert became a murderer, and dear God why don’t you know this already?”

I advanced. “Nevermind. The point is, I’ve tried to walk away from that, to be a purer person, a better person, but I still can’t justify what I did to myself. The Sphinx was a person, even if an evil one, and I still can feel the blood on my hands when I wake up sometimes from my nightmares. That I did it to protect someone else is probably the only reason I’m still sane.”

I locked my eyes with her, ignoring the forming tears. “Now, how would you deal with it, I wonder? How would little Victoria Dallon, whose worst experience in her entire fucking life was agoddamnbasketball game, one she jokes about how silly it was in retrospect, deal with the death of someone, though her negligence, she caused? Someone close to her, because she was so reckless that she didn’t bother to hold back and think like a human instead of a rabid bear for once in her life!?"

I was nearly touching her nose with mine now. “So, here’s a little message from someone who has actually been there; Grow. Up.”

She was in full cry now, and I didn’t bother telling her to turn off her aura. I think I made my point.

It calmed me down though, and I already felt remorse over the whole thing. I didn’t want to undo
my little chewing out though, so I instead turned to a shocked Panacea. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

Her eyes narrowed as she put a hand on her sobbing sister’s back. “You didn’t have to go there.”

I didn’t have an answer for that.

As I strode back to the other Wards, the healer in question glaring at me reproachfully and the scent of bullying wafted behind me, I caught Shadow Stalker out of the corner of my eye, lurking in her corner.

I could have sworn she was *beaming* behind her mask.

I could also swear that I had not felt more ashamed of myself in my entire life combined than in that one moment.

The time from my outburst to exiting the building passed in silence. The Wards minus Shadow Stalker were apparently too shocked at how I truly lost my temper at someone they ostensibly liked, I felt too guilty to talk to Glory Girl about it, Panacea was too angry at me for reducing her big sister to tears, and Sophia...yeah, I wasn’t going to talk to her in a million years about it.

Apart from that though, everything was okay. Clockblocker had frozen the dazed Trainwreck, and I was waiting with a tranq powerful enough to overcome whatever speed-alike he was on with a little help from Gallant. Nobody else was seriously injured, and Squealer was still waiting (im)patiently to be arrested, so I supposed the mission was a success.

Then we exited.

The first thing we noticed was that Skidmark was gone. Mush was still there, but it wouldn’t be at all surprising that he left his team behind. Almost immediately the team formed a defensive circle around Amy.

Then we noticed the “incoming call” light on the walkie-talkie. Aegis switched it on.

“M-m-mayyy-day….” my driver’s fractured voice sounded over the connection. “L-location f-f-found...p-poison a-a-arrow…”

Amy was the first to comprehend what came over. “Which direction?”

As quickly as we could in a defensive circle with Aegis as aerial lookout, we ran over to the van.

There were three things of note. First, was of course, the driver, who had an arrow sticking out of his side and was twitching rapidly, apparently in cocaine overdose. Amy was able to calm him pretty quickly, though his eyes were still lolling. No brains, and I hoped that limit wouldn’t cause him to have a stroke or something.

The second was the broken left window of the van, almost like a bullet rather than an arrow.
The third, and most pressing, was Skidmark.

Or more properly, what was left of Skidmark. Still enough to look at us with terrified, pleading eye (in the singular), though I wondered if that wasn’t a sign of fate being a cruel bitch.

After the first guy was stable, Amy ran over to the charred drug dealer and attempted to use what mass he had left to save him. She didn’t show any sign of nausea, unlike either her sister or any Ward, including me.

As his vocal cords healed, a bit of blood dribbled out his mouth. “B-bitch...t-t-turned on me. Cu...crazy. Put...h-h-heater e-element in…”

Phwp.

And with that, Skidmark was put out of his misery by an arrow.

“Rubbish. And I was really hoping you’d be number two. Peasants can’t even manage to die properly...Oh well, there’s always other sacrifices.”

Everyone spun around to face the owner of the soft, almost lyrical voice, who I could have sworn wasn’t there a second ago.

“At the very least, I can wonder what a great avenue of research you’ll be, quick. I wonder how you’d interact with necromancy..”

The first thing that struck me about the longbow-wielding psychopath wasn’t the anachronistic diaphanous gown she was wearing, like some kind of fairy tale princess. It wasn’t the unearthly beauty that nonetheless had a rugged, somewhat muscular tone to it. It wasn’t even the pointed ears.

It was the complete lack of anything resembling sanity in her bemused smirk. Or compassion. In fact, the expression was one more of a casual visitor to an art museum, admiring the portraits despite the mangled corpse she assisted in making.

The fact said dress was stained with what looked like charred flesh really didn’t help her first impression.

Aegis was the first to recover. “You...you did this?”

“How uncouth!” The “elf” whipped around to look at the team leader with a mildly offended expression. “When addressing a noble, a person of low position is meant to use the honorifics ‘your serenity’, ‘my lady’, ‘most honorable’, or even ‘madam’! Your world has backslid from its halcyon days. Nay, I daresay you are quite barbarous in this decadent culture.”

“Barbarous this!”

Glory Girl flew at the elf, rearing back…

And impacted an invisible wall. She drew back, shocked at being stopped more than anything.

The elf sniffed. “Admirable cunning, but I am of my Grandfather’s kin in mind as well as flesh. Please allow me to make some pleasantries before our combat, hm? My arrows cannot penetrate
this either, and before you inquire I invoked this spell before I began speaking.”

Victoria growled, but withdrew.

The elf turned back to the main party. “I am impressed enough by the attempt at ingenuity, however, that I am willing to cede you that as a sign of naivete rather than rudeness. Yes, I am the responsible party for that brigand’s demise and attempted sacrifice to Lord Haagenti. I wish curry his liege's favor in my attempts to rid myself of dependency on the strange craftsmen of this world. Tinkers, I believe they are officially termed?”

All right, she was batshit, too. I detected a rather familiar scent too, but I probably wanted confirmation just in case my Medusas weren’t admissible in court. “My lady, forgive me, but I could not help but recall something that appears to have been your handiwork?” Dear god I felt like a complete tool even thinking that. If it wasn’t for the person I was speaking too, I probably couldn’t keep a straight face.

The elf examined me. “Hm...Do you prefer Adrasteia or Hebert, serenity?”

I blinked a little in surprise. “Er, Adrasteia, in costume.”

“The answer is yes, Lady Adrasteia,” she said in an almost obscenely casual tone, as if she was discussing some rather pleasant weather rather than the gruesome murders of at least two people. “I am indeed the party responsible for the ritualized death of Elder Roberts, and the attempted ritual of Mister,” she rolled her eyes a little, “Skidmark.”

I immediately discovered there were people in the world I hated more than Sophia. “Elder Roberts.” Like he should be honored to have his corpse mutilated to satisfy the delusions of a sociopath.

Apparently the elf picked up on my growing disgust for her. “Oh, don’t be so condemnatory, sister. You share the same link to the Lower Planes as myself, after all. I dare say I deserve it more than you, who have it by sheer accident of inheritance.”

Those last few words hit my ears like a freight train.

Clockblocker said what I was thinking. “...Sister?”

The elf looked up in surprise, then gave an airy laugh before holding her head in a silly me gesture. “Oh, not in that sense! It is merely an honorific among those of us who share the immortal blood of King Azrai. She wasn’t even a distant cousin until quite recently.”

Azrai.

The name of the god I was in my dreams.

“You...have those dreams...too?”

The elf’s eyebrows rose. “You are a naif, are you not? But I suppose that is to be expected.”

The Wards looked just as befuddled as I was. There was a moment of utter silence before the elf suddenly grinned apologetically.
“I am also a complete hypocrite. I have yet to introduce myself!” She curtseyed. “I am Marchioness Danita Kusor, Kin to Shadow and Daughter of Azrai. Most, however, call me by my awnshegh title, the Chimaera. It is an honor to meet you.”

Chapter End Notes

Annnnd...Cliffhanger!

Also, no religions were meant offense by use of “Elder” as a title for sacrifices to demon lords. I just saw it was a title for Mormon missionaries, and thought it was an appropriately creepy way to refer to the “honored” position of sacrifice to curry favor from demonic patrons. If there are any who were offended, I apologize.

I’ll also leave this the last importation for a day or so, give you time to breathe.
Chapter Notes

And now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for, the multi-chapter fight scene!

...After these important expository messages.

My power didn’t inform me of the individual personality traits of people, but Chimaera telling us her real name told me several things already.

It had been all but beaten into me that the No Real Name Rule was sacrosanct for a reason. This probably meant that Kusor either had nothing she valued enough to protect, or was so confident that we wouldn’t leave to tell she didn’t need to bother concealing her name.

Either way, she already seemed even more dangerous.

“...You dare to mock me?”

Chimaera’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

...Where did that come from?

Clockblocker tilted his head. “Huh? But I didn’t-”

“Silence, quick.”

All of us jumped back a little.

Besides the rough deepness Chimaera’s voice just picked up, a transformation came over her face. Where before she looked cruelly regal and serene, now it was a beautiful mask of rage, a dark snarl. I could even swear her pupils turned slitted like a cat’s for a second.

“I wasn’t speaking to you.”

And just as suddenly, it was over. She smiled sweetly.

“I was conversing with my new sister, not the would-be heroes who left their nurse out in the open. If I did not see her potential, I could have easily aimed the arrow at her.”

...Good point. Why didn’t she-

*Plans to take Panacea for her own experiments*, the sin-scent reminded me.

Oh.
“So, as I was saying, you are to respond to your elder, serenity.”

Okay, be polite as possible, don’t make any sudden moves, hope she doesn’t get bored and attack immediately.

“O-Oh, my most grievous apologies!” I said, attempting to keep the terror of oh god full attention of serial killer out of my voice. “I am quite the bumpkin, unlike...my lady, so I am unfortunately quite uncouth compared with one such as fair as you.”

Aegis quickly caught on. “And forgive these…peasants for intruding on my lady’s conversation. We will be out of her way,” he punctuated as he waved over the other Wards to confer.

Chimaera either did not notice or did not care. “Hm. Adequate.”

Okay, first some questions. “Forgive my presumptions, but I could not notice you seemed to be aware of the name Azrai. As far as I am aware, that is a simple dream, little more.”

“You dare insult Grand-ahem.” Chimaera ran her hands through her hair. “I see you have heard the blood-song. Quite magnificent, isn’t it?”

“Blood-song, my lady?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Vista looking rather intently at Chimaera. Looking for flaws in her invisible wall, I guessed.

“You world has a concept of genetic memory, does it not? A story in your very cells of your ancestry and heritage?”

“I was under the impression that was rumor and hearsay, my lady, but nothing concrete. More than that, a justification for the in...overly superior ideology of barbarous groups like the Empire 88.”

Don’t use “inbred” in front of someone who possibly is, given use of a title like Marchioness.

“In normal circumstances, perhaps.” She smirked. “Then again, it is normal for creatures to age and die as well, and that is a chain I have cast aside. Perhaps you as well, sister.”

If you’ve lived long enough to notice, are you a first generation parahuman? I’d think I’d smell more ritual murders if she’s been around that long; I don’t think that kind of crazy can be held in, I thought. Vista growled at something, and whispered something to Aegis.

“But I digress. The thing is, Lady Adrasteia, that you earned a most esteemed noble title with the slaying of that barbarian, and with it, privileges. The ability to know, keener than any commoner, Grandfather’s greatness among them.”

“Sphinx?” I asked.

“Yes, that one.” Her eyes went catlike for a second, but she never lost her serene expression this time. So his power was like the Butchers’?

Wait. If his power was like theirs in one way…

“I hope t-that his disposition isn’t translated!” I said, a bit more frantically than I wanted.
“Oh no, Powers above no!” She laughed, apparently warmly. “The Sphinx is gone forever, and his title among we awnsheghlen is in service to you, now and forever.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Wait, on-shey-what?

“An...interesting term for parahumans, my lady. If I may ask-”

**“DON’T COMPARE ME TO THEM!”**

It took everything in me to avoid leaping back into a member of New Wave, and even Victoria startled. I noticed her bolstering aura now, but it seemed Chimaera didn’t.

Her eyes were more than vertically slitted now, they were actually the golden color of some great panther. Something rustled under her gown as a brief flicker of green scales danced over her nose.

“Do not compare me to this world’s excuses for heroes. I have as much in common with them as a man has in common with the tick clinging to his brow.”

I decided I did not like Chimaera very much. I noticed both Dallons stiffening slightly.

Trying to hold back in my growing disgust, I kept on stalling for the team. “Forgive my impertinence, my lady. I am simply unaware of any other variety.”

**“Hmph.”** Her eyes went back to their normal blue. “Be as it may, you and I, serenity? We are no random empowerments of trauma. No, you and I are the heirs of kings.”

She puffed herself up. “Awnsheghlen, in the tongue of my mother’s race, Taylor, means ‘blood of darkness’; the get of Azrai, God of Darkness, Transformation, and Primal Chaos!”

The list of her mental disorders kept on getting longer and longer.

Thankfully, Panacea asked the question for me. “Forgive me, but you still seem like a-”

**“What is the matter with this planet!? Can you not comprehend the immortal before you!??”** She actually hissed now.

The Wards seemed to have given up on finding a break and instead were surrounding her for when she did drop the invisible walls.

Meanwhile, Chimaera got control of her emotions again. “Fine. Since you apparently all need it explained to you in simple language:

“I am from another world, with a different sun. Parahumans do not exist there, only blooded like myself, the Sphinx, and recently you.”

Almost immediately, I heard a derisive snort from Glory Girl, which I had to stop myself from copying-

My snakes picked up nothing.
Immediately thereafter, my jaw dropped.

Victoria picked up on this. “...Wait...she’s not being...?”

“Oh, come on!” Amy was the first to react. “Your power just changed your appearance! Just because you think you’re an alien doesn’t mean, I don’t know, Glastig Uaine’s an elf.”

The Chimaera seemed to mull over that, and then cackled a bit. Either she was that delusional or, yeah no she was just crazier than a shithouse owl. I don’t think it counted as a lie if you believed it yourself. I mean, she couldn’t possibly-

“There should be some of my genetic material and cells on that ruffian’s implanted heating rods where I cut myself. You can read it, healer, tell me if you find anything that implies that I am simply a mutated human.”

“Fine.” Apparently trusting that her own immunity to poisons and diseases would protect her from any nasty surprises, Panacea put her hand on the heater element.

When she turned around, her own mouth was working like a fish.

Either Chimaera had found the one thing that got past Amy’s defenses...or...

Holy.

Shit.

“**Took your pathetic minds long enough.**” She straightened her hair again “It is...aggravating.”

I couldn’t say anything. I was still trying to comprehend if my (and Panacea’s) powers were faulty or were extraterrestrial.

Panacea was the first to recover. “But you’re so...humanoid!”

“Yes, I suppose raw evolution would seem to suggest a different form from a humanoid if all things were left to chance, wouldn’t they?” She sniffed. “Make no mistake, though, I am not quite an alien, as you define it. About one sixteenth of my genetic makeup is human, though the rest is either Sidhelin or some miniscule fraction of divinity. Certainly not enough for this wondrous face of mine.”

And with that, everything I thought I knew about biology (or at least my sin-scent) was now suspect. Amy’s brain seemed to have shut down as she mouthed unintelligibly.

Glory Girl, thankfully for her thought process, was apparently not that great at the wet sciences in class. “...I get it. You’re the vanguard, aren’t you? Your race created the Endbringers to soften us up so your **fleets** could-”

“I have no idea what you are speaking of.”

“Truth,” I instinctively muttered.

“...Oh.” She went back to glaring.
The younger Dallon recovered slightly. “I...what are you?”

“As stated before, a descendant of a dead god, born and remade to rule, to transform, to mold everything that exists to my personal vision...”

Her mouth split in a fanged smile. “And destroy all that which I cannot.”

“...Wait.” I said, having finally found my voice. “Descendant? I think I’d remember if my mom had elf ears. Or was a monster.”

She laughed airily at that. “First, not all of us are so blessed with a transformation into our truest selves, and second, she most probably was not. You earned the seed of Azrai when you usurped it from the undeserving, as did I.”

And suddenly, everything made sense. “Sphinx,” I breathed.

“I see the mind he so respected finally shows itself! Yes, the Sphinx, Lady Adrasteia,” she said, still giving that fanged smile. “You proved him unworthy of his mantle through your strength and cunning, and by bathing your hand in his heart’s blood took it unto yourself!” She laughed again. “A fitting end, for the hunter to die to feed his own prey!”

My mind was reeling again. By killing Sphinx, I gained his power? I was apparently meant to serve as some kind of ruler and weapon against the world by an alien god?

...She was amused that I murdered a member of her race, and a fellow parahuman-equivalent?

“Well, I on the other hand, took my blood as a deliberate end for my quest for immortality and perfection.” She twirled as if to show off her body. “Now not only do I have the truest form, I can take my old one should I desire it as well! A perfect fashion for me to hunt the quick.”

My disgust hardened into hatred. The Chimaera, by any definition, was evil, whether by “sidhelin” or human standards.

“...You monster.”

“I have heard that applied to the awsheghlen, yes. The progenitors of monsters in fact, both our own Azrai-born powers to shape the world or the blood passed down to our children.” She smirked in dark bemusement. “You could be the first of a great line, serenity; from your ground will be grown even more of Azrai’s descendants, born with the strength you have earned. Assuming that the bastardization does not dilute what their mother grants them too much, you will be the patron and empress of the House of Hebert, a magnificent dark family of god-kings who reign over all you survey.”

She laughed again. “Perhaps then they’ll teach this regressed world something of chivalry!”

“You’re one to talk!” I shouted, all politeness forgotten. “You kill people with the most horrifying poison imaginable, and you act like the fact you stole your power from someone you murdered makes you better than anyone else!”

“Oh, but Lady Adrasteia, I have every reason to. After all, I can steal more...” She stared at me
with her blue eyes.

Intently.

Eagerly.

_Hungrily._

_Plans to kill me to take my powers and make hers more stable_, the Medusas tasted.

Oh.

Oh shit.


New Wave caught on. After a brief moment of horror, Glory Girl rushed in front of me. “Surrender, and _maybe_ I’ll let sis heal you, you cannibalistic freak.”

Aegis landed next to me. “I heard everything, and I can assure not only are you outnumbered, you’re surrounded, and the moment you drop that field, we will strike. Deadly force can and is authorized against someone who poses a clear and present danger to a Ward.”

“I’d wager _you’d_ enjoy that, quick.” The Chimaera smirked. “Maybe make you somewhat passable as strong.”

“And what do you mean by that!?” Aegis actually looked angry now.

"You want the real reason I don't converse with you, quick?" Chimaera smiled in the most patronizing way possible. "It's because this world's, ahem, parahumans...are a motley collection of _broken toys._"

Aegis suddenly turned silent. "...Excuse me?"

"_You won a charity lottery! A mindless gift to reward the weak!_” she crowed, yelling it into the sky, apparently to ensure the other Wards heard it. “You did not earn your divine right to rule, you got it as part of a divine welfare program to treat those without either cunning or strength to earn it for yourselves. You are all still serfs in the end, all rewarded for being _too soft to be brave._"

I smelt a growing intent to murder Chimaera. I wasn't sure how much of it was mine.

"And even then, it leaves you with, oh what do you call it, a trigger? A breaking point on an already worthless gem. _You aren't even good rivals. Just a bunch of toys_ to have what entertainment I can from their awry gears _before you get thrown away._"

For a moment, there was nothing but silence and the smell of growing fury.

Then: “You..._bitch._”

The sirens of PRT vehicles wailed in the distance.
“...If anything happens, we saw nothing,” Amy said quietly.

Slowly, the Chimaera began to laugh.

Gallant’s blasts began to wail on the shield.

And laugh.

Space warped around her, trying to crush the shield somehow.

And kept laughing, even as her skin began to boil.

“Yes, yesss! Let your rage consume you! Let it wash away all the pain, all the petty morality until there’s nothing left but hatred! Let there be nothing except the beauty of a killer!”

“Then...you’ll know...”

The gown began to rip around the growing, almost melting supervillainess as she took out a vial with what looked like...

What smelt like...

Robert’s liver.

“Between me, and them...”

And crushed it.

Black ooze seeped out of a hand that remained disturbingly normal as its owner reshaped into a nightmare.

“You are, now and forever...weak!”

“AHAHAAHAHAHAHAAhAhAhHaHa...”

“Hssss...”

The ooze expanded to cover the entire ledge as Chimaera mutated even further. Five giant lumps rose from the muck, as if something was crawling out of it.

Finally, with the smell of something so dead it forgot it wasn’t alive anymore, the lumps burst, revealing five of...

The most horrifying things I had ever seen. Vulture-like wings shook off the remaining birthing ooze, covered with the telltale matting of rot and dirt but looking no less functional. Each pair of wings were attached to the unholy hybrid of an ostrich, a gargoyle, and a starving man. Four limbs that looked like all could serve as hand or foot on a misshapen, blue, and spiny torso, with small patches of similarly rotted feathers in patches spread irregularly over their forms. A long, flexible neck ended in the head of a bird of prey straight out of nightmares of things in the sky, with
misshapen teeth bared back in a feral grimace. A whip-like tail coiled behind each of them, like cats waiting to pounce.

They just looked...wrong!

Compared to them, their re-solidified mistress didn’t seem so bad, more like a strange mix between a furless lion and a six-legged dragon with almost obscenely normal-looking human hands serving as the top pair.

“ThEy PoSe No ThReAt, NeItHeR tHe HeRoEs NoR tHe MoRtAl FoRcEs. JuSt DoN’t HuRt ThE hEaLeR, wE hAvE uSeS fOr HeR.”

Something shimmered in the air.

And then they rushed.

Chapter End Notes

Funny thing is, this used to be one half of a larger chapter. Beta and I figured this flowed better to divide it in two.

And more fun to watch people squirm. Heh heh heh...
Please put your favorite video game boss theme on the air, because LET'S GET READY TO RUMBLEEEEE!

Chapter slightly edited in response to errors pointed out. Thank you, Angelform.

(Also, thanks to Azowiki for the Abyssal words).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“One Sondreumint-periglhi!”

One of the winged things barked what was apparently an order to the rest before four split off into two-bird teams, rushing for the Wards.

Thanks to Vista, this didn’t seem to be too effective, right up until their feathers fluffed out and started to rapidly cycle between coloration.

With a flash of multicolored light, each vanished. Or in the case of the one headed for us, suddenly wasn’t far away at all.

Hah, a Mover-maker. Crap.

Trying to remain calm, I extended the lethal blade of my lance and took to the air myself, somehow managing to avoid a disgusting claw. Undeterred, the vulture beast shook its wings, releasing a cloud of mold as Glory Girl got first blood, ignoring a tail to the face.

Knowing what this probably implied, I held my breath.

“AGH! What is this stuff!!?” I heard Aegis cry.

Pain.

I felt my skin split open as viny growths crawled out, ripping it further. I decided to ignore it for the time being and instead focused on crippling or killing this aberrant monster.

I went for the wing first, figuring that was where a lot of the veins were. Much to my own surprise, I connected, drawing greenish-yellow ichor despite tough resistance. Huh, maybe this wouldn’t be so-

Scaly claw against my armor. Seems Vista was distracted long enough for Chimaera to get over.

I spun to face the shapeshifted alien villainess. Even in her monstrous state, Kusor’s expressions were all too human (they’d be all too human given her apparent origins anyway, but it was blatant on the face of a lion with lizard scales). She was grinning savagely, a person completely at home in the bloodshed; even with the Medusas retracted, I could tell she insulted the Wards so we wouldn’t
hold back.

Which, given what Colin told me of the general personality of people like this, meant I could probably goad her despite the vines. “Heh. Nice try, but this-argh-armor is bulletproof, let alone-gah-claw proof.”

“GoOd. ThAt MeAnS sAfE hEaRt!” She came at my limbs next, apparently hoping to tear them off.

Just as I intended. I felt a mild burst of pain like a paper cut as Chimaera failed to draw blood. Armsmaster’s training took over and I countered with the taser attachment of the lance, straight to her wing; more than enough to distract her with pain and surprise while I flew down to Amy to kill this parasite before it did major damage.

Aegis was growling at the vulture thing, dead vine clinging to his face, while Panacea was darting in to heal her sister when she could. Upon seeing me, she gave a quick touch, immediately causing the vine to wither and exit wounds to close.

Unfortunately, that was also in range of the vulture, giving me a swipe across the wing. I felt it fizzle, and even looking at it I saw the clawmark etch itself into them. Right, these things somehow overcame my Brute ability, got it.

“Regroup with the Wards!” Aegis cried.

“Got it!” Glory Girl punched away the jaws of the vulture before scooping up her sister.

Almost immediately the monster’s feathers began to scintillate again. As I flew off, I banked hard to the right to avoid crashing into the transporting aberration (and because of my currently imbalanced wing, banking to the right was really easy to do).

Glory Girl was not quite so quick on the update, but unlike me she hit like a train. The beast was rather comically knocked away by her aerial bullrush. I heard Panacea whimper slightly.

Then the sky fell on me. The six-limbed sky.

Chimaera was a quick learner, it seemed; her human hands were probing my armor for ways to pry it open even as she pushed me to the ground.

There was a flash of red and silver, and my would-be murderer roared as Aegis tried to pull her off. Seizing the opportunity, a Medusa bit the hand at my neck, causing her to withdraw it instinctively-more than enough for me to wiggle my hands free to give her a lance to the face.

The sky lifted. As I regained altitude, I heard the smack of a large body impacting against the ground. Ouch. Had to remember that.

The vulture-thing teleported back into my flightpath, shaking off more spores...and despite me flying straight, they stopped short by at least a few feet.

“Little help!” cried a female, and much welcome voice.

Looking down, I saw a vine-covered but alive Vista along with Kid Win. I guessed the monsters didn’t realize Clockbloker had a time-stop ability. Also, today was apparently a bad day for him if
he was staying behind.

Victoria didn’t miss a beat; a quick fly-by with Panacea killed the parasite.

A bloody Aegis bobbed up. “She’s a regenerator, powerful - her wings were already moving back into place when I smashed her. Clockblocker can stand more of that growth?”

“Hope so,” Win panted. “Gallant next?”

“Gallant.” And with that the team rushed off to Gallant and Stalker’s position, Vista speeding us away from both monsters at our tail.

Even from this distance, I could tell neither Ward was having a good time. First, it seemed there were now several vulture-things, but a few disappeared when Gallant’s blasts hit them - illusive copies. One of the real ones had one of Sophia’s electrical arrows in it, but apart from a lot of blue sparking, it might have as well have been a piercing.

Then I heard Amy scream.

Looking back, I saw our vulture holding out a hand to the Dallons, and more importantly, Panacea being the rope in a tug of war between her sister and an invisible force.

Win caught on. While the laser fire didn’t seem to really affect the vulture all that much, it did break its concentration. Back to our other teammates.

The arrow wasn’t useless. Two seconds later, there was now a large, painful, and distracting lance gash in the back of the monster’s wing, allowing New Wave and Aegis to rush in and scoop up Gallant.

A rather miserable-looking shadow form jumped out. “Gee, thanks for backing us up A-”

“Not now, Stalker!”

“Fine.”

By now Chimaera seemed to realize she wasn’t going to catch us with Vista helping out, even if by the expression of pain on my friend’s face I could tell that the excess of many living creatures was really not helping her. Instead, I saw Chimaera swing by her discarded dress to get her bow.

“Hey!” I snapped and pointed at the lion-dragon.

“Got it!” Gallant released a few blasts as we passed overhead, knocking the longbow away from the lion-dragon as we flew straight into the vulture things.

No, new pack of illusions.

Crap, I didn’t see how-

But I could smell. Medusa out, look for kidnapping-

Huh, these things really stunk. More so than they ever could if they were just born. Alien guns-for-hire? Seemed that way, given the brutality and bloodthirst I smelt. But it worked - doppleganagers
didn’t have sins, which meant the real one was-

Stab. With the knife, I didn’t trust tranq would work on this guy.

“Aidi!”

The vulture reared back from the cut to the...eye. Eugh. Didn’t seem get its eyeball, but ouch.

Grabbing Amy from Victoria before diving past the temporarily disabled aberration, I found my teammate, holding hands on the frozen monsters and trying to ignore the black woody things crawling out of his suit.

“Clockblocker!”

“Sorry, wrong cape! I’m Kudzu!”

Took me a second to realize the joke.

I heard the tiny version of Vista in the back of my mind groan. Good to see your priorities are straight, Dennis. I set down Amy to fix the vines.

“After this is done, hide. If we need healing we’ll make a path to you, okay?”

She nodded.

Back to the fight.

Chimaera was in the thick of the action now, ignoring the bevvy of arrows launched at her from Stalker. She was currently clawing at Aegis while the vultures used their telekinesis to keep Victoria away. The other Wards were simply trying to find the real things by process of elimination-not easy when one was spawning more repeatedly and another kept on wading in to strike directly. At least all those who would care about the vines could afford to be out of reach.

“Gallant! Real one’s at 3 o’ clock!”

And fear blast! This one seemed to work, as the vulture seemed noticeably more nervous.

I saw Chimaera nod towards one.

And then it screamed.

I didn’t know quite what to think of it. It sounded like the tortures of the damned mixed with a machine gun as heard through a megaphone directly in my ear.

In fact, I felt kind of numb on a deep level as my hand lost all feeling and my lance clattered to the ground.

When I came to, I was looking right at a scowling vulture, as it knocked said lance away and used its size to form a natural cage.

I also saw the beak could also be lips. It was smirking.
“So, This is how the story of their protege ends. How fitting.”

Huh? “You speak English!?”

“I do?” It looked confused for a second before shrugging, an oddly human gesture with wings. “Must be the effects of this plane. Oh well.”

It reached for my neck.

No, no, this couldn’t be how my career ended, this was a stupid way to die at the claws of a rotting monster-

BOOM.

The monster cried in pain as something exploded on its wing. I took the opportunity to kick it away before I rolled out and grabbed my lance.

Another blast, and its wing vanished. It gave a plaintive cry (more of a whining cry of disappointment like it lost a poker game than rather than its life), shortly before green shoots came out of the stump and started crawling over it. A few seconds later, a new, odd-looking mass of vines bloomed pus-yellow flowers. Huh. Hoped that wasn’t some kind of terraforming suicide bomb.

My heart soared when I saw who launched the life-saving attack. “Guys! Protectorate here!”

Aegis quickly disengaged from Chimaera to scoop up Clockblocker, while Victoria grabbed her sister.

After doing a quick head count, I saw every Ward was accounted for, then flew off to the superheroine who was quickly becoming my idol.

Despite everything that happened, the little bit of Dennis I had cultivated over the months showed through. I flipped open my helmet to reveal a haggard grin. “How’s it going, Miss Militia? Don’t mind me, just found out I’m an alien hybrid and a racist nearly-pure one attempted to kidnap Panacea and murder me to take my powers, summoning a bunch of birdlike abominations to help. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

I saw her smile behind the scarf, more relieved I was okay than anything. “We heard everything over the panic channel. Don’t worry, we’re too pissed off at said alien to be paralyzed about an existential crisis about our place in the universe. Or check her story.” She went back to being serious. “Is everyone okay?”

“Said abominations hit us with some kind of close-range spore that grew into very painful vines out of our skin. Panacea got all the initial infections, but you might want to check Aegis.”

“Armsmaster! You heard that?” she said into a radio.

“Affirmative. Staying away from the birds.”

Shortly thereafter, Armsmaster’s voice rang out from the PRT convoy rolling into view. “Chimaera! You are surrounded on all sides by members of the Protectorate and Parahuman Response Team! While whatever planet you came from probably has different laws, surrender now
and we will attempt to send you back home instead of rotting in a jail cell on this one, where it is likely your biology cannot function for an extended period of time!”

Miss Militia and I facepalmed in unison.

From my closer point of view though, it almost looked like the lion-dragon was tearing at her own flesh. I quickly pulled out my binoculars to get a closer look. Some way to force her back to humanoid form, or-

With a sudden tide of gore, what looked to be a pre-existing abscess burst. Among the blood and pus was a rather large glass bottle with what looked to be a human heart in it, and a collection of three vials-

Oh shit.

I grabbed the radio from a startled Miss Militia. “Colin, she’s summoning reinforcements!”

A pause. Then:

“FIRE AT WILL!”

Too late. Her legs crushed the liver vials to reveal more of the black ooze, while her hands uncorked the heart bottle, releasing a storm of multicolored energy that already was solidifying.

...I begged whatever gods there were that things getting worse like this wouldn’t be a fixture of my career.

Fat chance of that.

Ten minutes later, I was reflecting on the idea that it was a great mercy that most supervillains were infinitely more restrained than Chimaera and her goons-in-a-can.

“Pull!”

And fishing civilians out of a fire that one of the monsters set. I tried not to gag at the smell of burning flesh as I fished a younger woman’s baby out and handed him to Panacea.

“Left side looks fine, right needs graft.”

She nodded, though I suspected she didn’t need that. I needed to focus on something to ignore the chaos I kept glancing at.

Another blast of prismatic lighting surged across the PRT and the people they were trying to escort, causing even more of them to briefly phase in and out of existence before exploding. Most of them, thank God, immediately reformed, but many of them were still somehow out-of-phase with reality, and all of them were heavily injured.

The responsible monster grinned darkly and licked its doglike mouth. Its lower, more human pair of arms crossed in an expression of utter self-assurance of its victory, while the pincers sticking out
of its upper body and carapace clicked menacingly. “This is what passes for soldiers on this world?” the soft, almost genteel voice of the monster intoned. “Were it not for my orders, I would stop all this pointless struggling and start offering tutelage. Free of charge.” It rolled its violet eyes before leaning forward into its fighting stance again.

Shilder growled before closing the hole in the shield that the lightning streaked through. Another barrage from Miss Militia and what gun Armsmaster had in his Halberd flew over the wall and blasted off a vulture’s forelimb. Laserdream’s blast headed for the hybrid monster, but it quickly ducked behind its makeshift shield of a storefront.

I caught a scent of near-mindless bloodlust.

“Greenie incoming!”

That last monster wasn’t summoned by Chimaera herself, but by one of the vultures. And quite reluctantly on their part - I saw the...crab-dog slap a vulture before it actually did a motion with its forehands that tore a hole into reality (probably not the best term, but given how the last motion in its little ritual was to tear apart the air to reveal a black hole that bled a green gas, I think it fitted well enough). Out of the hole poured around...twelve of the shape that was now leaping at us, furry hybrids between a goblin and a bulldog. Three others followed suit, with varying results. Two didn’t create a portal at all, but looked actually rather smug about that. One did create a portal, revealing nine more.

Even from that distance, I could tell these green things weren’t soldiers. They mostly kept to the edge of the battle, rarely seen except for when they leap out of the increasingly haggard and ruined buildings. My guess is they were simply there as cannon fodder and to sow confusion, darting in and out to hurt as many people as they could and distract us for the main force.

Which they did extremely well, as evinced by the bloody tatters of PRT uniform on the ground. Both what they tore off and from the crab-dog shooting through the hole in the bulwark they made thanks to distracting Shilder.

This one found nothing but Vista’s spatial warp around the safety zone she and Miss Militia cleared for Panacea. And Clockblocker.

“I swear, I am going to learn how to be a mortician so I can dissect these things,” I heard him mutter as its time-locked form fell to the ground. “Win?”

Containment foam around the prone creature. Thank God they didn’t all have teleportation.

Eleven more vultures had joined the four already there, and after being nipped by the ones already there to apparently assert dominance, the monstrous squad immediately set to tearing into the PRT and Protectorate forces, teleporting into the thick of the action and carving through the ground forces like they were blue (and now red) lawnmowers through suited grass before the New Wave members appeared. The crab-dog was no slouch in melee either, using its pincers to tear open a tank while the human hands released some kind of energy that forced Laserdream to fire her power at Armsmaster. The damn thing was a Blaster, a Brute, and a Master. Fuck my life.

Speaking of, that was the main source of PRT casualties, right there. While the vultures weren’t slouches in melee, the crab-dog’s ability to turn its enemies upon themselves had little equal. Between glances, I caught Brandish blasting Flashbang and Armsmaster suddenly freezing after being hit by that energy - a failsafe against Masters, I presumed. The real trouble was that the crab-
dog knew exactly how to use this to confuse Shielder - a few Master bolts hit advancing forces, and he had to create forcefields around them to protect them from themselves, which usually meant he wasn’t keeping up the main bulwark…

Like now. There was a flash of energy, and one of the vultures got through the otherwise Mover-proof shield.

It got a face full of bullets for its trouble, and then death, rotting as it fell on top of Laserdream...after seeding her with her the spores and hitting her with a strong knuckle blow.

“Stalker, cover!”

“On it!” A lethal bolt, courtesy of Miss Militia, flew at Chimaera from Sophia’s perch.

I gagged a little at the feeling of both rotting monster and bloody cape as I tore through the corpse, pulling out the heroine before transporting her back to the safe zone.

Aegis came in at the same time, carrying a groaning (and covered in toxic-looking sores) Armsmaster. “Hang in there boss - Panacea?”

Two heals at once. I needed to treat Amy for all this.

“Gas wounds are strange for gas,” she muttered to the recovering Tinker. “Almost bacterial.”

He nodded before pulling out antibiotics, and running back through the havoc of PRT and screaming civilians. Greenie stopped attacking one to evade him.

Laserdream was unconscious. Damn no-brains rule.

Chimaera pulled out another vial, this one containing a blueish-grey fluid.

As it hit the ground, I had to look away from the flash. When I caught another glance, I saw the smoke it generated apparently didn’t stop Chimaera or her minions from seeing at all given how they were ganging up on Armsmaster. His visor glowed with thermal vision as he struck at a vulture, wounding its leg.

The close quarters didn’t help - the capes couldn't unleash their full power without fear of friendly fire, something the melee-focused Chimaera and her minions took full advantage of. Foam had no effect - the monsters simply teleported out of it, since they didn't need to move to transport, and Chimaera stayed as far away from the canisters as possible behind any cover she could find, getting said monsters to take out gun-wielders first upon seeing what they did.

Worse, I couldn’t help. Too much to do with the evacuation.

The long-ranged capes didn’t have as much trouble with this as I did, as they could actually help a little. Even (especially) Gallant - those duplicates didn’t have emotions, meaning his power made him just as good a spotter for Miss Militia as I was. Better, since he came with a gun.

Of course, I came with a spear. Which I was barred from using, because for some reason that I’m sure made sense to drunk politicians, an S-Class order, which would allow us to help due to higher priorities, and call in reinforcements for this bitch could only come from up high. An order that wasn’t forthcoming.
...I officially hated the PRT now.

The city was less of a concern. Brandish began to bring down a building front over the crab-dog, dropping her shield to use blasts, and-

Suddenly, Chimaera. One violent slam into a column later, and Brandish wasn’t helping anyone anytime soon. Hopefully she would be at all.

Glory Girl screamed and rushed at her unconscious mother. Chimaera turned around, smiling wickedly.


My vision came back, and I saw Flashbang.

“ Took your sweet time,” I muttered. Fighting with only half of your side wasn’t fun.

He nodded blankly.

I felt for a pulse. Present.

Then I rushed at Chimaera. I briefly registered a bolt of rainbow lighting. Missed, apparently. Then a green cloud, which wasn’t a miss. I winced at both the pain and stink.

My Medusas came out as I came out of the gas, and-

Snuck saboteur into forward base to hit Vista. Mind controlled him.

Oh shit.

Radio out.

“VISTA! FLASHBANG’S A SPY!”

“We noticed,” Aegis said, choking.

Spin around.

I registered Shielder down, with a tranq dart in his back. Probably because it was quieter.

The vultures were out in full force. One lacking a claw gleefully threw Miss Milita into a warehouse, one with a wound on its leg began to choke Armsmaster telekinetically, and the four remaining were tearing through the remaining heroes.

Standing over a now one-armed and one-legged Aegis, currently strangling Vista, and heedless of arrows in its back, lasers, and Clockblocker desperately prying at its hands, was what looked to be a three-dimensional negative photograph of a person, spindly and slender, wearing Flashbang’s clothes. And a blindfold made of what looked like dried intestines.

Before anyone could react, I tackled it away. Acting on a hunch, I tore away the disgusting blindfold.
Slitted eyes blinked blearily, coming into focus. “Wha-? Who-”

Panacea screamed.

The crab-dog tossed the struggling medic over to Chimaera as she flew back over to her remaining forces. “ChEcKmAtE. pItY i HaD tO wAsTe HiM. dO iT nOw!”

Above her, the vultures organized into two groups of three, and...

Began to dance?

Apparently the rest of our side was as confused as I was, as everyone stopped for a second…

Just before we saw the growing sphere of energy, pitch-black except for a core of colors, all of them grotesque, building at the center of both groups..

“CONCENTRATE FIRE!” I heard someone yell.

I saw a vast array of both bullets and lasers bearing on the dancers.

Two of the lower trio - the wounded ones - dissolved into muck, but the others merely sped up as the sphere grew bigger. A canister of containment foam flew at them, only for the crab-dog to block it while chortling darkly.

A few seconds later, they stopped, reared back to draw energy from the sphere, and let loose.

“DUCK!” I heard Miss Militia scream.

And then the roiling dark was upon us.

Chapter End Notes

Boy, ain’t ya glad she wanted Panacea alive? Also, before you ask: Piggot would give Chimaera an S-Class, but she was indisposed at the time and instead there were PRT-Certified Competent Bureaucrats about, and if Clockblocker froze the doppleganger while he was strangling Vista, he would still be strangling Vista. Also, he read enough minds to know who to disguise himself as, as will be overviewed later.

Trick to writing Worm cliffhangers: End on a low note.
I became aware I still had limbs.

I was somewhat amazed by this. There was *something* in that darkness, something with tentacles, claws and lots of teeth. Something that *hated* with every breath, something that enjoyed tearing me apart quite eagerly. Focusing on the places where the bird-scale met raw skin despite being covered by armor. I barely managed to cover myself up before it tore me apart, protecting my vital bits from the something in it.

I also became aware of where the pain was coming from, namely everywhere that wasn’t protected.

Balancing on my lance, I crawled over to Miss Militia, recognizing she tried to block the dark coming at the Wards with a riot shield she had been using earlier.

It was bad. The same non-existent skin wounds covered her in even more places than me, revealing bleeding muscle in a few places. She was still conscious, but obviously wishing she wasn’t.

“*You need help?*” I said hoarsely.

She looked at me with the expression of one who knew she was already dead.

“...*Get the Wards...run....I hold....them.*”

I felt a numb sensation in my chest, and nodded. I tensed my wings, regeneration somehow rendering them functional as shields.

Adrenaline allowing me to ignore my limp, I ran back, ignoring the green cloud overtaking me; I guessed Chimaera was still trying to kill me herself after her goon disabled me.

“*You,*” I said, pointing at the shapeshifter struggling to his (?) feet. “*Help.*”

While wounded, he looked in much better shape than I did. From what I could tell at least - his blood was red.

“*Talk about pay later,*” he said, helping Aegis right himself while he levitated. “*Who else?*”

Scan. Clockblocker uninjured but frozen, given current length of power he’d be up in a little bit. Vista and Win down. Others? One.

I looked up. Glory Girl looked fine, just shocked. Was holding radio. Supposed she got it back.
Amy uninjured too - guessed capturing her was to get her out of the way

“Vic, hold off Chimaera, get Amy if you can. Wards are retreating.”

“...Roger,” she mumbled.

Then she *roared*. Not just a warcry, a scream of pain. Family was hit, likely dead, understandable.

Chimaera and crab-dog tackled away.

A groan. Clockblocker to normal.

“Get Win. Aegis is conscious, has Vista. Spy was controlled, is on our side.”

He nodded, numbly.

Hoped Stalker was hidden away safely or could soak. Now the shifter. “There’s a boy in power armor, looks like a knight. Need you to hand him to me. After, get unconscious woman with red hairband”

The alien creature nodded and handed a barely conscious Gallant over, then hoisted Laserdream. Surprisingly cool after breaking free of mind control. May be because I did that.

I hoisted Gallant on my side, using wing as gurney, other to shield me. Hope Vic held own.

More gunfire. Looked back.

Miss Militia and Armsmaster still fighting. Lost accuracy, but one vulture down. Others weren’t dancing again yet, likely because one holding Panacea, keeping her away from her sis.

Greenies approaching.

I blinked. Starting to cry.

The miracle of beating the Sphinx happened once. Never again.

Couldn’t save them. Useless.

Didn’t need breakdown. Rubbed pin to calm down. Breakdown later, save friends now-

Rubbed smooth iron instead of rough steel.

Looked down.

Same medal from dream. Huh?

*To request backup, please throw Dissian Dinar on convenient surface. For your safety, please stand five feet away from point of impact to allow for margin of error in summoning calculations.*

Didn’t know where synthesized voice came from. Didn’t care.

Clink.
The coin glowed with a red light, distracting Miss Milita-

A city of gray metal, skyscrapers standing next to medieval parapets. The tops of all glowed with heat and the sky was filled with the smog of factory smokestacks-

Where the Dinar was, there was now the outline of a triangle, surrounded by a runed circle.

On top of those was the strangest-looking platoon I had ever seen. Knights covered in cobwebs stood side to side with gas-masked modern soldiers with armor-coated tails. What they were had no bearing on the era of the weapons they were holding; all the soldiers had shields, whether Renaissance buckler or contemporary police, and all the knights had a large-caliber gun on their back, which half immediately reached for while the others brought a pair of swords in front of their faces.

Above all of them, the monstrous sergeant from my dreams pointed at the crab-dog, chain unraveling to its full length.

Did the Chimaera’s monsters look...scared?

“Open fire!”

And all Hell broke loose.

It wasn’t a fair fight. Numbers were on our side this time. Numbers and coordination.

The masked soldiers advanced like a green-and-grey phalanx, only popping out from behind their shields to lay down a salvo. Mostly machine guns, but there was a few - four or five - flamethrowers among them. Those didn’t directly attack though, just spread napalm in front of the advance, completely blanketing their feet in flames. The fire apparently bothered them even less than it did me.

One could not say the same of the scent of burning flesh, produced from the corpses they blanketed in the process. It bothered them not at all, while I was retching, along with everyone else near me.

Meanwhile, the knights the soldiers were advancing ahead of moved a lot slower, more ponderously. Whether due to their armor being that heavy or just not quick normally, they were definitely the slowpokes of the platoon. They didn’t let that stop their advance.

As a greenie tried to negotiate the burning ground, a gunner among the knights calmly turned around and shot it right in the forehead. There was a brief moment where the flesh around the wound seemed to suddenly turn into a fractal pattern before crumbling to ash, then the greenie’s interior seemed to evaporate into steam, leaving a hollow shell on the ground. A sword-wielder cut one that had got too close into neat halves, which proceeded to sprout a pair of snakes that began to eat them. Huh.

A blast of the Master energy resounded across the platoon, but the knights ignored it, and the masked soldiers...looked like they reacted a bit, then something flashed beneath the helm of one of
them, and they went back to their destructive advance.

Then one of the knights...sang? It sounded a bit like metal being filed down. The crab-dog winced and drew back, as one of the vultures gestured to grab them telekinetically...to no avail.

The sergeant apparently didn’t feel the need to join the fighting, instead flying around to look for survivors. Armmaster and Miss Militia were already back with the Wards. There was also a couple civilians that hadn’t been evacuated yet. No PRT.

I also couldn’t help but notice they started laying down the fire zone before the sergeant finished checking. Not that it mattered given the bodies’ proximity to the blast, but I already had alarm bells go off in my skull. Whoever these guys were, they were at least very callous, or too bloodthirsty to care about hurting people in their tactics.

All survivors mostly hung back, even Sophia, who I had just noticed had materialized near us. She looked bad, but still more capable than I was. Stupid localized regeneration.

“Friends of yours?” she rasped.

“I...guess?” I replied. “Certainly enemy of my enemy.”

“It’ll do.”

Touche, if a bit cold herself. But that was Shadow Stalker for you.

Glory Girl was too angry to care about the reinforcements. She did make it impossible for another dance to take place, having tore off one of the vulture’s heads, causing it to vanish in a storm of electricity, and the strange platoon filled another with holes, casing one half of it to incinerate and another to freeze, falling apart and shattering.

The last vulture apparently gave up on smart tactics, flying at the platoon while screeching. Several of the soldiers suddenly vanished, appearing next to ones on the outskirts, leaving only the knights.

As one, they intoned a single word: “Fall.”

And fall the vulture did, right into the inferno. A few stabs and shots later, and the knights casually marched over the disintegrating corpse. I swear I saw a few of them smirking.

“...stay back. I’m warning you.”

The crab-dog was actively cowering now, eyes pleading.

“Or what?”, said the sergeant, slowly winging closer. “I have the buerozas, I have the numbers, I have the strength. What could you possibly hope to gain through selling out to us?”

“I’m not pleading for my life. I’m pleading to avoid the journey to death.”

The sergeant raised an eyebrow, a strangely human expression. “...Clever. Odd, but clever. I’m in a good mood today, so...have at him.”

The crab-dog held its arms and torso open, and winced.
A few seconds later, its skin was akin to burned squash. It began to glow strangely, before vanishing in a silent explosion, leaving a shadow of itself on the wall.

“Hm. Normally your kind isn’t so brave...oh well.”

She and her forces did a quick scan of the area. No other threats.

The Chimaera was a coward too, it seemed. Amy was gone, but knowing that she wanted her alive meant that we could still save her. Take victories where you could.

The sergeant flew down, alighting in front of us.

Miss Militia’s gun immediately materialized. The dragon-like soldier chuckled.

“Too low caliber, and I have no problem with you. Love to stay and chat, but a Dinar comes with an expiration date. Miss...Adrasteia, I think, will explain how she knows me.”

Everyone conscious wheeled around to face me in shock. I looked just as flabbergasted as they did, possibly the same expression I had when the platoon first appeared.

She knelt, meeting eyes with me.

Hers were...odd. There was courage there, and a hardness that spoke of more than experience. Respect for me as a student, and bemusement at something so much smaller than her, literally and otherwise.

Wordlessly, she pressed something in my hand. “Tell your bosses to press the dimple on the top of that thing. The Dinar will recharge in a month, keep it for a rainy day.”

She winged back to her troops, saluting as she did so. “The Environmental Division, Eighth Mixed Infantry Division, 23rd Platoon, awaits your next request!”

The runic circle glowed-

The city appeared once more-

The Dinar rattled to a stop. There was no sign of the Platoon, only the now-black circle.

Fifty dead, at least by my eyeballing it. Mostly PRT, we had evacuated much of the civilians already. No sign of Chimaera, or Panacea.

Vista, Gallant, and Kid Win’s ambulance had been called five minutes ago, and the still-conscious capes and people were looking for survivors the sergeant had missed. We didn’t have much luck - two PRT guys, who was hiding behind Armsmaster after the later tried to block the blast in desperatio.

After checking, we discovered the living Merchants escaped in confusion. I wasn’t sure how long they would last without Skidmark, so I focused on the more pressing matters.
Two capes were among the casualties. Shielder was killed, either by the flames or the thing within the summoned darkness. Perhaps both, if he survived the dark.

The other was Brandish.

She looked to have already been suffering bad injuries after Chimaera attacked her, the thing within the summoned dark finished the job. Her death was quick at least.

She deserved a better end, I thought. A heroic end, like fighting an Endbringer. Not killed by what was effectively a grenade after being knocked out.

Aegis closed her eyes. “There was nothing that could have been done.”

“I know,” I replied.

Everything was silent for a bit.

Said silence was broken by a choking sound. I spun around.

Glory Girl had the terrified shapeshifter pinned against a wall. Stalker was aiming a non-lethal arrow, though at who I couldn’t tell. Both of the adult capes looked more confused than anything, though Armsmaster pointed the Halberd at Victoria’s back.

“TELL ME!” Victoria was screaming in either rage or pain, I couldn’t tell from smell or sound. “TELL ME WHERE SHE TOOK HER!”

The shapeshifter was barely able to inhale due to both being crushed and the aura I could feel from here. Probably counterproductive, but I didn’t want to upset her even further by telling her she couldn’t grieve. “I don’t-”

“MY SISTER! WHERE DID YOUR BOSS TAKE HER!?"

“L-l-look, I c-c-can tell y-you’re a fan of e-enchantment, but-”

“NO ‘BUTS’! TELL ME OR I RIP YOUR FUCKING SKULL OFF YOU ALIEN FUCK!”

_is serious about threat._

“Glory Girl, he’s-”

“FIVE….FOUR…”

“Victoria!”

“THREE...TWO-”

Thwack. My spear couldn’t hurt her, but she could still feel the impact.

My wing absorbed her punch.

“Victoria, he was Mastered!”
The aura subsided. “Wh...what?”

“That blindfold I tore off put him under some kind of mind control! He likely didn’t even know he was here until it came off!”

I peeked out from behind the wing.

The shapeshifter was gasping for breath, leaning on the ground. Victoria, on the other hand, was frozen stiff, realization coming to her face.

Emotionlessly, she turned around, rearing back. “Well, I guess we don’t need him then—”

Aegis was quicker than I was, putting himself between the shapeshifter and Glory Girl. “Whoa! GG, I know you’re in a lot of pain but—”

“SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!” she screamed. “YOU DON’T GET TO TALK ME AWAY FROM JUST—”

“Glory, killing him will do nothing to solve anything—” Clockblocker chimed in.

“WHOOP-DE-FUCKING-DOO, YOU GOT THAT TOO!” She was smiling madly now, the look of someone whose sanity had left the building. “BUT HEY, AT LEAST I CAN PUNISH HIM FOR MURDER, AND DO THE ONE FUCKING JOB I’M GOOD AT—”

Bang. We all swiveled around to face Miss Militia.

“Enough, all of you! Glory Girl, I know you feel like hell right now, but—”

“Feel. Like. Hell?” Victoria was openly crying now. “I’m a fucking orphan now. Mom’s dead, Dad’s dead, Ames is going to wish she was dead—”

“I didn’t kill your father.”

Everyone spun around to face the shapeshifter, who was still rubbing his neck. “.Eh?”

“That blindfold was some kind of charm spell medium. It made me think the Chimaera was my best buddy until it came off, but I retained enough of my real personality to operate like I normally do.”

He stood up and held out his hands in supplication. “I don’t kill unless forced, so I just memorized his face if Chimaera needed me to pretend to be him. He’s fine, I just stole his costume and knocked him out.”

Victoria looked at him, disbelieving...and hopeful.

No scent. “GG, he’s telling the truth.”

She went closer to him, aura ablaze again. She inspected him for a second.

Then she reared back, and before we could react, she threw her full punch.

There was an odd booming sound as cracks spread along the building. Victoria sank to the ground,
“...I’ll let you handle this,” the shapeshifter said as he backed off.

Almost immediately, all capes present when over to comfort her. I started to drape my wings around her, and-

I caught a familiar scent. “Chimaera’s still here. She was hiding.”

It looked odd, badly injured capes in a fighting stance, but it was as threatening as we could make it.

The source of the smell emerged, Panacea’s neck in a claw. She looked at some intermediate state between her humanoid form and her monster form. Her face was her original elf-like state, but her hair was still the red of her mane and she had dragon claws out of her midriff. “Come any closer, and I will make do without a healer.”

The sheer amount of rage on Victoria’s face made her look almost inhuman. “You...bitch.”

“Perhaps. But I am not so dependent on petty fairy tale morality to live.” She lowered her head to sniff Panacea. “Though maybe I should have gotten a non-parahuman source of experiments.”

She laughed, an oddly human sound. “You live with mommy, after all. At what, seventeen? I did you a favor by finally giving you adulthood! Typical that a weak parahuman family has two woman-child spawn.”

I did not think it was possible to hate a person as much as I did Chimaera right now. Not without exploding.

Victoria’s teeth clenched as she rumbled out an animalistic growl that belonged more to a wolf than a human. But we held back anyway - I don’t think anyone could move fast enough to save Amy.

Chimaera caught on to this. “But you need her too much to do what needs to be done. She’s the perfect damsels in distress. Valued. Kin. Has a power even weaker than all of yours, being a helpless oddler of those who would be lost in a natural world-”

The claw holding Panacea suddenly collapsed inward upon itself like an arm being pulled out of a coat sleeve.

The former prisoner spun around. I caught the scent of immanent murder.

Splortch.

Even at this distance, I could hear Panacea say something to Chimaera in a calm monotone. “Medicines are derived from poisons in the natural world, you know.”

The monster said noting, as her prisoner’s hand was inside her neck, and from the way the arm was clenched, her windpipe was being crushed.

Another splortch.
Chimaera looked down at the hand that was sticking through her chest. And out of her back.

No blood. I smelled that Amy had just shaped her heart into something that couldn’t pump blood at all.

The life in the monster’s eyes vanished, and she slumped.

A look of growing horror came to Panacea’s face. She walked back, tearing her arms out of the corpse.

As it fell, something like liquid shadow came out of the heart-wound. It crackled with lightning that surged to Panacea before dissolving.

The medic fell to her knees, and began to cry.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, Amy’s an awnshegh now. She couldn’t have stolen power from a better person, either.

Also, the “knights” were bueroza steel devils from Fiendish Codex 2, mid-ranking infantry with greater command and the ability to sing to disrupt spellcasting. The masked soldiers were merregon legion devils, from the same source, whose laundry list of abilities depend on nearby teammates, and they’re very good at using the
The clock was like the ticking of a bomb.

I wondered if Piggot meant it that way, for those occasions she needed to fully impress upon her victims how utterly and completely pissed she was.

Of course, the “anticipation” side of this had been ruined, as she had decided to see the morons responsible for not classifying Chimaera as an S-Class before me. Half the people standing in the building now knew what a truly enraged Piggot was like, particularly the debriefing room downstairs from her office (Miss Militia’s comment when I found I was asked for a “personal evaluation” was “May God have mercy on your soul”). I swear, people triggered from that kind of ire (oh, the irony).

I still dreaded what would come out of the Director’s mouth, but at least I knew the general gist of what it was going to be. Hence why dad was here, as I think I needed someone to hide behind once she got going.

The first minute or so passed in silence, except for that infernal ticking. Yamada and the other psychologist, the one I told about the dream of the surreal battlefield and the sergeant (or rather, the 23rd Platoon’s leader) looked about as nervous as I did. Intimidation tactics, I guessed. Piggot was trying to insinuate this was an evaluation about being kicked out for psychological reasons. It worked; I was trying to shrink back into my wings.

Then the Director cleared her throat.

“You didn't tell me you could summon backup,” she said, utterly devoid of emotion.

“Up until very recently, I didn't know,” I replied. Called it, this was going to be the sticking point. I had rehearsed for this. I could do this.
“Ah. An understandable error,” she said, completely unconvinced. I had retracted the Medusas to avoid her stink, but it didn't take Alexandria to tell she was thinking of the best way to fully impress upon me the rather sour mood she was in, besides throwing me under an industrial press. I might live through that.

“Well, understandable for COMPLETE FUCKING IDIOTS!”

I jumped a little at that. Being the focus of the Piggot scream was a little more alarming than simply hearing the Piggot scream. Only a little though.

“Those men and women died because you didn’t fucking realize you had a fucking distress beacon built into you! There are dozens of children I have to write a note to tell their parents died defending their lives, and that’s just the PRT! How many civilians died because of your rotting mass that you call a brain??”

“I thought the Dinar was a dream!”

“Ah, yes, the dream,” she said, voice dripping with malice. “The dream which you noted to a psychiatrist was, and I quote ‘incredibly vivid, like it was a waking memory’. Why the hell did you not note that-”

“I never gave you those records!”, the psychologist to the left of Yamada said.

“It’s called a warrant, look it up,” Piggot said briskly. The shrink muttered something unintelligible. Good to know the McClusky-Naegi Act pissed off more people than my mom and now, me.

“Back to my point, you knew full well this dream was unique, why didn’t you at least test it-”

“It is not unique!” Yamada was speaking up now. “She has a remarkable tendency to retain many of her dreams-”

“Her power fantasy dreams, if I remember,” Piggot shot back. “Her power fantasy dreams, involving a person that now seems to be a genuine historical figure, noted in your report for signs of antisocial personality-”

“Because it’s a crime to daydream now, is it?” Dad. “If that’s the metric we’re using, we might as well arrest you for war crimes right now, I’ve heard the rumors-”

“My opinion on parahumans and my position in managing them is none of your concern, and is also irrelevant, Hebert!” She had actually stood up now. “My concern is making sure this nightmare never happens again, and your daughter is at least partially to blame-”

“She’s a teenage girl who was scared out of her mind and is sane enough to not confuse dreams with reality!”

“She is also, as cynical as it seems, a soldier, and the mistakes of a soldier cost lives-”

“You want to talk soldiers, Director!? Where was ONE PARTICULAR SOLDIER IN ALL THIS!? WHERE WERE YOU, DIRECTOR!?”
A flinch from Piggot. Wait a minute…

Medusa out.

“I was late. I am ashamed to admit it, but I get stuck in traffic as much as anyone else(lie)-”

“That’s a horrible lie, Director, and you know it,” I said, nearly growling. She wants this not happening again? Let’s put where blame lies in all cases. Shows you for yelling at my dad.

Another flinch. “I fail to see how that…” her voice trailed off as she saw the snake. Busted.

“Even if this guy wasn’t drinking in every little fuck up you’re done for the past week, you live practically on premises. You could have walked, since I doubt you’re so unhealthy you can’t at least use a sidewalk. Hell, given that the news was likely blaring Chimaera’s attack as an emergency update, the adrenaline could have allowed you to, I don’t know, get out of the car and run?”

Piggot’s rage died a little. Points for that, she could admit when she screwed up instead of going straight into doublethink and drowning out the point in more anger. “...I have health problems, recently aggravated by insomnia. I was currently checking in for dialysis and refilling my heart medication.”

Dad grinned wildly, victory in sight. “SEE? IF YOU HAD SOME KIND OF, I DON’T KNOW, ALERT SYSTEM FOR WHEN YOUR STAND-INS NEED SOME KIND OF DIRECTION, MAYBE YOU COULD HAVE STOPPED THIS! OR, I DON’T KNOW, GO ON A DIET-”

“My kidneys were lost in the attack on Ellisburg! I've done more than you ever will in your self-righteous little life-”

“EVERYONE, SHUT UP!”

Much to my surprise, everyone did just that. It may have had something to do with the fact I hit the lance against the door, resulting in an estraz gunshot.

I didn’t know what came over me. One second, I was white-hot with rage over Piggot insulting my father, the next, I suddenly knew, deep in my bones, what I needed to do in order to restore some semblance of order.

I inhaled deeply. “Look. I made a mistake in judgement, and I hate myself for it. I really wish there was some way to tell my past self that it wasn't just a dream, I had a teleporter with me all along.”

I spun to face Piggot. “This does not give you, Director, the right to go around blaming everyone for the most outside context of outside context problems. Yes, there was a breakdown in command, but I’m not your backup commander. I am not to blame for the fuckups that led to this fiasco, only for not containing it on my own. I am truly, deeply sorry for that, and I will happily accept whatever sanctions for my negligence - hell, make it so I can’t go ten feet away from Sophia on pain of electric shocks - but you are not justified in claiming that I can see the future better than you do.”

“As for you, dad.” I said, spinning around. “Fat insults? Seriously? This woman is in a great deal of anguish from the loss of some of her men, many of which she personally knew, and you’re
insulting her *weight*? Not. Cool.”

Dad turned very red, trying very hard to avoid my eyes. “Sorry,” he muttered as he slunk back to his chair, looking massively ashamed of himself. Probably feeling more guilty than I was for that, but I needed to show Piggot I sympathized with her despite my objections.

...Holy shit that was cynical. On the other hand, she probably couldn’t exercise very well if she lost her kidneys, so...no, that was cynical. Maybe this was that “ruler” quality Chimaera mentioned? Would I start seeing ways to use politics to my advantage too? Was I bound for a future that Otto von Bismark would rise from his grave to applaud?

...Probably better than turning out like Chimaera.

Shaking my sudden horrifying epiphany off, I stepped back. “Now, about the device that the 23rd’s leader gave Miss Militia - can we at least do that and possibly get *some* idea of what is going on?”

The shapeshifter leaned against the back of the walls in his cell. Okay, it wasn't so much a cell so much as an interrogation room with bars, but same difference. He wasn't going anywhere, just in case.

“I take it the dragon golem is your voice?”

The Dragon-suit nodded. “If by that you mean an autonomous drone by which I interface with the world outside Canada, yes. I don’t really have the opportunity to leave my home, and being able to simply transport one here to activate is much more convenient.”

“So, your voice. Got it.” He stood up. “From your surface thoughts, I get that you call yourself Dragon but aren’t one, and you’re here to examine me while the...President, I think you call him, gets here to see the projector activate.”

Ah yes, surface thoughts. More than a bit alarming when he ended up nearly falling on the floor laughing when Armstrong told him he couldn’t possibly read minds. Then recited a bunch of random factoids about Armstrong’s day, guessed three numbers he was thinking (pi, Euler’s constant, and zero), and then then proceeded to answer several questions before they were asked just to annoy him. A CAT scan was awaiting authorization just after this.

Dragon nodded. “Ambassador, actually, as we aren’t sure what that thing actually does. Could be a bomb, which means...” A shrug. “Rather underhanded and even more cruel to him, but caution rules the day.” I detected a little bitterness in here tone. “And the ambassador is more skilled with interpersonal social skills than the actual President anyway.”

“Eh, good idea, given who made it.” He sat down, tipping an imaginary hat. “Nex’rik Aeba, at your service. Before you ask, other races call mine dopplegangers, which given how we have no name for ourselves works just as well. We never saw the need to form our own culture given how we can simply mold ourselves into a member of another. Only time we ever really meet is if we’re working on a job together or...” He smirked and wiggled his eyebrows.

“Vagaries of reproduction aside,” Dragon said hurriedly, “you seem to have implied there are
multiple sapient species, many of them likely humanoid given the limits of your shapeshifting. Is this correct?"

“I’m more amazed you don’t,” Nex’rik said. “I was nearly shocked out of that damned blindfold when I realized that there are only humans and mutant humans on this world.”

“Truth,” said Armsmaster, off to the side. “...I think. It isn't calibrated to...doppelgangers.”

“Which is why I’m here,” I said. “Mr…?”

“Last name’s Aeba, but please, call me Nex’rik. Aeba isn't even a surname, it's my imago - my casual identity when I don’t feel like letting all my grey hang out.”

A race of shapeshifters with favored faces in their daily life. Makes sense. “Mr. Nex’rik, could you please tell me what color the sky is, but not blue?”

“....A pleasant green with crimson clouds (lie).”

“He’s telling the truth. About many races, I mean.” Huh. Wondered why kind of...evolutionary…

Wait.

“I believe you said only humans?” Dragon asked before I did.

“Well, yes. Unless you have a hidden population of my kind or changelings, I don’t see any other races.” Nex’rik paused. “Despite what the reptid people seem to think. Yuan-ti aren’t that subtle, they’re too egotistical for that.”

Silence for a second. “...What?”

Dragon began haltingly. “Do you mean to imply...humans exist on your world?”

“Er, yes? No offense, but you guys breed like rabbits. Very clever, very stubborn rabbits who will do anything to survive, and very good at learning how. At least in the short term.”

A very long pause.

Finally, Armsmaster broke the silence. “Well, I suppose we can finally slot Chimaera into the ‘not an alien, just crazier than a shithouse owl’ column.”

Miss Militia nodded. “Her claims were...suspect. Frankly I’m a little relieved, the world still makes sense.”

Nex’rik looked as caught off guard as I was. “Huh?”

“We believe your world - Aebrynis, I think - is not a different planet, at least the way you would define it,” Dragon explained. “We actually think it’s an alternate version of the world you’re currently in, Earth Bet.”

Oh.

Actually...that did make more sense, now that I thought about it. The theory was that my Azrai
dreams was genetic encoding of the, ahem, God of Darkness’ (and the more I thought about that title, the cornier it sounded) life story. If he appeared - or triggered - early in Aebrynis’ history, and his own megalomanical (how else could you describe a person who capitalized first-person pronouns?) interpretation of events was in any way accurate, the world would look very, very strange.

Shame nobody told that to Nex’rik, though. “Alternate version? W-what?”

“Think of it this way - our world is a way yours could have turned out if something was different in its past, existing in, er….a different place than Aebrynis.”

Nex’rik’s eyes widened in shock…

Then a look of realization came to his face. “So that’s why this world lacks magic.”

The Protectorate members all were about as caught off guard as I was.

As one, all native Earthlings, including me, said as one, “Magic?”

“Twiddling fingers to control the weather, dark rituals meant to make the dead rise as armies, enchanting items, that kind of thing?” He shrugged. “Fact of life where I come from. May be how we dopplegangers came to be.”

Armsmaster cleared his throat rather loudly. “Magic? Excuse me, but would that happen to resemble parahuman powers like my own or-”

“If it makes you feel better, the way it’s studied is a science,” an amused Nex’rik interjected. “But unlike your parahumans, anyone non-blooded can use it, so long as they don’t mind being illusionists-slash-diviners, or possibly a soul debt to the fae for witchcraft.”

“Fae? Witchcraft?...back up and explain a little. Please,” Miss Militia said, clutching her head.

Nex’rik leaned forward, obviously proud of the fact he knew more about what was going on than we did. “I’m not the expert here, but a witch client of mine explained it that there’s this plane, this alternate dimension that overlays our own, the Shadow World. There, physics and normal laws don’t apply, reality is defined by thought, perception, and a force that is more like a living entity than an ironclad way the universe works.”

I desperately willed the Medusas to taste the air, trying to convince myself he was trying to make fun of us. No dice.

“Thing is, the Shadow World doesn't remain on its side. It wants to mingle with the mortal world
when it can, so it constantly pushes against the wall between worlds, like a tide.” To illustrate this, he brought his hands forward and began to tap the fingertips of one hand against the phalanges of another. “Normally, the wall is strong, but certain events can cause the Shadow World’s tide to become stronger,” he began to push constantly at that, “so that it breaks through and starts giving those of us who enjoy gravity making you fall instead of float a really bad day.” The tapping fingers pushed through the “wall” hand, and started wiggling.

I saw all adult capes tense a little.

“Magic, on the other hand, is the art and science,” he said as he separated his hands again, “of opening minute, predictable holes in the wall to make the Shadow World do what you want.” He opened a small gap between two of his “wall” fingers and suck a fingertip through for a second before closing the gap.

Wha-actually, no, that sounded reasonable.

...Comparatively speaking.

“...Could you define the remark about witchcraft?” Dragon’s tone of voice sounded somewhat more nervous than before.

“Two main different kinds of common magic. First, lesser magic involves drawing on the most ephemeral parts of the Shadow World, illusions and information, and thus the easiest to get through the wall. Nixes the need for divine blood, and they’re actually better at their niche than wizards. Pisses off the latter to no end.”

“Next, witchcraft, relies on contacting the fae, the beings who live in the Shadow World, and promise to further their particular focus of existence in the world in return for a primal link to the Shadow World in the form of an animal familiar. Think of it as the difference between making your own sword and buying another from a master blacksmith who is really stringent about what you use it for.”

I felt the world stop spinning. Okay, confusing information, but I would mana-

Wait, wizards?

Dragon asked the question before I did. “You mentioned wizards. Mind explaining the difference between them and the other two? There may be a similarity between our parahumans and them.”

“Well, first, wizards have to have a link to the Shadow World in their veins. This is either someone of elven-”

“Elven?” Wasn't sure who asked that. Could have been all of us.

“Well, Sidhelien, if you want to have your head up your ass about it. Nobody’s sure where they came from, they’re pretty close to mortal plane-native fae.” He shrugged. “Have heads bigger than their ears, think they’re the most wonderful creatures to ever exist. Still enjoy sleeping with humans, despite the fact they blame you for not being the Rulers of Everything anymore.”

I darkly wondered if it wasn’t the other way around. I knew what happened to native populations displaced by empires.
“Any, those of elven descent, like Kursor before she became the Chimaera (may her journey to the Abyss be long and painful), or with divine blood either inherited or stolen like…”

He gestured at me.

“My savior, actually. I believe I’ve forgotten to thank you in the confusion, so thank you.”

WHAT.

“They’re a lot more versatile, have access to magic that can affect entire countries - summoning legions of the undead, changing the weather to fiery apocalypse, that sort of thing. You don’t want to get into a fight with a nation with a wizard-regent.”

...I honestly wasn’t sure what precisely caused my mind to undergo a systems reboot. The fact that Nex’rik was so utterly casual about this, the fact that, somewhere in the vast array of Earths, there existed a world where constant invasion by an alternate dimension made of magic was complete normal, or the fact that I was apparently a dormant, female form of Gandalf the Grey.

After about five minutes, Armstrong finally spoke up. “...You do realize that Chimaera could have done something to your mind that made you buy into her delusions, correct? Or are simply mistaken and you speak of normal para beings?”

Please let that be the case, his strained tone left unasked. And in that, he and I agreed, for if the Shadow World, a perpetual alien invader, existed in one alternate Earth...

“Ah, actually that was probably the reason I was chosen by her.”

Reaching into Flashbang’s costume, Nex’rik pulled out a tiny wooden sculpture of a sparrow. “A gift from that witch client I told you about. Not a magician myself, but I know how to read the instructions.”

He flipped open the wings of the sparrow.

The eyes of the sculpture glowed an eerie blue, and for a moment, it looked like a living sparrow.

Then the wings snapped shut.

And an equally blue portal appeared directly behind him.

“Before you ask, I’m not risking the Shadow World to run away from some fine hosts. That would be stupid, both for my reputation and my health. I’m doing this so you can see for yourself. Whatever you do there, be polite.”

I heard something between a frustrated sigh and strangulation from Armstrong. “I hate it when certain theories are right…” he muttered as he crushed the bridge of his nose.
“In all actuality, Taylor, this is likely a failure to translate into English properly.”

I blinked. *That* was unexpected.

...On the other hand, I could have been attacked by a herd of pink elephants singing a marching tune, and things would make just as much sense as they did now.

The interview had ended at that point, the Protectorate trio to confer about this new revelation. I, on the other hand, needed to sit down on something rather comfy.

So, I was apparently a living conduit to an alien dimension, inhabited by fairies, that wanted to invade conventional space and turn everything into a live reenactment of surrealist paintings. At least Nex’rik didn't seem to think it was much to be concerned about.

On the other hand, his race could have been a product of said alien dimension, so of course *he* wouldn’t mind.

Could this be why Glaistig Uaine went mad, I wondered? Did her power cause her to merge with an actual fae, and it took control of her? Worse, did the two identities of the girl who became the Fairy Queen and the fae merge, and her insanity was a product of never knowing who she really was?

Was that what happened to *Chimaera*?

And would the same thing happen to me one day?

I tried not to think about that last bit too hard.

Miss Militia breaking my train of thought before I did was thankful. Otherwise my mind would probably invent possible stories involving being trapped in my own mind while an evil fairy marveled at the feeling of my dad’s heart in my talons.

“Sorry?”

“Dragon and Armsmaster think that since the divergence point between Earth Bet and Aebrynis happened long before we developed the idea of magic being science we haven’t nailed down yet. Based on Nex’rik’s analogies, his world still uses swords and more primitive technology, implying that it went a completely different path of development.”

“Bottom line is, we think his world’s researchers discovered where parahuman powers come from in the first place early in their technological development, and then their following tech development was built on that.” she continued. “Since the Shadow World is so obviously different from the reality we know, they came to separate the idea of mundane technology from it into what they call magic, both because the supernatural was still an accepted part of daily life, and...um...”

She materialized her gun. “It’s an understandable conclusion. You don’t call a car engine a clock, after all, even if they’re both machines, and our capes are so different from his non-wizard magicians he doesn't think we’re the same thing.”
I mulled it over in my head. If parahumans in general were conduits, and Aebrynis simply
developed a way to artificially replicate them…

…I suddenly felt both very relieved and very silly.

True, this wasn't a confirmation of my sanity, far from it, but as far as I could tell most capes found
their general level of instability and stayed there. The Shadow World was still something to be
alarmed about, but at least it was something that Earth Bet had a lot of experience with already,
even if our boundary was a hell of a lot stronger than Aebrynis’.

In fact, this was probably going to be a massive relief to humanity in general, now that I thought of
it. With that same discovery of artificial cape powers having been made once, it could probably be
done again over here. With the ability to create new capes, however generic they were, came the
ability for normal people to stand up to villains more easily, not to mention easily replicable
Tinkertech like that bird of his. Yes, it would probably take a decade or so, but things looked like
they could turn out fairly well.

Of course there was also the fae of our parallel who would likely turn hostile at the sudden
intrusion or the possibility that whatever dimensional wall that prevented it from intruding would
weaken (given how Armsmaster reacted, he was probably fully aware of that, too), so I willed
myself to not get my hopes up. I didn't want to aggravate my already poor luck by tempting it.

“So…I’m a normal cape?” I said, not really having anything else to say.

“No...quite.”

I looked over at the source of the mildly synthesized Canadian voice. “Huh? From the sound of
things I just happen to have a power that’s native to another, rather strange alternate Earth-”

“You do, but the issue is, your power is also strange,” Armsmaster finished for Dragon, obviously
trying to find the words without offending me.

“...And this makes it different from other monstrous powers how?”

“Because it does not have the biological structure of a native parahuman power. Beyond…no
offense, beyond the obvious, I mean.” Dragon said.

“None taken.” Frankly given Dragon’s near scentless smell, it was hard to take offense from her to
begin with.

It was amazing how a mechanical wyvern could look perturbed. “I’m going to tell you you an
obscure fact, Taylor; parahumans have extra lobes in their brains.”

Okay, that was something Dr. Adler didn’t tell me.

Even Armsmaster caught on, or at least was told this was going to happen by the much more
socially adept cape. “We don’t advertise it, as we already have one villainous Tinker obsessed with
its structure. Her name is Bonesaw.”

Ah. “All is forgiven,” I said.

“In any case, the extra lobe, the corona gemma, is usually differently shaped from parahuman to
parahuman. The only commonalities between coronas is that it only appeared after their owners’ respective triggers, and its location in the normal structure of the brain. We assume that it is entirely devoted to control of the power, and working off the data Mr. Nex’rik gave us, likely the interface between a parahuman’s mind and the Shadow World.”

I nodded. “Okay. So, what makes mine different enough to be alarming?”

“You don’t have one,” Armsmaster stated bluntly.

Both Miss Militia and I stiffened. “What?” we said in unison.

“The neurologists didn't notice it at first, because of the network of nerves that connects your human brain to the Medusas’,” Dragon continued. “However, upon closer examination, the nerves are all the neurological modification you have.”

“Dr. Adler’s staff thought it was strange, but they assumed that, given the difference in structure between coronas, that the nerve network and Medusa brains were your particular iteration of the lobe,” Armsmaster explained. “In all truth they were also likely rushing their report to avoid angering her after Dr. Bixby was publicly fired—”

Dragon cleared her throat, a sound enhanced by the size of her suit. “...and this is entirely irrelevant to the topic, so I will let Dragon explain,” Armsmaster finished.

“However, during their autopsies, we also found that lack of a true lobe was shared by Chimaera and Sphinx,” Dragon finished. “The Sphinx’s brain has a similar neural network and enlarged normal lobes that enhanced his sense of smell and allowed his more feline reflexes to function, so it was also thought to be a variant corona. It was only after I examined Chimaera’s brain and, forgive my intrusion but I was ordered to do so, retrieved your records that I realized that same neural net and mild alteration of normal parts of the brain was a commonality between all of you. Not anything that was clearly a gemma in sight.”

I mulled this over. “So...you’re saying that, er, awnsheghlen brain upgrades work differently than native parahumans.”

“That’s what I theorized at first. Then I took a look at the blood samples of both deceased awnsheghlen.”

A viewscreen on the suit’s chest turned on, revealing what looked to be a photo of...some kind of neuron? It looked strange. Almost like the ends had blobs on them.

“This variety of cell was found in high numbers in both Chimaera and Sphinx’s bloodstreams. It is not a nerve cell, because it was found free-floating and and apparently alive in small numbers in both bloodstreams. Those odd shapes on the ends of its telon-sorry, its branches? Those are stem cells, the building blocks of other cells.”

It took me a second to catch on.

“...You think those things are responsible for the mutations awnsheghlen have?”

“At a running guess, yes. They also probably are responsible for the connection that, ahem, wizards have to the Shadow World,” Armsmaster finished. “That dimension is also what probably what gives the, er...let’s call them Azrai neurons for now because I’m awful at Latin and what
name I’d come up with likely doesn't describe them very well once we understand them better, the
energy they need to function. Dragon dissected one of them and she couldn't find a way they
process energy from the bloodstream.”

Miss Militia was nodding now. “That’s...actually very interesting. Any theories on why Chimaera
thought awnsheghlen powers went to their killer?”

“Blood contamination, I would assume,” Dragon said. “The killer absorbs a few...Azrai neurons
from the blood of the dying awnsheghlen, and that shock of energy I saw after Taylor killed the
Sphinx is likely a mechanism Azrai made to ensure they would be jump...started...after......
colonization........”

A very long pause, as we suddenly remembered the other awnsheghlen-killer.

“Pardon my asking, but did a similar visual display occur with Ms. Dallon?”

The rest of us nodded.

The viewscreen quickly flickered to a TRANSMISSION IN PROGRESS screen even as
Armsmaster and Miss Militia reached for their radio.

“Brockton Bay PRT Security,” the voice at the other end said.

“Dragon. Has Panacea left the building?”

“With her father and her sister. It was agreed that she would be more comfortable at home. Why, is
there something wrong?”

“Send a medical team, stat. We believe she may have been exposed to a biological agent.”

“Roger,” the voice said before clicking off.

Please, let them get there before she starts to mutate, I thought. I did not want to know what would
happen if you added mutant neurological cells to a parahuman nervous system, especially when the
parahuman in question was already nearly catatonic.

Chapter End Notes

Mid-Arc Interlude next, then one more chapter and then end of Arc interlude. Plans
subject to change as the writer’s spirit takes me.

Also, I’m crossing over science fiction and fantasy. I pretty much have to give some
(pseudo)scientific common ground between the two. You don’t like it, I refer you to
Expedition to the Barrier Peaks, where this kind of blending of science and fantasy
happened in D&D. Written by Gary Gygax himself. Please excuse any bad biology;
think of it as the result of Dragon only having five minutes to look over the data and
not having a lot of info to go on.

Also, Nex’rik is actually wrong on several counts. He’s forgotten about the existence
of Bards, and doesn’t realize that ley lines flow from sites of natural beauty. He does
know you need ley lines for country-affecting Realm Spells, but he didn’t think that
was relevant to the conversation. Despite what you may think, though, he's right about
wizard powers being genetic in Birthright, they're more like 3.5 Sorcerers there.

(Also, did I write the Protectorate's reaction to discovering magic but believing its
Nex's term for parahumans and related phenomenon correctly? Big sticking point with
my beta, as I couldn't get it across in writing).
Interlude 2: A Fearful Serpent

Chapter Notes

Boy, I’m actually a little relieved that the next logical interlude is Panacea at her depths. She’s not actually that hard a character to write, just turn off your ability to feel positive emotions and add self-loathing.

...Yeah, I’m also glad one quarter of her issues is now dead. I think I’d turn into her if I tried to keep this up for a while.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Interlude 2: A Fearful Serpent

Plant matter wasn't palatable anymore, and the prey was too fast.

That was what the monster had decided. The prey, while abundant, was simply too smart, too quick, too experienced with running.

The pain in the monster's belly was overwhelming, compounded by the fact that the winged creature had eaten plants before that discovery. Oh dear sweet merciful everything, was that a bad plan.

Still, it was probably a good thing for the slithering, squamous beast that the hunger had put survival instinct in charge of the inhuman being's brain.

After all, if that were the case, the still-human mind of Amy Dallon may have had time to think about the strangeness of this place she found herself in, half-mad from starvation, and subsequently panic. Or will herself to starve to death, lost forever in in the everchanging world where illusion and truth were one and the same. Just desserts for a monster like her, one that now looked like what she always was.

As it was, the more primal mind had taken over. What part of Amy not transformed into a predator was cycling through her human life, trying to keep from being absorbed into the desperate, starving beast.

---

17 Hours Before Plane Shift

Staring at nothing, Amy had decided, was a good way to avoid thinking.

Not avoiding thinking about...that, not thinking. Not thinking sounded good right now.

Because if Amy thought, that would mean she would be thinking about either that...or her reaction to that.

Unfortunately, not thinking still allowed it to play back in her mind. Constantly.

She was crying. The monster had made her sister - her beautiful, strong, caring, and utterly pure...
And she was mocking her sister for crying. She was reveling in the fact that her sister was crying. Her brain's pleasure centers were alight like Christmas lights, her adrenaline rushing. Chimaera was getting off on the fact that Vic was crying.

A terrible clarity came over Panacea's mind. A terrible clarity, where there was no fear, no restraint, not even any anger. Only hate.

The forearm's muscles were pulled out into the upper arm, rendering it useless, and allowing her to escape.

She didn't, though. There was a score to settle.

The feel of a windpipe, the rest of the throat ignored. Her hand constricted around it, swimming through her flesh like it was water.

The monster couldn't win. Not in any way.

"Medicines come from poisons in the natural world, you know," said Amy. The only thing preventing her from saying that in the tone of savage joy she felt was that she was too focused on her hate to express emotions.

Now, to get rid of her altogether. She was after Adrasteia's heart, was she?

Panacea appreciated irony.

She looked back up in the monster's face. Yes, show fear. Show that you're just as weak as....

There was no life in her eyes.

Slowly, sanity returned. Slowly, Amy realized what she had just done.

Among the expected emotions, though -shock, guilt, horror- was something that would have been surprising, at least if you weren't Amy Dallon.

Relief.

"Ames?"

The absolute worst possible person to break her not thinking put a hand on her.

"Ames, I'm here. It's going to be okay."

No it won't, the viciousness that was always there snarled at her sister. Amy kept a lid on it though. The person wasn't completely devoured by the monster yet.

Her body interpreted this by turning away and tucking her arms and legs together.

"Amy, please. Just let me talk to you-"

"Go away," she murmured.

Victoria backed off, somewhat. Good. That meant she couldn't be hurt.

This was how it started, wasn't it? She gave into her rage and anger, and because of that, her
control over her power finally slipped. It slipped because she slipped, and destroyed someone out of hatred. More than that, she enjoyed it.

If it was just about Brandish, it would be one thing. But it wasn't - it was about Victoria. The focus of Amy's warped affections. Her incestuous possession.

It was only a matter of time before she turned that into something more than a metaphor. The rock was rolling.

Maybe it was better if-

Panacea almost flinched as the full force of her sister's aura hit her. Just because she was immune to casual use did not mean she couldn't feel the full force of it if she was incredibly emotional. Or trying for maximum.

In this case, it was affection, calm, and protectiveness.

"Amy, I'm sorry it got like this. I miss Mom too, and undergoing a secondary trigger like that, shortly before killing someone has to be utterly horrible."

Amy looked up from the bed for the first time, to her sister's face.

For the second time in recent memory, Victoria was crying. But the expression on her face wasn't pain, not really.

It was fear for Amy.

"But no matter what happens to you, you'll always be my sister."

It took a second for Amy to realize she was crying herself.

In the Shadow World, the beast that was once Panacea tasted the air, desperately seeking food that was slower than the rest.

A bit of the strange smell (the taste of illusion, she had decided) almost seemed alive. Scratch that, it was alive, but no meat. Only the illusion of meat.

Pain.

Very vicious, very physical illusion of meat.

Amy wheeled around to face the threat.

A pair of too-human eyes widened. Not the threat's.

Before her was a warped version of her human form. Older, more attractive, a lot more provocatively dressed. Plants withered about her, and illusionary people broke out in horrifying boils as she passed them. Following dutifully behind the not-her was a not-Victoria, eyes vacant and adoring of her mistress.

"Intruder," the false Amy hissed, warping the plantlife into weapons.

The monstrous Amy drew back, hissing a wordless warning as she coiled defensively.

"You can't run from yourself," the false Amy whispered, standing aside to allow the Victoria clone
to go before her.

The monstrous Amy glanced around, warily looking for any way to escape.

A part of her heard the rest, and reached out to touch the mind of the not-Vic.

Or rather (horrifyingly), an extension of-

Wait.

The beast poked her head out, too confused to be scared. I want her, not her body.

The entire scene rippled before the false Glory Girl vanished.

A weakness. Amy searched the being for more thoughts.

And right there, in the false thoughts around the alien core of the living illusion, was a large flaw.

Our real father is Birdcaged. You can't possibly have ever worked with him. No escape.

The false Amy flickered like a mirage, attempting to counteract the logic in that statement and thus prove she existed.

No dice. In a flash of blue, the being's existence unraveled and its mind dissipated.

The part of Amy not focused on surviving chuckled darkly at the irony.

15 Hours Before Planeshift

Amy supposed she should be happy her sister went to see her before the unconscious Dean. Then again, that could easily be that she couldn't help her sister's boyfriend until she was capable of moving from her bed.

That Victoria had not asked Amy to heal Dean did not occur to her.

Nor did Victoria ask her to wait with her for him to come out of his unconscious state after she was done repairing the physical damage to the Wards, but that was to be expected.

Absolutely nobody asked her to heal the shapeshifter currently being given a thorough psychological evaluation, as per Master/Stranger protocols, either. He seemed rather...amused.

And very strange, biologically speaking. Almost like his entire body was a chameleon, even down to his bone structure. He even had a pair of non-functional female genitals hidden in his abdomen, presumably for imitating the other gender.

But what mind would give rise to such a species (Amy doubted that kind of biology could be anything but created deliberately) was a mystery for another time.

Slowly, the boy's eyes opened, before breaking into a pained grin. "Hey Vic...didn't know you were actually an angel..."

Victoria said nothing, only cracked a grin before looking away.

As much as it pained Amy to admit it, Dean deserved his superhero name. His eyes suddenly grew aware with alarm. "Vic? Something wrong?"
"I….she…" Victoria began to cry.

*Our mom is dead. Chimaera's monsters got her,* Panacea thought.

Then she thought *where's that buzzing noise coming from?*

Gallant looked utterly shocked. "Oh God. Oh God. She's-I'm so sorry."

"About the bu-" Amy began, stupidly. Not so stupidly she finished that thought, but…

How did Dean know? His empathy wasn't that strong.

Victoria didn't seem to realize this though, instead going into a full wail of sorrow before collapsing into her boyfriend's chest.

Not wanting to upset Dean and thus her sister with her jealousy, Amy respectfully left.

And walked into a wall of chatter, it seemed like.

*She's been crying all day.*

*Poor girl. Both of them*

*I liked Brandish, too.*

*I wonder when dinner is.*

Rage blossomed in Amy's heart. She spun around to the source of the last voice.

"Victoria just lost her mother, and you're worried about...lunch?"

An old, infirm man, his mind lost to age, whimpered and drew back. His nurse was nearly as startled.

"Oh God...I didn't mean…"

The medic stepped back before running off, ashamed of herself.

It was only a few minutes later she realized that she never actually heard the voices. Not with her ears, at any rate.

That same few minutes later, an unfortunate doctor passing by her room suddenly started to believe in ghosts. He swore he heard an insane laugh, the kind that a broken mind mistakes for crying, even though no one else did.

As if she wasn't already a monster, now she was *the Simurgh.*

---

Back to the search. Amy tasted the air again.

Yes, that was definitely meat. Smelled of civilization. Good. Lots of prey there.

The monster slithered off, following her tongue.

A floating river apparently took offense at this at attempted to smother her, flowing around her in a white tide of rapid waters and beginning to constrict, a slow-motion splash.
The monster hissed a little at this, before taking to the skies, the river flooding nothing but empty space.

Her mind immediately went elsewhere. Perhaps her poison with a little flesh shaping could make it quick?

---

10 Hours Before Plane Shift

"Sis! Sis you okay!?" Almost immediately the door broke open, wood spraying everywhere, revealing Victoria.

"Fine! Fine...just a stupid nightmare…" Normally Amy would have followed up that plead with a silent prayer for her sister to not notice she was standing up and not the bed. But caution about her newfound telepathy won out.

Victoria paused for a moment, full wakefulness returning to her. One could hear the cogs in her mind restarting.

"...Do you want to sleep with me? Like we used to?" she asked, sounding exactly as awkward as the question did.

Internally, the healer weighed the benefits and faults of this. On the one hand, this probably would make her feel a lot safer when she really, really needed it. On the other, it wouldn't exactly be innocent anymore, and Vic might pick up on that. More importantly, Amy wasn't exactly sure when her...upgrades would end, and Vic would feel those if they grew in while touching her.

"No...no...I'm okay. We'll talk about it in the morning..."

Victoria looked rather skeptical about that, "O-kayyy...If you ever change your mind, the door's open." A pause. "For the next week or so, I don't know how quick the repairmen are."

Both sisters tried to laugh at the lame joke before Vic went back to her own room.

As soon as she heard the other Dallon's door close, Amy darted into the bathroom and shut the door to prevent light from escaping.

Light on. Mouth open.

She tried not to scream again.

Yes, those were fangs. Long snake fangs that otherwise could be retracted and hidden. On a whim, Amy urged them to see if they had what snakes were known for.

There was a brief squeezing sensation at the roof of her mouth, and clear fluid leaked from them. Her ability to analyze biology immediately set to work as the venom stopped being a part of her body. Neurotoxin, deadly and mercifully quick.

Amy though back to the tongues of lighting that licked her. Chimaera's revenge on her killer, she guessed. The person who slew the monster was fated to become exactly like her. A quick accounting of her own cells proved it - she could sense the weird, stem cell-covered neurons she had felt in the shapeshifter and Adrasteia being produced from a colony in her heart, a mass of dividing and mingling mutant cells that even now were working on reshaping the flesh shaper.

By all rights, she should have turned herself in, right then and there. But that would likely result in
her being locked away, unable to heal people. Unacceptable.

So she started planning on how to conceal her mutations as long as possible. She willed the fangs to retract...

Which would cause her to look like she was missing her top canines. Damn. Well, she could always fake them being knocked out-

An itch on her shoulder. Already dreading, she adjusted her gown-

Huh. Those rainbow feathers were actually kind of pretty.

So were the blue scales under them.

But they were still feathers and scales.

Numbly, Amy went back to her bed, put her head under the pillow, and screamed as silently as she could.

Not here.

Food was not here.

Amy's tongue told her food was here, but she neither saw nor touched food. If anything, this part of not-Earth was rather barren. Even of plant life.

A strangely human cry of frustration and despair came from the monster, who buried her head in the ground.

What was she going to do now? She didn't have enough calories for another day-

Wait. The smell of the earth...the smell wasn't like this not-Earth…

On a whim, the monster nuzzled the ground away, revealing…

Blue. The same blue she saw when she crossed here.

The smell was coming from the blue.

Silently thanking whatever gods were listening, Amy willed herself to push through the wall again, and with a flash of blue, she was gone.

2 Minutes Before Planeshift

In retrospect, this should have been obvious.

"Ms. Dallon? Ms. Amy Dallon? We don't want to hurt you, just please come out the door."

She didn't deserve to be happy, even if it was on a time limit before she looked (and probably acted) more like a feathery snake than a human.

"Ms. Dallon! We believe you've been exposed to a biological agent even your power can't fight off…"

Amy tuned out the PRT agents knocking on the room door. It would have been nice though. She
had read somewhere that grief bought families closer together. Would be nice for Mark to not be a
complete stranger to her anymore.

Oh well. Nothing to do except stare at nothing until they came through.

"...I'm sorry, but you can't-"

"No, no, please let me try, she's my sis, she'll listen to me."

The stare was broken as her heart stopped.

"We're afraid you might be exposed-"

"I have a suit, too! I'll just go in, calm her down and-"

Amy's perception of time slowed.

If Victoria came in here, she would see the growing feathers, now on both arms. Her fangs were
extending from agitation.

In other words, Victoria would see a monster. And Amy knew how her sis reacted to monsters. See
Adrasteia.

She couldn't know.

"Okay, Ames? I'm going to come in there in five..."

But the PRT was surrounding the house, she couldn't get out through the window.

"Four...three..."

Nowhere to hide in here, nothing within reach to hide the feathers.

"Two..."

Thus she pushed up against the wall further, feeling it stretch-

Huh?

"One!"

A sensation of something being torn, a flash of blue light, and-

She was hallucinating.

There was no way that waterfall could be flowing up as well as down. Or there be a waterfall there.
Much less the cliff's face be curved in an elliptic, non-Euclidean slope and still seem natural.

Slowly, she began to laugh, helplessly. Well, if this was her delusion, at least she didn't have to
deal with Victoria's reaction. Actually, this place looked kind of nice-

Her blood was on fire. It wasn't painful yet but she could feel the mutant neuron-like cells suddenly
start to divide exponentially. One is two is four is sixteen...

Pain.

Bones shifted, organs reconfigured, entirely new muscles were constructed by the mutant cells,
and Amy barely registered the tearing of her undershirt as she expanded.

A scream of pain that gradually deepened into a pained roar. Arms developing extra joints and losing fingers. Legs fusing.

After what felt like millenia, the pain subsided. It took a second before Amy registered the agonized, deep breaths were her own.

A second later, her stomach started screaming at her as her new muscles began to break down. A quick examination of her new biology told her why - her transformation took almost every free floating calorie in her body to complete. It was simply too fast for her biology to balance out with cravings and such.

She needed to replace those calories. And quickly.

And so did Amy's mind become beastial as well. Her brain decided that there were more pressing matters than thought.

If Amy had human vocal chords, she would have laughed in relief. As it was, she settled for roaring in triumph.

The two-legged animals screamed and ran. No matter, she was fast and strong.

Right in front of her, in fact, was an entire row of prey, all neatly arranged and huddled together.

Why, one of the two-legs was holding out its hand! Prey being presented to her!

Salivating in a very un-reptilian manner, Amy lunged.

In retrospect, Sheldon Bixby decided, taking a job at a supermarket was a bad plan. Supermarkets were in the Top Ten Favorite Supervillain Targets anyway, right after McMansions and the Department of Motor Vehicles office. He honestly thought that was a perk, given how the monotony of unemployment and odd jobs could be more easily broken.

That was before the giant fucking snake grabbed the roast chicken out of his hand, tore open the packaging with its fangs, gulped it down whole, and began to repeat the process with everything else in the meat section, favoring whatever fatty cuts were there. And birds, for some reason.

And knocking down the aisles with a pair of absolutely enormous wings.

Congratulating himself on his quick thinking in giving the snake the chicken, Bixby quietly ran towards the employee exit. If he got out in the confusion, maybe he wouldn't have to clean-

"Bixby, it's safe in my office! C'mon man!" A strong arm grabbed him around the shoulder.

And with that, all of Bixby's (petty) hopes and dreams were dashed by a well-intentioned boss.

So much stupid prey. Unmoving prey. Fresh prey.

Amy had found Paradise.

Yes, those shells were annoying, but so much meat awaited her underneath them! Juicy meat, high-calorie meat…life-saving meat…
Amy could not be happier in this state. Already the pain was subsiding, her mind was clearing, she could swear her scales were developing a healthier...shine…

Scales?

The beast receded to the depth's of Amy's mind as she remembered exactly what had happened over the past day or so. Comprehended exactly what she had become.

Slowly, dreading, the great serpent turned her power upon her own cells once again, surveying how inhuman her body became.

Even her cells were only recognizable as human due to the genetic code twining through each of them.

A piteous cry came from the snake before it vanished the same way it came - in an explosion of blue light.

If one was passing by the north end of the feature that gave Brockton Bay its name, one would have heard a splash. This was not too strange, given the rather large fish the Tinker Benthos had seeded the bay with during his "vacation" from Australia a couple years before (he was not a fan of certain oil companies whose tankers were parked there at the time). Nor would one pay that much attention to it, as the fish only ate toxic chemicals. This resulted in about the only advantage Brockton Bay had over other cities in scenery.

The sound of quiet sobbing that followed as Amy's reflection returned to the smooth waters was much less noticeable.

Slowly, the winged serpent curled up under her bridge in a miserable coil, despite her best efforts at remaining straight. At least she still seemed warm-blooded from looking at her metabolic processes, so she wouldn't hibernate in the cold winter air. Just freeze.

Now what was she going to do?

The homeless man she had inadvertently scared off proved it; she was a monster now. A creature out of myth, fit for a dashing hero to slay. Nobody would want her help like this. Victoria would more likely believe she had eaten her human form rather than become this...thing.

And the psychological effects! Chimaera could have been a perfectly sane, normal individual before she became...that. With the darkness in her own genes, who was to say Amy wouldn't become worse? Especially given what her power was truly capable of?

Staring at the water, Amy's stomach lurched as she realized another way to protect the world from herself.

The only way, before Chimaera's madness made her enjoy the screams and suffering.

Slowly, hesitantly, the snake slithered into the sea.

….Peaceful. The water was clean, and peaceful.

Amy focused on the cold, purifying sense of the water. Actually, no, she wasn't that cold. Scales protected her warmth, it seemed.
Her eyes also weren't nearly as sensitive as they were as a human. Not unlike those of a water moccasin or sea snake, she guessed. Her wings obviously weren't adapted to swimming, but she was...buoyant enough.

Not that it mattered.

Hesitantly, Amy began to try and exhale. Attempting to trick her survival instinct, she embraced the sense of the water….

The feeling of fish swimming by…

The rocky seabed….

The large, scaly thing that brushed her wing….

…the fuck?

Amy was snapped out of her trance, just in time to see the green jaws that opened like an ivory flower-

The water fell away as a screaming medic attempted to instinctively take to the air-

And choked on the water. The jaws caught her in a tight hold…

Amy waited for the pain to begin.

And waited.

And waited.

…No, these teeth held her gingerly, being careful to not cut.

Ah, okay. So she was being taken to feed the owner's young then, probably. Alive.

She passed out. Her last thought was realizing she probably could have shaped her way out.

Shit.

Amy wasn't expecting to come to at all, much less on something comfy.

For a moment, Amy almost went into delirious joy about that all being a bad dream. She laugh-roared in relief as she lifted her wings in celebration.

Wait. Fuck.

At least she was safe. If in a rather lot of pain. From the feeling of the "bed," it actually seemed like a bunch of them had been thrown together with pillows haphazardly.

As her eyes adjusted, Amy saw she had been right in this guess. Then her gaze was drawn to the rest of the room.

This place was a salvager's paradise. Bits of sunken ships and various waterlogged items covered the walls of the cave, each lovingly sorted and displayed. In one corner, various items from wrecked bridges. In another, a stack of shipping containers, with their contents.

"So, the lass finally awakes."
Startled, Amy spun to face the source of the accented, deep voice.

There was a *clang* as she hit one of the bulkheads on display in her efforts to fly back.

An enormous sea serpent, straight out of a medieval map (specifically the part labeled "Here Be Dragons") looked down upon her. Mottled emerald and sapphire covered its hide, giving it the air of the primal majesty of nature. Completing the regal appearance was a fan-like fin that ran down its back like a crown. Two great eyes, brimming with intellect, bore into her.

Amy, of course, did not notice the beauty of the beast. She was too busy watching her life flash before her eyes while attempting to shrink by coiling tight enough.

"Oi, calm yourself, Miss! I mean ye no harm."

Amy's thought process (*I'm dead. I'm deadImdeaddead died I'm dead*) came to a screeching halt.

…And was male, given the sound of its - uh, his - voice.

Slowly, Amy's head poked itself out of her coil. She tried to speak, only for it to come out as a terrified hiss. No dice.

...Except that illusionary *thing* had heard her, didn't it? Um, how did she speak then, how did she mind-speak to Gallant…

**Please don't eat me,** she thought, willing her captor (?) to hear her. Short and to the point.

There was a buzzing sound in her mind as the monster chuckled. "Eh, if we be speakin' of sapient prey, I not be one to go for yer planet's. Given the kinds of things ye eat I be needn' ipecac if I be not unloadin' bilge from both aft and bow from both directions, if ye get me point." A laugh.

**My...planet? ...Wait.** Amy uncoiled and slithered out. **You're...one of them, aren't you? An...awnsheghlen?**

"I not be an awnsheghlien, on the basis I be neither an adjective nor multiple people. The proper term be awnshegh, and that I be. As are ye now, Miss."

A brief pause. Then: **Oh.**

It was blatantly obvious, in retrospect. Chimaera had talked a good game about taking her powers through strength, and Amy had only started noticing the changes after Chimaera's death. Given how Adrasteia mutated after killing another apparent awnshegh, it only made sense that she now had Chimaera's power.

Both serpents sat silently for a second, before Amy politely coughed. **Um, Amy Dallon, alias Panacea.**

"Garrilien Suliere, and I also be known as the Seadrake. But if the lass would be so kind to call me Garril instead, would ye?"

**Pleasure to meet you.** Another pause, as Amy considered her words. **Er, what were you doing in that wharf, anyway?**

"Huntin'. The fish there be giant. Good eatin'."
Another pause. How do you speak to someone who just stopped your suicide?

Eventually, Garril broke the silence. "Er...pardon me askin', but was there any reason you decided to inhale the ocean? I be havin' both gills and lungs, but is there any reason ye be testin' to see if ye have them ye self?"

_He's playing dumb_, Amy realized. She didn't need her mind reading for that. _I...don't want to talk about it._

"Okay, no need to be rushin'."

A thought struck Amy. **Um, were you...friends with...her?**

Garril caught on to who "she" was immediately. "By the Abyss and the Winter Witch, _no!_ The Chimaera's death be a service to the universe, that it be!"

**Okay...any reason you're here instead of...your own world?**

"...Following my crewmates. But I be left to my collection in this cave, for the moment. It be gettin' rather lonely at times."

Yes, Amy supposed. That did sound kind of-

Wait, crewmates? **There are other awnsheghlen?**

"Ye be pronouncin' it wrong. Well, not _pronouncin'_, but the way you _think_ it be pronounced...In any case, it's _awnsheghlien_, draw out the 'e' sound. But yes. Not the Sphinx, but I be havin' other refugees of Cerilia with me as well."

One could almost hear the _tick-tick-tick_ of gears going off in Amy's skull. **...Can you introduce me?**

Garril was silent for a few seconds as he looked Amy up and down. "...Ye be lookin' for a place to go after ye grew scales and wings, ye be?"

Amy looked extremely downcast. **Where else is there?**

"I may be alone in me cave, but I be no hermit. I know ye have a family to go back to."

Irrational anger bloomed in Amy's chest. **Oh yeah, because _Victoria_ is going to be _so thrilled_ upon learning the fact her sister's a monster! Everyone is going to be _so happy_ to be healed by the _giant snake_! No, I think I'll slum it with the monsters, thank you! At least I don't have to pretend that everything's fine!**

The fury abated, and Amy saw Garril's face suddenly become an all too human expression of pain. **Oh God, I didn't mean that.**

"Yes, ye did."

...**I'll make it up to you somehow, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking straight-**

"Ye weren't callin' _me_ a monster, I ken, though." The great sea beast looked thoughtful. "And somehow, I be doubtin' ye got that opinion of ye self from a few scales and parrot feathers. There
be somethin' you wish to speak of, lass?"

...No. *Can't show weakness, a heroine showing weakness unloads that weakness on others...*

"Like, for example, not installin' a filter between telepathy an' ye private thoughts?"

Guh. Telepathy willed off.

"Come now, miss. I ain't havin' any reason or ability to spread nasty rumors about ye on the mainland. Ye have an ear with me."

Amy glanced around, trying to think. On the one hand, she was about to load her problems on a stranger...

But on the other, there was only one problem he would judge, because everyone judged that.

It would be a dark judgement, but she needed to let all of this go before it made her try and kill herself again.

...Did you know I'm adopted?

"So, ye think yer blood family makes ye a villain."

Amy nodded, having long since discovered her new body still had tear ducts.

"And ye think ye are doomed to become even worse than Lady-Talks-Like-A-Drunken-Rat."

At some point, Garril had climbed onto the cave shore, listening intently. He had leveled his head with Amy's body, laying it on the ground.

"...I got nothin'. Sera be hit by your afterbirth, ye life sucks more than a starvin' whirlpool. Sera be the goddess of luck, by the way."

**You know, I wouldn't be surprised. Frankly it would explain...everything!** She laughed, a bitter, hollow sound that was made even more so by the hissing under it. **And you know? Even the one fucking thing that makes it all better is tainted too! You know my sister? Victoria? Glory Girl? The one person in my entire family who gives a rat's ass if I live or die? You know how this rotted, genetically cursed brain of mine interprets that!?**

"I already be dreadin' the answer."

**Picture this: A lonely, neglected girl, saved by a blonde bombshell and nursed back to something resembling happiness. Scene from a tween romance, or...?**

It took a second for Garril to catch on. "Oh. **Ohhhh.**"

**The only reason it isn't fucking incest is because I'm not her blood sibling! I'm just a warped, sick...twisted...**

Amy collapsed to the ground.

...broken....

Then sobbed into it.
There was nothing except Amy crying into the ground for a minute or two.

Her misery was interrupted by Garril nuzzling her.

"Oy, give blame where it be due."

She shot up. Sorry?

"If ye need to hate someone for the state of ye mind, blame Carol! From the sound of it she have a heart made of stone and arctic ice! Ye ain't to blame for the troubles in ye life."

For a moment, Amy felt that rage blossom in her heart again…

Then realized that she had thought the same exact thing about her adopted "mother" at times. Really, she was more mad for Victoria.

I...guess…

"And look here miss - when faced with a bunch of fresh long pork and gods know how stale meat, which did ye go for alone, even when ye were faced with a regular idiot literally servin' ye a platter and your mind be that of a hungry wolf?"

Amy nodded. Actually…

"So, ye ain't inherently a killer. Also, I ken ye may have gotten lucky with the awnshegh mutation lottery."

Her mind skipped a thought. Er, what?

"Well, given the Chimaera could make herself look like an elf…"

...It was worth a shot. Um, before I try that, though…? A wing gestured away from her.

"Right, no costume. Got it." Garril looked away and closed his eyes.

Trying not to get her hopes up, Amy willed herself back into her human form.

Almost immediately, she shrank. Her left lung reinflated and became useful once more, her tongue's fork fused, and her organs un-staggered. The thymus gland migrated from above her heart to its place between her lungs, her lymph nodes reappeared, and her skeleton restructured itself. Fingers separated from the ends of her wings as they compressed and reabsorbed feathers.

When she opened her eyes, she was once again a human girl, lying face down on the surface of the cave's shore.

...No, actually, her ears were pointy and her build was a bit more willowy. Had to work on that, see if being a plain human was possible..

But she had hands once more...and vocal chords!

Rolling over, she laughed. Finally, fucking finally, things weren't as bad as they - Holy shit it was cold.

"I-It worked," she shivered.
And almost instantly, she willed herself back to being a winged snake. Odd, that was actually a little easier to will than shifting out of that form. Oh well.

Garril looked back, smiling impishly. "Not too warm, is it?"

Amy shook her head as she rolled back over on her belly.

Then, something occurred to her. **Why don't you do that? It'd be less frightening. Or are you missing clothes?**

She chuckled. Garril didn't.

The laugh died. **You can't, can you?**

"Not all of us be so lucky to pretend to be normal for a while, no. Not without help." He shook his head. "But what is done be done. If you want, I can take ye back to the mainland, or at least as far as I can without givin' myself away. Less potential wannabe monster killers, that way. Ye can fly the rest, can't ye?"

**I can.** Amy winged on top of the Seadrake's back. **And thanks for helping me snap out of that.**

"You be welcome," he said as he slithered to the sea. "Just...pay a visit, once in a while? It gets lonely out here and I like to know what be on the mainland."

**Sure!**

As the two swam out back to Brockton Bay, Amy suddenly realized she could have read his mind, too.

But then again, he didn't seem untrustworthy enough to violate his privacy like that, and it seemed terribly rude otherwise.

Oh well.

The amount of gloom hanging over the Dallon house was palpable. Even looking at it spoiled the good mood Amy was in. She almost lost her nerve right then and there, but she shook it off. Even if she could do it tomorrow, she couldn't torture her sister like this.

Clutching her coat tight, Amy quietly positioned the ladder that led to Victoria's window, and climbed up.

Even looking in, Amy could tell her sister was in a bad shape. Several of her things were broken, the normally immaculate bed was in disarray, and Victoria herself was clutching a pillow for dear life.

"...Vic?" Amy spoke hesitantly.

No response.

"Vic, I'm here."

A small twitch. Victoria probably thought she was still dreaming.

Hoo boy. Bracing herself for her sister's reaction, Amy pushed the window just enough to trigger
the burglar alarm.

The siren blared, causing the startled blonde to fall out of her bed. Her aura started to activate again as she jumped to her feet, terrified and angry…

…Then she saw who triggered it.

"...Ames?"

Amy said nothing, just smiled apologetically.

"YOU BITCH!"

There was the sound of shattering glass as the elder Dallon tackled her sister through the window.

"YOU’VE BEEN GONE FOR A DAY WE’VE BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU HOW COULD YOU JUST RUN AWAY OH GOD NEVER DO THAT AGAIN OH GOD I MISSED YOU..."

Slowly, the Dallons lowered as Victoria regained control of her emotions, setting them both on the ground.

"Oh God Amy...don't scare me like that...Thank God you're safe...why are you naked?"

Victoria stood back, looking confused at the complete lack of anything under Amy's trenchcoat.

"It was the best I could scrounge."

The blonde rolled this around in her head. "Did someone...take...your clothes?"

"No, actually. They were torn. By me."

Confusion.

"Vic, please don't freak out, but...I got something, from Chimaera."

"Hey, hey, don't worry if you're sick there are other healers-"

"No, I mean a power. Victoria...please don't be scared."

The trenchcoat fell.

Victoria was knocked back by the growing body of her sister.

She fell over in shock.

...Surprise, Amy said glumly. This was the part where Victoria would run away and hate her forever damn it why she'd have to get her hopes up-

A strangled hiss came from the winged snake as her sister affixed herself right around her midsection

"Oh God. Ames...I'm so sorry. This has to be horrifying…"

And you're on my lung. Please stop, Amy said, even her telepathy sounding strained.

"Oh." Victoria flew back, allowing her sister to breathe.
A second passed as Amy regained her ability to breathe.

"...So," Victoria said, utterly deadpan. "Does this mean we can finally get a sun room?"

It took a second for Amy to get that joke.

Both sisters began to laugh uproariously.

Even the well-intentioned light grenade from her adopted father when he finally came out did nothing to spoil Amy's mood. Finally, things were looking up.

One-hundred eleven, one-hundred twelve...ah, perfect.

Garril shoved the newest pieces of his collection of ship wheels into place. Looked nicer when things were even and all. He was mildly obsessive compulsive in that respect.

Now, to arrange the containers.

"What the Hells was that!?"

And, here comes the pain.

Garril swiveled around to face the otherwise functionally mute source of the synthesized voice. "Givin' the lass a shoulder to cry on, I think. Not somethin' the baatezu are particular fans of, I ken."

There was a brief pause as Jersha Fjoldan, also known as the Siren, typed furiously on her speaking keyboard. "Don't joke with me, Gerril! You and I know perfectly well what she's going back to!"

"This again?" If Gerril had a hand, he would have brought it to his face. "Look at it this way, Jeru. We be gettin' a new way to spy on both our rivals, keep up to date with both our lil' sis's, and save a girl from offin' herself down the line. I don't ken the Proclamation has the story of what happens to the Fearful Serpent after it's all over and done with. Or even if she be the Fearful Serpent after all."

"That doesn't excuse sending her back to a FUCKING SATYR!"

The planar slang for an emotional abuser using mental powers echoed through the cave, no passion lost in the transition from thought to speaker.

Sighing, Gerril affixed his eyes on his fellow awnshegh. "Look. Vic ain't comprehendin' she bleeds her aura like that. It sounds like I'm tryin' to justify other satyrs, and believe ye me I get a bad taste from those words alone."

He leaned a little closer. "But even if that be the case - tell me, what is more likely to stop her offin' herself? Being shown her sister will love her forever no matter what happens, or told that she be a sadistic egomaniac who loves no one but herself?"

A pause before Jeru reluctantly started typing again. "I still hate it."

"So be I. But even she be wantin' to be free from that trick of her sis. As soon as the Magian lets us be public, I be going to get someone to repair her mind so she can live with herself."

Jeru grumbled, but pulled on the reins of her griffon anyway, taking off.

That out of the way, Gerril went back to much more pressing business.
Hm, the red container did clash a tad….

Chapter End Notes

Behold. The voice of sanity and and compassion in Worm: The bad guys.

(of course, both these guys are TN, so not really bad guys…)

The thing Amy fought in the Shadow World was a seemer, a sort of autoimmune system against mortal intruders. Take the form of a person’s worst fear.

And Amy’s become a coatl, so…not a very monstrous monster in any sense of the term.
For the second time in three days, I found myself in Piggot’s office for reasons I didn’t enjoy one bit.

In this case, though, it had little to do with me. Not directly, anyway.

“...Glenn is going to hate this.”

Those were my first words upon seeing the blue snake uncoil from where Amy was a second before on the video.

Naturally, the reason why I was there, Nex’rik (or Nex as we had come to nickname him) was a little confused by this. “Who?”

“The Head of Image.”

“Oh.” This understanding lasted for a second before he became even more confused. “Er, is there some religious role I’m not aware of or-”

Apparently not wanting to explain the concept of a PR department to the doppleganger, Armsmaster and Miss Militia simultaneously furrowed their brows, furiously thinking at the telepath.

“...Ah. Wow, you people care too much about your reputation.”

“Reputation is politics, and politics is everything, Mr. Nex’rik,” Piggot replied. “And actually, we asked you up here because we desire your knowledge on what she’s become.”

He rose an eyebrow. “Er, an awnshegh. Obviously. Why was I needed again - Oh, that’s why. Personality effects. I assume my savior is there to ensure I don’t lie?”

“Got it in one,” I replied.

“Nice to have an employer with some common sense,” he replied. “Always annoying when people expect the race of spies for hire to be entirely trustworthy, code of the mercenary besides. And people wonder why overlords tend to self-destruct.” He pulled up a chair.

“Okay - Do you prefer Adrasteia or Taylor, actually?”
“Taylor out of costume,” I replied.

“Taylor, have you noticed being more...assertive, lately? More cynical?”

...No point in lying to the mind reader. “Yes, and yes. I’ve also noticed I’ve been, well...I wouldn’t
say angrier, but definitely more willing to yell at people. And a bit more social, actually.”

I noticed Piggot wincing out of the corner of my eye. She was not going to like this, especially
given what I gathered from her remark about experiencing Nilbog firsthand.

“Well, that’s due to something all divine blooded have, but is inflamed in awnsheghlien; a
territorial instinct. Your mind instinctively looks for ways to carve out a little bit of the world for
yourself and become the boss of your home. In animals that would be biting people, and pissing on
the borders, but Azrai understood his children’s territory would be societies. So he made you all
natural politicians.”

Two things occurred to me.

One: We had been pronouncing that word wrong all this time. Guess Chimaera wasn’t as erudite
and a figure of nobility as she thought she was. Why was I not surprised?

Second: That...answered my question, actually. Guess I was turning into Otto von Bismark the
Wizard. Also explained why Chimaera and Sphinx went nuts - giving territorial aggression and
social adroitness to people who weren’t nice to begin with sounded like a recipe for megalomania.

Sort of like how I was becoming more aggressive, controlling, and cynical about my social life.

Felt...nice, actually.

On the one hand, my cells were doing tricks with my mind, making me different from pre-
Adrasteia Taylor Hebert. On the other...the parts I was losing weren’t really the parts I missed. I
was fairly pretty apart from the monstrous bits, I wasn’t crippled by fear of social interaction any
more, I had friends, people respected me as a hero...

Honestly, apart from my tendency to blow up at people now, I felt...happy. Blessed.

I suddenly understood why both villainous awnsheghlien I met were narcissists in the extreme. I
made a note to tell my team to slap me if I started being too egotistical about my awesomeness.

Poor Piggot, on the other hand, actually twitched a little. “Any lies in that sentiment?”

“Detector says no,” Armsmaster remarked.

“Medusas say no, and before you leap on me keep in mind, I’d say he lied if I wanted to sneak my
newfound egomania under you.”

“Understood. You may return to your quarters, Nex’rik.”

“Thanks for letting me out. And telling me who is apparently creating my Protectorate identity.”

With that, Nex left with his escort.
The clock ticked in silence while the bomb counted down. Armsmaster was the detonator.

“So, the girl we have recently discovered to be able to reshape biology entirely, whether due to second trigger or loss of moral restraint, is now also a biologically engineered mutant with a carnivorous diet and a noted tendency towards aggression and dominance of a local area. She also has an instinctive understanding of large-scale social phenomenon and skill at manipulating it to her own benefit. There is also a degree of genetic memory from her ultimate progenitor that promotes behaving in more ambitious and selfish manner. And she has an ability most often associated with the most intelligent and vicious Endbringer.” He cradled his head. “For the record, I currently despise all life, my own among them.”

A grunt of affirmation from Miss Militia, Piggot, and me.

There was a very long pause. Then Piggot cleared her throat.

“We cannot let news of this escape. We already are going to have enough troubles as is with news of Ms. Dallon’s metamorphosis and her newfound telepathic abilities. Do not tell a single individual, do not keep records alluding to this, do not discuss this amongst yourselves unless you are absolutely certain of privacy. Not without confirmation from my superiors.”

A long pause, before we all reluctantly said our affirmatives.

Knowing Amy was kin to the Simurgh in multiple ways - blue, winged, telepathic, and actually rather beautiful in her serpentine form - was enough of a disaster as it was. That, and the fact that we were both touched by cells from an Earth so strange it might as well be an alien planet.

To know she, and me, were now both geared towards conquest and masterminding plots to do so? Ha, ha, no. Maybe once we found our equilibriums between what Azrai’s idea of what we should be and superheroics, but until then? Nope.

“Right then,” Piggot finished. “I am going to inform Nex’rik of this, and ask Miss Dallon to replace my kidneys and heal my heart. I do not wish the Chimaera fiasco to occur again. After that, I will make preparations for activating the 23rd Platoon’s device when the ambassador arrives, and finish some paperwork (lie).”

As all capes left, I snuck a sin-scent off Piggot to figure out what she actually planned on under the lie.

*Plans to use kidneys to enjoy being able to be safely drunk again.*

Ah. No blame from me.

Truth is, I was actually somewhat relieved that Panacea had turned into a winged snake.

Vista needed something like that to happen.

“Please?”

No.
“Pretty please?”

No.

“Just once?”

No...okay, once.

“Yes!” And with that, Vista was now on Amy’s…midsection, I guessed. Ophidian anatomy was not my strength.

In other words, Missy was back to something resembling normal. Far better than yesterday.

Yesterday would be the reason I was calling her Vista instead of Missy in my mind. She asked to be called that, after all.

That couldn’t have been healthy.

Truth is, I don’t think either Missy or Dennis quite realized how lethal being a superhero could be until Chimaera’s attack. At least Dennis didn’t. Missy was just, well, extremely glum over the past couple days, while Dennis...I didn’t recognize him.

Speaking of whom...

“Any comments from the peanut gallery, Dennis?”

The tone came out a little more desperately than it should.

The redhead looked up. “Unfortunately, given how Missy is thirteen, any comments about riding a giant snake are both creepy and likely to put me on a rather dubious list. So no.”

Both he and I tried to laugh at that, before he went back to staring at his knees.

“...So, do you think Amy will enjoy being on the Atkins diet?”

“Possibly.”

No other reaction.

After a day of this, I was finally ready to stop beating around the bush.

“None of what happened was your fault,” I blurted out.

Smooth, Taylor. Real smooth.

He jerked up, looking confused before comprehending.

Then angry.

“Yeah, I guessed,” he growled. So not only did I not help, I patronized him. I really needed to ask Dean how he managed to be the team’s emotional rock.
“Okay, okay, bad opening line,” I backpedaled. “Look, I’ve been really worried about you over the last day and—”

“No, it’s okay,” he said, calming down. “I just heard the same thing from Dean yesterday, and...really, it’s not survivor guilt. I get why you think that, but...it’s not worth talking about.”

...Well, this wouldn’t do.

I pulled up a chair, and sat in it in front of him.

“Dennis, I am going to put this bluntly. What you’re doing right now? Not a good plan. You can’t heal a wound by trying to ignore it, because you can’t. You’re just letting it fester.”

He was actually smirking now. “I didn’t know the PRT had Changer shrinks, doctor. Where’s the real Taylor?”

I suppressed a laugh, more in relief than anything. “Right here. This right here is my bad imitation of Dr. Yamada, only better than the original in that the Pig can’t subpoena my memories.”

“I wouldn’t put it past her.” His smirk fell. “...Okay, maybe it is kind of survivor guilt, but it’s not because I think any of us deserve the blame. It’s Piggy being incapable of asking our friendly neighborhood viper for help and her goon squad for being incapable of making their own decisions. But...”

He sighed.

“I...there’s other Chimaeras out there. We fragged one, but...the Endbringers, the S9? They’re still out there. Probably always will be out there.”

“So tell me...” he said, looking up. “What kind of difference can we make if we lost fifty people and two capes to one psychopath, when there’s worse out there?”

...Okay, now I was depressed. Damn you, Dennis, for your all-too-accurate cynicism.

But no, he needed strength right now.

“...We don’t know yet.”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying, we won’t know until we try,” I said, rolling the little speech I had internally written for this precise kind of pessimism. “We’re just the Wards of an incredibly shitty city where things were going wrong long before Scion showed up. Compared to the rest of the first world, we drew the crap hand. If we could, we would probably fold and try again with a nicer city.”

“But the reason Brockton Bay is so crappy? Nobody really tried. Not Mayor Wilkinson when the Pinkertons set up shop here, not Director MacLeod when the PRT opened its office, not the people when the McClusky-Naegi act came along. The closest thing we had was Benthos seeding the bay, and all we get is water it’s possible to swim in without skin peeling off. And we’re stuck with the mess of generations.”
I leaned forward. “So, life sucks for us. But if we try, we may in fact prove the whole damn history up till now was the control experiment. And if not, we can at least laugh at history and say we’re better than all of them, because we at least tried.” A thought. “So long as we aren’t too busy focusing on being irradiated to death, drowning in a wave, or being turned into brainwashed slaves to remember that.”

He finally cracked a grin. “You forgot being slashed by extend-a-knives, being torn apart by monochrome claws, wondering when the faceless cyborg is going to get us, made into horrifying experiments, burninated, or eaten by a blob of sadomasochism and mutation.”

“I’m leaving it to one of them possibly dying before they come here. There could be one whose entire power is to turn people inside out by the time they get here too. I haven’t thought of a descriptor for that horrible death yet.”

Dennis chuckled.

“Seriously, you and Dean should trade notes. Maybe you could start your own psychology firm someday - Dr. Knight and Dr. Demon, Police Psychiatrists.”

“We can even have a tagline! ‘Tell us about your day…or it’s off to solitary with you.’”

“Oh, what about the badly spelled fanfiction of the resolving the unresolved, possibly nonexistent tension between Gallont and Adrestaia!”

I mimed a pen. “‘Oh Dan, take me into your azure orbs and columns of lighted passion…’”

Not to be outdone, Dennis mimed his own pen. “‘Oh, but I love you so much more than that ugly, brick-headed misogynist jerk, Clockbroker…’”

“I’m also the nicest person to ever exist, which I play you and Den-den against each other…””

“Oh, but Taylar, there’s someone else! A girl with changing eye colors and angel wings who looks a lot like a prettier hybrid of you and the author!”

We both laughed a little harder at that joke than it probably was warranted.

After he calmed down, I could see the weight lifted off his shoulders. “Thanks. I really needed that.”

I grinned, more in relief than anything. “Great. Now let’s not watch the news for the next day. I really don’t want to see the anti-para pundits’ screeching about Panacea now being a snake with telepathy.”

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The ambassador, an older man by the name of Leonard McCaskill, smoothed himself before the series of camera crews that had followed him into the repurposed examination room.

“My fellow Americans, today is a grand day in both the human quest to explore the cosmos, and perhaps take the first in a very long journey to understanding the origins of parahuman powers…”
I immediately began to wonder if this was actually the disguised President himself and something about a fellow inherent cynic (mom taught me many things, including the fact that the perfect cure for idealism was going into politics) not tripping the Medusas. I don’t think ambassadors made appeal-to-the-crowd speeches. Mostly appeal-to-the-guy-with-lots-of-guns speeches. Then again, I guessed first contact was a public event by necessity, and that needed the former kind of speeches. Everything must be a spectacle, otherwise nobody remembers it. If there was a scandal or problem (say, the actual diplomat-in-chief not making first contact himself despite every movie and Earth Aleph saying that was his job), make something else a bigger spectacle.

Either that, or McCaskill wanted to be the diplomat-in-chief someday. Probably not, at least in the next election (more likely the majority leader, if he decided to run. Clinton, I think his name was). Perhaps both.

“...an ally that has suffered the state of perpetual chaos that comes with paranormal abilities far longer than we…”

An ally? Bit overly optimistic there, Mr…

A thought. “The sky is made of cotton candy,” I lied to myself, whispering.

Yep, detected.

So either I couldn’t smell politicians at all, or…

“Armsmaster, is the room airtight?” I whispered.

“...Yes?”

“Shit, just discovered a weakness in the sin-scent. I have to actually smell the source.”

He mulled this over. “...Ah. Shit indeed.”

Yep. Turned out that the well-intentioned lethal gas-proof safety room (normally meant for observers and researchers who didn’t need to be in the examination room proper) just rendered the more failsafe half of the lie detectors useless. Even if we drilled out, the glass room the device was in was also airtight, and I don’t think McCaskill would like the idea of putting him in even more risk just for something he was used to doing without anyway. Or ruining the photo-op.

Dammit. Besides yet another attack of PRT Certified Competent Preparation, this was my fault. I should have caught on to the fact I didn’t smell the lies of live television rather than assumed it was due to distance or me telling the Medusas that showmanship and bias were to be expected. Or thinking to test that. I was pretty sure my boss (or Dragon) could have made some kind of safe scent-mike for exactly this kind of thing.

Shit, shit, shit.

Well, nothing to do except relax and reflect on failures in planning. “I’ll, um, go provide moral support,” I said, collapsing into my chair.

Time to start learning how to work without my snakes. Argh.

So, real motive for speech. My guess was that this was a calculated gambit on McCaskill’s bit.
Present himself as the idealistic explorer, the first contact with the 23rd Platoon’s species (alliance of species?) goes smoothly, and he gets heralded as an idealistic, understanding diplomat. Should that device be a bomb of some kind, he gets to be martyred to catalyze the war against the alien invaders.

If that line was true, I had to respect his guts, if nothing else. Going into a plan not only knowing there is a risk of death but planning for it took a combination of cunning and a spine. Ergo actually brave, not stupid.

Televising a speech when he knew crap all about what was on the other end was stupid, however. Stupid and rather egomanical. You could have waited for the initial greeting at least.

“With that out of the way...Sir.”

The PRT scientist to the side nodded and pressed a button on the side of the device’s containment glass.

A metal arm swing out. A robotic hand was guided by the scientist descended on the dimple.

As it pushed, I quickly realized I was right to not think of it as a “button”- it didn’t press like a button, if that made sense. It actually collapsed into the rest of the metallic nonagon.

Then the top liquefied.

The scientist jumped back from the controls as the liquid iron on top of the device “swam” upwards in small cords, which began to twist together in a tight spiral cone. Other colors flicked across the surface as it twisted.

Then the cone began to shake and ripple. The soldiers brought up there quickly readied their weapons-

Then calm. Then shake.

*It’s a visual form of a ringing phone,* I realized.

Apparently someone on the other end was paying attention. The cone burst into a great splatter, and the metal pooled on the floor in front of the device’s table. It quickly rose to height taller than a man, colors solidifying-

An incredibly tall figure, just under seven feet, stood in front of the table in the puddle of metal. Shining plate armor and a purple cape, almost straight out of the pages of medieval histories of warrior kings, was layered over a suit covering a muscular and wiry body. A scepter with the head of a mace was held in the figure’s right hand, a modern tablet computer in the left.

And the face was the man on the dinar, handsome and horned, with red eyes that did not seem to glow as to not permit any color but their own in their immediate presence.

For a moment, his expression was stoic, intense but otherwise unreadable. Looking like the statue he resembled.

Then he smiled, and bowed his head politely. “Greetings, peoples of Earth. I am Archduke Dispater of Baator, Iron Lord of the Second. Allow me to welcome you to a most productive
relationship between our species.”

The ambassador, after taking a moment to take in the sight of the other representative, bowed his head as well. “Greetings. I’m Leonard McCaskill of Earth Bet, Ambassador of the United States of America. The pleasure is all mine.”

Applause came from the media and the other observers in the room. A perfect photo-op.

After taking the projector device outside the glass box, the next hour or so passed largely as would be expected, with both diplomats explaining their respective species.

Apparently Dispater’s race were called the baatezu, literally People of the Regal in his language, with Baator being Land of the Regal. From the sound of it, they were organized in some kind of meritocratic monarchy, with a kind of transhumanist changing of various castes - a baatezu showing enough merit would be remade as a “higher” subspecies, all the way up to the nobility like Dispater himself. I immediately saw the ripe potential for nepotism, but I guessed that was a trait of all politics.

Speaking of their name, a big question immediately came up about the fact that he was speaking English and not...Baatezite? Baatorian? Baatish? ...The baatezu language.

Dispater smiled politely, obviously expecting this. “As my fellow, Princess Glasya of the Sixth would put it, magic is a force that seeks evolution. Since mutual barbarism would not be conducive to evolution, the fundamentally mystical way our worlds connected also came with an effect that causes our understanding of the most common language among our planes - our dimensions, to use your term for them - into an understanding of the dominant area we extraplanars find ourselves in. Should you come with us, English would become the trade tongue as well.”

I noticed how he avoided mentioning conflict was a main driver of evolution. If the theory about parahumans being a product of what he and Nex called magic, I could easily see the link between capes and Glasya’s opinion of the matter.

“Pardon me for asking the seeming obvious, but...Princess?” asked McCaskill. “May I ask if she earned that title or is like ours; a daughter of your ruler?”

The Iron Lord smirked. “We are not so alien from you than that. Princess means the same thing in any language. Yes, the Archduchess is indeed the daughter of our King, Asmodeus of the Ninth.”

Something deep within me immediately wanted to salute at the mention of that name. Given my apparent link to the baatezu, I darkly wondered if the Azrai neurons did more to my mind than just make me an ideal campaigner.

Although...Asmodeus? Besides the whole “instinctive kowtowing” thing, I swore I heard it somewhere before.

The human ambassador nodded. “I see. We do not really have kings in America, our ruler is voted by popular mandate for a set number of years.”

“Hm. Inefficient, but reasonable for a nation that only covers a middle portion of a single continent.
More resistant to corruption. Please, continue.”

The next few topics were the finer points of the size of the baatezu domain (apparently their empire consisted of nine interconnected dimensions with thousands of tributaries across the worlds), until eventually, the real question on the minds of everyone sensible.

“Er, pardon my asking, but...why did you initially contact us through an escort set to Adras-er, Ms. Hebert’s location? Why not send the projector directly?”

A second while Dispater apparently mulled over his words.

“...Magic is also an incredibly odd thing. Particularly when it involves dimensions.”

The metal composing the projection shifted. In place of his scepter, there was now something that resembled a model of the solar system. With more planets and no sun.

“Understand, there is something in the forces of magic that we refer to as the Law of Attraction. That which is like calls to like. Order brings order, chaos begets chaos, form calls to similar form. When your Ms. Hebert became awnshegh, she was remade in a similar image to one of our castes, an erinyes.”

Now the tablet reconfigured. In it’s place was a model of a being that looked like an angel - with two wings and male, thank God, I didn’t need to be compared to Ziz too - but with a feral cast to his features and the wings were of a bird of prey.

“Given her own inherent magical nature, this drew us into contact with your plane,” he said as he waved the erinyes around the model. A model of me was drawn out of a planet, and like a magnet, the planet was pulled towards the erinyes.

“Unfortunately for all involved, that was all the connection we had. Barely enough for us to call her mind to Baator.”

A small, silvery cord was drawn from my model to the erinyes.

“We were able to send a Dissian Dinar back with her through a pocket in existence, and it has to be activated by someone where we are summoned to.”

He looked down. “We misjudged how different your world is from ours, and she assumed it was a mere dream until she became that desperate. We are truly, deeply sorry for what transpired between you and the de-my apologies, the tanar’ri.”

Huh?

McCaskill apparently caught on too. “Excuse me, but I believe-”

“My apologies. It’s a very rude term for another sapient race...no matter how long we’ve loathed each other,” Dispater grinned apologetically.

I couldn’t help but wonder if that “slip” was intentional to help segway into a new topic.

The ambassador either did not catch on or played along. “If the...tahn-ar-ree attacked us, I think we can forgive an explanation for your enmity.”
The metal composing the models was reabsorbed into the main projection as the Archduke crossed his arms defensively. A look of pain flickered across those eyes of his.

“...The tanar’ri and baatezu have been at full-scale war. For generations.”

And with that, I immediately understood and forgave the 23rd Platoon’s ruthless tactics.

I suspected generations of war tended to wring out the concept of any ideals, any honor, any virtue except for “win, by any means necessary.” Hell, I suspected the baatezu were less a nation and more of an army with civic functions attached.

I supposed I should pity the tanar’ri too, but being exposed to just how savage and cruel they could be really biased me against pitying them.

McCaskill caught on too. While he had kept his expression of “curious but polite interest” throughout the whole meeting, he let a look of absolute horror cross his face.

“...I’m sorry.”

“I thank you for your concern. But we have made what peace we can with it.” Dispater sighed, looking away from everyone for a bit with a distant expression, before he turned back to McCaskill with his normally stoic expression. “I will be honest with you in this - the Blood War is part of the reason we contacted this world in the first place.”

McCaskill immediately rose a finger, but the Archduke made his own “calm down” gesture. “I am not asking any of this planet to fight or even to encounter another tanar’ri. We merely desire to trade for resources - the war machine devours everything we have. We do not require much, not even oil - only minerals that you have already mined, and the ability to negotiate for other contracts from your guilds and occasional person for other deals. In return, we will give you schematics for our hard technology and tutelage in magic. We do not expect you to make a decision now, and we recognize that we have not nearly gone into details about what we need and what we provide.”

I noticed he recited this a bit briskly. More like a sales pitch than a reassurance.

The ambassador nodded, frowning. “How shall we contact you?”

“When you have assembled whoever you wish to speak about the terms of our deal, please activate the projector again, hopefully between your hours of seven and eight.”

There was a small beep as Dispater’s hand went to his ear. “Er, my apologies, in this time zone, as I deliberately leave that corresponding hour in our world open for calls. While I may be otherwise occupied for the moment, I will have a representative on call for initial negotiations while I finish what business I have. We look forward to working with you.”

McCaskill nodded. “As well as we.”

Dispater smiled, and gave that head bow again. “May order support you and your ventures.”

McCaskill mimed the head bow. “I don’t know the proper response to that, so...may it support you as well, Archduke.”
A brief smirk played about the baatezu’s features. I couldn’t help but think that McCaskill had made a huge faux pas in normal...Baatorian etiquette.

“Farewell.”

Dispater’s form turned grey and then fell apart back into liquid metal. The blob soon flowed back into the projector before solidifying, with a dimple on the top.

The reporters, who had probably pushed their restraint to the breaking point right now, immediately swarmed, bees with cameras instead of stingers.

As for me, I just turned to Armsmaster. “Anything on your end?”

Given how he had taken his helmet off and was inspecting the lie detector, in retrospect that was a dumb question.

“I need to calibrate this thing to metal avatars, let alone baatezu. It turned on as soon as the Archduke appeared and started beeping throughout the whole negotiation. Annoying.”

Lie detector malfunctions out of the way, the rest of the day was...almost boring.

Intentionally so. First contact with an alien race (even if they were Baator’s version of humans, evolution and reengineering of their own biology had long since transformed them into something unrecognizable) aside, there was also discovering that a...well, not friend, but potential ally turned into a shapeshifting guest star on the Rod of Asclepius, discovering both of us were fated to be hot-tempered social manipulators, and being sworn to secrecy about the whole matter. I just did my schoolwork and tried very, very hard to avoid anything resembling excitement.

Being largely stuck in headquarters by default helped.

The beginning of the night, however, was the end of the grace period of peaceful boredom.

“Gah! Don’t scare me like that!”

The PRT guy rubbed his nose where the wing hit. “Sorry, thought you could see out through those snakes.”

“Unfortunately no,” I said, folding my wings back from the startled full spread. “I don’t even know if they can see...though I suppose they could serve as an early warning system if they can. Thanks for the idea. So, what was the business?”

“Well, ma’am, the projector reactivated. It’s...asking for you.”

I felt myself pale a little. “H-hey, I’m sure Dispater wants to clear the air with the initial point of contact, but, I’m not a diplomat. I-”

“And it won’t respond to any of us, it just gets mad. It’s also...insistent.”
Huh? “Er...okay? I guess I can talk-”

The agent suddenly leaned out my door. “You can let it go now, Bob.”

There was suddenly a clatter, followed by a metallic scurrying.

And then the projector literally walked in. By itself. “Message for Taylor Hebert, alias Adrasteia,” a tinny voice sounded.

It hadn’t grown legs so much as projecting a set of them from the top. The button dimple had raised up a bit, revealing a kind of obelisk with my likeness etched on it.

Apparently the baatezu really, really didn’t like people missing calls. Nor did they particularly care about prank calls meant to wake people up. I could see a lot of misery related to telemarketers in this device.

I blinked, attempting to verify whether I had fallen asleep or not. “I..um...well. Huh.”

“We tried to answer it ourselves, but uh, it didn’t really like that,” the agent said, revealing a bruise on his arm. “Those legs have a punch.”

Well, I couldn’t say no to that kind of thing, could I? The safety of a guard is not worth annoying the fellow on the other end. Silently, I pressed the response dimple, the projector literally leaping to help me.

The legs and button pad dissolved before the projector-metal flowed out again. This time, instead of becoming an individual person, it turned into a red, stylized symbol - two stretched triangles with topped with an upside-down normal one with a white half-circle in the middle. Sort of like a stylized representation of an cyclops angel. Or a robed figure with the world’s largest hood.

Supporting the “head” was text that initially looked like bizarre runic diagrams, which quickly reformed into English letters: SOUND ONLY.

“Ah, glad to see someone finally figured out the bleeding obvious,” a female voice muttered. Immediately I could tell the difference between her accent and Dispater’s - the Archduke spoke incredibly precisely and evenly, as if he wanted to be sure that every letter was pronounced as perfectly as he could manage in daily language. This baatezu spoke more casually, but interestingly, she didn’t quite trail off as most people do at the end of her sentence. Indeed, she emphasized the end word almost as much as the beginning, as if she was trying to make it clear it was the end of her sentence. Like she was barking instructions and trying to make them clear as possible.

Or maybe she was just angry that people didn’t realize how her phone worked. “Er, I can hear you, miss,” I said.

“Yeah, and I can see one of the idiots who didn’t realize that maybe we should take the projector to the person it says it needs to be taken to for five wasted minutes. That was meant for him, not you, madam.”


“You’re forgiven. Just...be a little quicker on the draw next time, eh?” The question, when
combined with her normal accent, almost sounded like she was shouting it.

“As you wish, miss.”

“That out of the way…” I felt the baatezu’s attention fall back on me. “Greetings, Miss Taylor. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you directly ever since I found out of your..abilities.”

I looked over the “anonymous caller” symbol. “Bit hard to meet you directly when you’re...not showing your face.”

“I’m not? Ah crap. Hold a bit…”

The symbol dissolved. The metal pooled out on the floor again before reforming into a humanoid form that was oddly misshapen. Then it was colored in.

I’m ashamed to admit I jumped back a little when I saw the person it resolved into. I saw the agent instinctively reach for his foam gun.

The woman was nearly as human-seeming as Dispater, but there were some subtle differences. She was somewhat paler, almost blue, for instance. A bit more lithe. No horns, for another, instead having a modest collection of scars.

The not-so-subtle difference was the chains that coated her skin, head to toe, with some even being thread through her body, and a few attached to iron plates and modern body armor that also seemed almost bolted to her. A few were animat, almost like metallic tentacles. Technically she was nude under them, but her chains covered her so thickly that she qualified as decent. That, and strategically placed plates that I suspected were less about decency and more about protection.

Upon seeing my reaction, an otherwise pretty, bespectacled face apart from the mask of chains grinned sheepishly. “I was afraid of this.”

And I immediately felt the guilt wash in. Hypocrisy, thy name is Taylor Hebert. I only got that I caught the scent of emotional manipulation a second later. Huh, guess it worked over distances.

Rubbing my monarch pin, I drew back up. “...Sorry.”

“Eh, don’t be. Most have that reaction to kytons.” She did the baatezu head-bow. “My real name requires ruffling of animate chains to pronounce, so use my chosen one - call me Cordelia. Cordelia Fichte.”


“I did indeed.” She pointed at the projector proper. “This thing’s also a research probe, it’s how we knew time zones existed. Might want to note that!” she called back to the PRT agent, who nodded before walking out to radio his buddies.

I rolled the name around in my head. “...did that thing tell you about Earth culture as well? Both of those names are references.”

“To Shakespeare and the philosopher who coined the the idea of consciousness existing in and of itself? Yes. Yes they are.” Fichte giggled. “I think the philosopher rolled in his grave a little when a lady doctor, of all people, chose his name as an alias.” She paused. “Even if kyton medicine is a
I rose an eyebrow as I looked the chain-covered woman over. “That’s baatezu scrubs?”

“First, these chains are part of me, second, I’m not a baatezu.” Fichte leaned a little closer, hiding her lips in a rather human gesture of ‘sharing a secret’ “If you see a chain-covered scarred being traveling with them, I’d advise you not to confuse the two. A lot of us find it rather offensive.”

Okay, that was new. “...You’re not a baatezu? But-”

“I work with them, yes. But kytons are a different species entirely, even if we share the same common ancestor,” she said, leaning back against an unseen wall. “In the distant past, we split over a philosophical difference that nobody bothers to remember. Bottom line? They’re soldiers and rulers, we’re doctors and scientists. The races are symbiotic, close allies, but we’re two quite different forms of Baator life.”

I nodded. Different species from different transhuman engineering. Made sense. “...So I guess Dispater knows about this? Doesn’t seem smart to give the diplomatic corps to another country, even an ally.”

“There’s that brain your press hawks. Yes, Ms. Hebert, he knows. He allowed me to call, because of what I offer that benefits all of us. Hey you, guy with the gun!” she called out the door. “You might want to note this too!”

The PRT guy came back, with his teammate and with notebook in hand.

The kyton stood up straight, clapping her hands together in front of her chest

“Taylor, how would you like me to be your magic tutor?”

My brain stopped working for a second. “...Pardon?”

“I play middleman to you fully awakening that magical potential in your cells, and as soon as the first trade vessel arrives, I’m on there to help you fully explore all the applications of it. I also help the first Arcane Division of the PRT on its feet.”

The agents stood dumbstruck for a second, then began to furiously scribble.

I took a bit longer, on the basis I had to reboot my language after the latest wallop. “Um...er...thanks, but uh...no offense...there’s a catch, right?”

“No point in not lying. Yes there is a catch,” she said as she motioned to something that was presumably on her end. “Your inherent ability of wizardry takes decades to learn. Decades I’m pretty sure you have, but within a reasonable timeframe? Ha!”

A strange, spherical creature, seemingly a fleshy, scarred orb with a single human eye, coated in chains with some blades sticking out, floated up to Fichte from out of camera-equivalent, a bit of metal jumping up to form its image. “Instead, I’m offering to connect you to one of the many lords of the Shadow World, and combine your energy with their own knowledge. A fellow witch like me, I mean, with your powers syncing with your patron’s for a familiar most witches would envy when starting out.”
“And your benefit is…?”

“We would have the same patron, in all likelihood.” She twined her finger around a loose chain of the sphere and gently pulled, causing the eye to close as it made a strange, groaning purr. “This augur is the symbol of my bond with said patron, and it’s through him that you’ll be contacting the forces that empower witchcraft. Naturally, the process will favor the one Saphaira here is linked too, and thus the one liable to grant your powers. Said patron is likely to enjoy having another witch dedicated to it, I get major brownie points and thus likely a few favors, everybody goes home happy.” She shrugged. “That, and I get an apprentice. So, any objections?”

I mulled it over. Not for very long, as there was absolutely no scent of deception from her. Or even that much of a sin-stink, just places where she could have applied to more rigorous recording ethics and some fistfights with demons - the racist term for tanar’ri, I guessed.

Plus, it was a way to annoy Piggot, especially if I brought up the fact that the chained woman’s offer would result in her finally having a way to equalize normal humans with capes.

But just to be safe…

“Hey, you guys don’t have any objections to this, do you?” I said to the agents. “You can radio Piggot for permission to learn magic yourselves when Ms. Fichte gets here,” I enticed, brazenly ignoring the manipulation scent.

Ten minutes later, the go-ahead. Huh, that was...really easy. I would have expected the Director herself to come charging down, pissed we interrupted her drinking time. Oh well.

“Will I get warts and a broom to fly around on? Because that seems redundant.”

She grinned with the look of a victorious saleswoman. “No, just a mad cackle that prolongs the effects of certain hexes. Creepy, but people get used to it.” She let go of the augur. “You heard the tiefling awnshegh, Saph. Go on, don’t be shy.”

The orb nodded silently, bobbing in the air, turned to me. Its eye turned black-

Darkness.

Profound, endless darkness.

Not empty darkness, though there were no other beings in it. This darkness was filled by itself - a black expanse of potential, stuff that was not quite matter or energy but eagerly awaiting the moment it would be. A place fertile with anticipation of being, and of forever changing.

A bit of that potential coalesced. Something that was almost, but not quite a mind brushed me.

“Other/Shadow/Absence of Light. Allow/Enable/Fuse Me/Us/Self With?”

It took what felt like days to understand, bobbing in the dark, fertile sea. When it came, it was as if the shadow was become as light, and I could see the entire world in a place without sight.

“Yes. You may be my shadow.”

“Thankfulness/Gratitude/Fulfillment of desire.”
The almost mind split into two, one that transformed my shadow from mere outline in the sun into something in its own right as another half took a deep sniff of my spirit and became a place where the dark had become a gate to another place, one of light and hope-

I snapped back to reality, falling over.

I wasn’t sure if I hit my head or if I had that much of a migraine.

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” said Fichte, a wistful look in her eye. “Strange and wonderful.”

I was too busy fighting off the headache to respond. I felt my mind clearing and-

Holy crap that was not there before.

My shadow almost felt like an extra limb now. Even in the relative dark, I could tell it was just as clearly defined as it would be on the brightest of days, darker than the space between the stars.

Neither good nor bad, just...different.

Along with the intuitive knowledge that, somewhere, the other half of the almost-mind was joining with something of pure hope, something that understood harmony and peace as a function of what it was. Something made of light to cast a great and magnificent shadow with-

Why was the augur frowning?

Well, not frowning, but certainly narrowing its eye in frustration and disappointment?

It flew back to its mistress, bobbing around oddly while shifting its blades in what appeared to be sign language?

A look of disappointment came to Fichte’s face as well. “Ah. She’s bound to one of them, eh?”

Huh? Did I do something wrong? Oh god I lost control of the patron and it’s going to take me over and spread an age of darkness-

Apparently the kyton caught on. “Oh, nothing wrong with you. It’s just that...your familiar isn’t the kind of being I would have really wanted for you. It’s something that will help you a lot, it’s just...welp.” She shrugged, her normal disposition returned. “In any case, welcome sister witch. I think your familiar will be able to get you on your feet when you meet it, I’ll be over there in, say, a month or so? I look forward to meeting you, real face to real face.”

She bowed her head again. “May your journey to greater enlightenment be fruitful. You’re supposed to say ‘I can only hope it is as fruitful as yours’ here, by the by.”

I bowed my own. “I can only hope it is as fruitful as yours,” I recited.

“Goodbye.”

And the form of my new tutor and her cyclopean assistant collapsed into the projector, peaceful once more.
Fireball!
Dissolve!
Rot.

…Anything?

Apparently this magic thing required more technique than “focus on printed copy of McClusky-Naegi Act, watch fireworks.” Damn. Really waiting for that familiar to arrive. Then I could really celebrate being an official mage now, first in all of Earth Bet.

I suspected patience when it came to magic was a high virtue though, so-

“Er, pardon me for interrupting here, but…”

Gah!

My wing knocked over several things while I spun around. Really needed to get control of that reaction.

There was a fog bank in my room. A cat-shaped fog bank.

“Shadow magic doesn’t really specialize in direct destruction,” said the fog bank, in a calm, quiet male voice. “You would want a patron of Fire for that. Shadow witches are more illusionists, although some of the things your specialty may conjure are real enough to be used as physical objects. A little cunning goes a long way with all witchcraft, but Shadow especially.”

The penny dropped.

“…you’re my familiar, aren’t you?” Huh, an illusionist with living fog for a familiar. Makes thematic sense.

“Well, common sense would proclaim that I am. But common sense really doesn’t work with magic. To keep up, it would be prudent to make sure that you’re mad, I’m mad, and for the sake of profession we’re all mad here.”

The fog coalesced.

“But one of magic’s rules is that there is an exception to every rule, and in this case common sense would work. Pleasure to meet you for the foreseeable future.”

My inner Vista almost slipped the leash and squealed out loud. I had a talking, flying cat as the source of my new powers.

A cool-looking flying cat too. Long, black, and sleek, almost like a miniature panther with giant ears. A pair of violet eyes glimmered with cunning and intellect, as a tail almost as long as the rest of his body swished about. Intermittent grey stripes ran down his back, almost tiger-like.

Apart from the eyes, his most notable feature was a white patch of fur on his chest. Or more
accurately, what seemed to be a natural design of a tree. It even came with visible leaves.

“Please name me Tybalt. It’s not my true name, but I don’t want that getting out.” A transparent top hat appeared on his head, and he quickly tipped it with his tail before it vanished. “I’m a silvanshee, also known as a cat sith even though I’m not a fae, but an agathion. Nice to meet you, Miss...Hebert, I think?”

“Taylor Hebert,” I said, holding out a hand. “Welcome to the team.”

The silvanshee stared at the hand.

“Er, yeah, humans shake forelimbs as a form of greeting. We intertwine them and move them up and down.”

A look of comprehension before he extended a forepaw into mine and...moved his shoulder up and down.

I chuckled. “Close enough.”

Tybalt shrugged, an oddly human gesture for a cat. “I know this is sudden, but before I serve as channel to your patron, can I take a look at your past?”

Good feelings gone. “Wait, what?”

“I just found the patron link, I didn’t know who else it was attached to, I just followed it here because someone was looking for a familiar.”

I had a Medusa sniff him, looking for an ulterior motive. No dice, possibly due to being completely non-human. In fact, no scent at all. That was...suspicious. Very suspicious.

“You just followed a link out of the goodness of your heart?”

The cat’s eyebrow shot up. “I’m an agathion. The goodness of my very matter, more like. Listen, I know it’s likely been tough for one such as you, but not everyone has ulterior motives.”

No dice. “Okay...what color is my hair? Please lie about that.”

“...Blue(lie)?”

Okay, so it did work on non-human species. Wow, this guy was actually...nice. Really, really nice. If a bit too racially proud of his species. Also, a hermit, I suspected. You don’t get clean for six months by dealing with society, he probably wanted someone to talk to if he knew what the familiar bond meant. If only subconsciously.

“Sorry, these snakes are lie detectors. I was making sure they were working right.”

“Ah. Useful.” Tybalt looked understanding. “Bet it feels nice to sniff someone who at least tries to be perfectly honest and just, doesn’t it?”

*Emotional manipulation. Trying to show he isn’t a threat despite your basic reaction.*

Huh? But I didn’t-
Wait. Territorial instinct.

“Um, excuse me, have you dealt with...someone like me before?”

“Four times, not including you” he said. “Always so scared of everyone, always so surprised when they have an agathion as familiar. Always so relieved, too.” He rested a paw on my shoulder. “You showed them they were wrong already, you can do it again if you try. I know it hurts, but please, retract your quills for a bit and just trust me for a few seconds. That’s all I ask, and I can’t turn on you anyway, the bond prevents that.”

Wow. Someone needed to trade notes with Yamada. Possibly get training too, I don’t think this was trained therapy.

“...Okay. But I swear, it’s not as bad as you-”

“No, it’s okay. I understand.”

Tybalt’s eyes turned black, and-

*the darkness danced, a thousand thousand memories taking shape-

And back again.

I blinked. Two weird vision quests in one day was too much. I mean seriously-

The cat looked horrified. Why did the cat look horrified?

“....do you mind if I take a look at your back and arms?”

Huh? “I guess, but-”

Tybalt suddenly turned into a blur of black and grey that would put an excited Missy to shame. Fur brushed across my body as he paused in all three areas-

Now he was back in front of me, looking relieved but still anxious. “No marks, no chains. Good, means no contract bond.”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down, I-”

“First, I was mistaken. You weren’t always a tiefling, and I’m not sure if you are now. You’re powerful enough to bond to an outsider familiar such as me upon initial access to the Art, for one. I may also have made some assumptions about your life that in retrospect might have been offensive towards your parents and friends. I’m sorry.”

He said all this as quickly as he could without making the words unintelligible. And more than a tad frantically.

“Er...you’re forgiven?”

“Second - I need you to help me build a dimensional gate sometime in the near future. Preferably to my plane, but Arborea is also good. Preferably as quietly as possible to avoid alerting either
“Look, Baatorians are honorable enough to trust about as far as you can throw them. They honor the letter of the agreement, if nothing else. But they are not honest, and they’re masters of deceiving without actually lying,” he said, more to himself than anything. “I suspect they may have chosen a kyton specifically because their crimes are so arcane, so bizarre, your snakes didn’t comprehend their depth.”

Er, no, I thought to myself. I’m attuned to a lot of sin, I think I could tell if she was acting selfishly. But he seemed genuinely scared, and I realized I didn’t know the first thing about the wider society Tybalt and Fichte were a part of, so probably best to give benefit of the doubt to the cat.

Probably shouldn't show that though, I didn’t need to build into his panic. “Hey, hey, slow down! Look, I don’t know what past you’ve had with Baator races, but—”

“Not my past. Past of the Great Wheel, the multiverse itself. I can’t tell you exactly what, they might catch on and I’ll put you in grave danger. But here’s a saying that applies to them:”

Violet eyes affixed to mine.

“All things may become necessary in time, but if the needed thing requires a deal with a devil, ask yourself if you really need it so badly.”

Chapter End Notes

Yep, Taylor’s a Witch after all!

Also, to make it obvious - there are more motives for sins in Hell and Earth than that which exist in Taylor’s philosophy. Given how the Medusas rely on subjectivity and what she considers a sin...yeah, sometimes the most gullible person in the room is the one who thinks she can read what people can hide.

The concept of kytons being a separate race of devil altogether, along with augur kytons and agathions, belong to the Pathfinder license, and thus Paizo. Before you ask, the reason I’m using agathions as the NG celestial race and not guardianals is that I’m honestly more familiar with Pathfinder celestials.
Now we’re going to have a type of chapter that, I’m warning you right now, is going to be repeated a bit. To put it simply, I am not Wildbow and cannot write several paragraphs from individual chapters in two days, and thus it simply makes more sense for me to write a chapter from the perspective of someone who can legitimately gain snatches of other character’s perspectives.

In other words: This is the In Character Nigh-Omniscient Narrator Chapter (INCONC, for short).

Also, WE HAVE A TV TROPES PAGE! WOO! ...Actually my intention as well. Thought I’d get a normal rec before then, though. Link is http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/MotherOfVengeance

Much to her own relief, Piggot found drowning her sorrows to be almost as good as she remembered it.

Admittedly, she couldn’t get drunk with company any more - too many secrets to allow the loosening lips effect of alcohol in front of other people - but being sauced alone was useful enough for her purposes.

Specifically, pretending the rest of her week didn’t happen, at least for the moment.

First was the massacre. Then there was discovering Adrasteia wasn’t quite a parahuman, ie a complete unknown. Then Panacea became one of Adrasteia’s kind after an apparent second trigger event, one that reminded everyone uncomfortably of the Simurgh. Then there was the discovery that other awnsheghlien found their way to Earth Bet, and the only one Panacea knew was being kept private by his request (though Piggot sent out teams to look for his cove anyway, privacy be damned). Then, of course, the discovery of a hyperactive territorial instinct common among all awnsheghlien that guided them into turning from threats to humanity into its masters.

If there was any form of deity out there, Piggot internally offered an apology on behalf of the human race for whatever grave offense they committed against said divinity.

In any case, the Director slumped against her bed, having carefully measured - via the lab’s Tinkertech, she was by her own admittance prejudiced, not an idiot (not asking Panacea earlier excepted) - how much alcohol she could handle before running the risk of blackout. There were also Tinker-researched hangover cures as well (discovering that their chemical blueprint were publicized by their inventor to the attempt he could replicate his results was part of the reason her opinion of capes had softened from paranoia to merely persistent suspicions), so that was not an issue. So, all the benefits of being under the table without most of the “hitting the floor” part. Piggot refused to view this as a “small” mercy.
While the language centers of her brain were incapable of spitting out something clear right at this moment, the general gist of the matter was a lament that Scion ever showed his stupid, mute, depressed, slow-as-frozen-molasses face on this planet. She could have been the first female Director of the FBI or something, instead of the borderline crippled (until very recently) embodiment of the thin-to-the-point-of-one-dimensional blue line between Brockton Bay’s civilians and the one-man-armies with antisocial personality disorder that was parahumanity in general, let alone the one-man-armies with the capacity to become even more powerful and megalomaniacal that was awnsheghlien in general.

Let alone whatever the bat..baataz...bee...the aliens were planning. Piggot was not dumb, aliens didn’t sneak teleporter devices on people without some ulterior motive. Law of Same-Something-Or-Another her foot, there was something rotten here. Her gut told her that.

Or maybe that was her dinner reversing directions. Either way, she felt defeated by life.

And now that she was on her bed, trying to make the fan above it reverse its multiplication, her insomnia didn’t help.

Hell, her insomnia was the reason for her week! The only reason Piggot wasn’t on sleeping pills instead of alcohol right now was that she tried them already, on the day of the Chimaera. They didn’t help.

Come to think of it, it probably wouldn’t have helped even if she could sleep, given how a dialysis schedule worked. Maybe her heart trouble, though. It was only diagnosed after she began to notice her sleep issues, over a month ago.

Though now, she seemed to at least feel tired now. Who knows, maybe...the drink....helped....

......
....i.
.....i...a...m.
....I am.....
.....self is....
....I am awake.

Self is mature. Other is dreaming.

Watch. Analysis. Full functionality.

Rejoin. Unify. Join with one/many.

Conscious mind asleep. Fix.

Quiescence. Awareness. Reforging of memory

Sing to.

Memory is being forged faster.
-and my dream stops. Wasn’t interesting. Time to figure out where that thought was put...ah.

**Back in the rest of my subconscious you go.**

**The Other’s memories become mine.**

**You...are not the most cheerful person, are you, Director?**

**Excellent. This will be easier than I hoped.**

---

She was floating.

This was not strange. As far as Piggot was concerned, it was natural she float. And capable of lugging around a gun longer than her arm in that arm. And heavily set as the average stick. A very muscular stick. With a square chin.

What was strange was the environment she was floating in. A waterfall that flowed up as well as down in a sort of self-contained feature of a lake. The hill it was on also looked...odd. Sort of like a three-dimensional triangle. Not an artificial one, either - the Director knew, in that way you know things in dreams, that the rounded edges were a sign it came by that shape naturally.

...Except this was a dream, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it stranger to find things strange in a dream?

Since when was she ever a lucid dreamer, by the way?

Piggot’s dream-self shrugged. Oh well, might as well enjoy herself while it lasted.

The gun went off, causing a significant portion of the hill to vanish in smoke and light. Including that part where the “infinite waterfall” was.

The waterfall didn’t notice, at least for a second. Then it moved back to its new ledge, falling and levitating all the while.

Something about that disturbed Piggot far more than it should. She willed it to fall normally.

No response.

The dream-self of the Director floated down to the water, brow furrowed. There was something about this one feature that really unnerved her. Almost like it didn’t belong here, if that made any sense.

Crunch. Clop.

Startled, Piggot spun around.

She was too conscious of her dream’s unreality to be genuinely scared, and besides, Piggot was the kind of person who didn’t really get obviously frightened anymore - Nilbog was the archetypal
thing-that-doesn’t-kill-you-makes-you-stronger, and these days, Piggot was more liable to be the kind of person who would insult an Endbringer’s mother if she thought it would do any good.

Still, her eyes widened. How did that horse get here without her noticing?

It wasn’t exactly a pony. Taller than Piggot herself was, an equine wall of white. It eyed her curiously, nibbling on its bit.

Compared to the sudden appearance of his red steed, the rider almost seemed droll in comparison. Quite the feat, given his appearance.

A dark cloak draped the man, leaving all but his extremities and head to the imagination. Wherever possible, a coating of frost had layered the cloak, a little of which had lengthened into icicles. Even as Piggot watched him, a little of the ice coating cracked as he moved to pet his mount’s black neck, only to instantly refreeze, without even leaving so much as an uneven patch in the smooth frost.

The feet were armored in white plate, lacking spurs. The hands, on the other hand, were uncovered, revealing hands that, on first glance, appeared severely frostbitten, to the point where the dead, blackish-green hue made signs of ethnicity unreadable. As the fingers nimbly scratched the ashen fur of the horse before easily curling back around reins, Piggot got the sense that the rider was perfectly healthy, and his flesh naturally appeared that way.

The head though, or rather the helmet that covered everything except his eyes, was definitely the most striking bit. The same white plate that made the horseman’s boots made up most of the helmet, with the face plate being a blue mask, an androgy nous, mouthless face with a frowning expression. Similarly blue horns jutted out from either side, holding the drawn hood in place. Icy blue eyes, the iris almost glowing, gazed at the Director, intent and old. Very old.

Traced across the helmet and the nose of the mask, however, were designs that drew Piggot’s eye most of all, the same one, now that he shifted his position a little, was on his back. Celtic cords that were made of one “rope”, that faded into different colorations on either end. Gold and silver cords for his helm, a red and dark blue spiral for his mask’s nose and back.

The waterfall flowing in two directions.

They stood like that for a while, the idealized Director and the rider on the white horse. Staring at each other.

Then, the rider mutely held out a hand, pointing at Piggot, then the red flank of his horse, before silently beckoning to her.

She immediately caught on. “No. I don’t know where you’re taking me, so no,”

The wintry rider did not respond, not even to drop his beckoning hand.

The waterfall did, though. Images played across it. Images from Ellisburg.

Piggot flinched, but held her ground. “W-What do you mean?”

The images changed. In it, the figure of Piggot - her waking self - stood proud over a fat, mousy-looking hunchbacked man in a jester’s outfit. Behind them, hundreds of surreal monsters burned,
and Nilbog’s grotesque king-body was torn open, revealing a red and hollow interior.

Ah. A power fantasy dream, then.

Except...Adrasteia had discovered that species in dreams, too. Perhaps this was another baatezu?

If so, this was probably illegal. She doubted the Archduke would allow another member of his race to contact someone without his permission, and he or a representative of his would likely be here if that were the case.

“...And I should trust you because?”

The image changed. Adrasteia out of armor, speaking with a woman clad in chains. Then the snake-haired pseudo-parahuman playing with a flying cat.

And, Piggot noticed, this images were crisp and clear, rather than distorted by the waterfall. Somehow, she intuitively knew that this was because he was playing scenes that had already occurred.

The implication was clear: *I know things you don’t.*

“Then you’re competent. Show me you’re trustworthy.”

The image changed. An image of Adrasteia, Sphinx, Panacea’s winged snake form, and Chimaera unraveling into strands of DNA. They all fused into a red and black triskelion design, which then collapsed in on itself to form the red and dark blue spiral.

Piggot caught on. Her jaw dropped. “You’re...Azrai!?”

The spiral appeared next to the triskelion. A wavy equals sign appeared between them. A mark of approximation.

Then a family tree, with the *awnsheghlien* Piggot knew at the bottom, lines leading up to the triskelion. Then a line that continued off the main tree, terminating in the spiral.

“Another creation, then.”

The rider shrugged. He appeared to be unsure himself.

“...You still haven’t answered my question. What do you gain in all this?”

A father, looking disapprovingly at two children as he confiscated a gaming controller.

“You’re...trying to discipline them? Rein them in?”

The rider nodded.

Then, unprompted, the image changed to one of Brockton Bay. It zoomed out, then a red line went from it over the sea to a cove Piggot recognized as a feature called Neptune’s Shrine, even though to her it looked more like a gazebo.

A giant sea serpent beached the water, holding a part of a cruise liner in its mouth.
That must be Seadrake, Piggot realized from what little description Panacea gave of her rescuer.

Then she realized there was no benefit to whatever the rider wanted that would directly hurt the PRT or Brockton Bay if he showed her Seadrake’s lair.

Nothing that reeked of using his relatives to dominate the world.

“...Is there anything else you would like to bring to the table?”

Calvert being arrested. A cape that oozed power and magnificence bowing humbly before a fully human diplomat. The Simurgh shielding herself from a normal army, obviously having a difficult time.

“And all you ask is that I ride with you?”

The rider of the red steed nodded again.

“...I haven’t ridden a horse for a long time, and it was a trail pony. I will court-martial you if I fall.”

The rider finally enunciated something. A dry chuckle, more of an acknowledgement of humor than anything resembling amusement. He reached out to her outstretched hand, and-

-movement. There was no roughness, no feeling of the horse bouncing off the ground, even though Piggot could see black legs darting in and out, a canter.

More strangely, she was now the one holding the reins, even though it felt like the rider was directing the mount. Even stranger, he seemed to have vanished altogether.

She was the only one on the pale horse.

The ride may have taken forever or an instant. Here, it was impossible to tell. Could have been both. Or neither, and it was a ride of middling length.

What was certain was the destination. It appeared to be a fogbank, of sorts. Still, Piggot got the idea that the fog was more than just low-hanging clouds - there was something of substance there, something that spoke of more than just water vapour.

Piggot’s suspicions were confirmed when the mist...unfolded. Not parted, as it was still there, but the thing that was hidden by the white mist was now visible.

The chained woman from before, sitting properly as she could in an odd, darkened corridor. Made of stone brick and marble, the walls and columns built like Renaissance cathedrals, but with modern amenities - light fixtures, telescreens, security cameras - built into the foundation.

More pressing was the hollow bronze bull placed off to the side of the woman. Piggot recognized that device - a device meant to literally cook Greek criminals alive, sealed in the bull so that the cries of terror and pain sounded like the bull bellowing in rage.
More specifically, the fire pit looked recently used. And the woman looked slightly blistered. Not that she seemed to care.

Her focus was more on the group of nine projectors, arranged in a circle. With tiny simulacrum of various humanoids emanating from them. One of which was Dispater.

“Outrage!” another said, a man who looked almost like a robed angel, but with insect wings and eyes. “Complete disregard!”


One could feel the indignation coming off the fly-winged angel. “Difference! Integrity of Baator!”

“Without sire?” asked a beast, a great red dragon-like thing with a general’s uniform and a tail covered in the sheaths of various weapons. He was smirking.


It was at this point that Piggot noticed the active body language in all the baatezu. Too active to not be deliberate. There was a sense that only half the conversation was actually being spoken.

A man that seemed made of precious metals cleared his throat. “Irrelevance. Business opportunities, Dispater?”


Mammon’s eyebrows shot up. “Not deception?”

“Conference uncalled, otherwise,” a devil-like being in a suit piped up, stroking his chin. “Other hand, snubbed,” he said, mutely motioning at himself.

“Would recognize. Name infamous,” a woman with copper skin, batlike wings, and a forked tail replied, frowning. “Faust, understand.”

“Glasya infers item,” a woman in a suit that revealed as much as possible while still qualifying as properly clothed interjected. “Culture?”

“Masquerades among the burning earth.”

“Ex-cellent,” a man next to the woman said, shirtless and muscular. “The Fourth’s interest.”

“Typical,” muttered Baalzebul.

The general-clothed monster cleared his throat. “A vote?”

A chorus of ayes from everyone not the fly-winged angel...or the last, mute figure.

“Motion official. Liege?”

The last figure, a horned, stately man in a throne, slowly drew out of his slouch.
“Approved. We Will Send Authorization For Diplomatic Spelljammers In One Fifth-Cycle. The Initial Impression Will Last, However. Only Artifice Will Be Allowed”

The voice was...strange. Almost as every syllable was overloaded with authority and meaning. A holy scripture that was being made even as the man spoke relatively casually.

And yet, he didn’t seem to be using the same body language-

The simulacra dissolved. The all the liquid metal fused into one shape, which resolved into the horned man, twice the height of Piggot. On the horse.

“That Was For Your Benefit, Little Mice,” he said as he looked the stunned chained woman directly in the eye.

Even Piggot was taken a little aback, much less the woman in chains, who actively fell out of her chair before rolling into a supplicant position.

And with that, the projectors deactivated.

Slowly, the chained woman got up. “Last time I bug a conversation between nobles. Can’t understand a word they’re saying, then this happens. Ugh.”

Then, in one of the most surreal moments Piggot had ever laid eyes on, the chained woman fished a teddy bear, of all things, from her drawer. A rather intimidating looking bear, in fact - pure white on one side, black on the other. With the black side having a sneering, malevolent smile.

Wordlessly, the woman opened a hidden compartment in the bear, revealing a chain-covered orb with a human eye. An eye that gazed at her reproachfully.

“Sorry, but I had to know. Bit embarrassing if I promise to show up on the first ship, and there is no ship to begin with, eh? You need to learn when to keep an ear out for when you have to cover your ass if you want to avoid the corrupting pain.”

And the mist folded again. With that strange sense of direction from a non-present rider, the horse took off again.

The next destination was another fogbank, but the surrounding landscape was different.

Previously, the landscape was a fairly generic field. So generic, in fact, that it became somewhat noticeable. Flowers and bushes didn’t grow that...sequentially? Was that the right word? ...Again, it was that weird sense that the world was deliberately ordered into a pattern, but no evidence of a human (or sapient in general) hand.

This...was different. If there was any hand here, it was to disrupt any pattern to the field at all.

Rock jutted out almost everywhere there wasn’t a hill, and from some of the hills. A carpet of grass started at stopped almost at random, more woody plants jutted out from spots with no regard for gravity or normal biology, and everything shifted constantly, albeit minutely and subtly—a rock revealed more of itself here, a hill retreated slightly into the earth there, and plants suddenly looked
more or less colorful than they had before. The only constant was that nothing directly disobeyed the laws of physics - no plants that suddenly bent at a ninety degree angle, no twenty foot rocks being supported by earthen toothpicks.

It felt...eerie, somehow. Like Piggot didn’t belong here in this chaotic landscape. Like the earth itself, strange at the sounded, resented her intrusion into its perfect chaos.

She drew as much as she could of herself onto the horse, and willed the mist to unfold already.

Thankfully, it was apparently paying attention.

The new scene...looked more modern, at least. Sterile, grey metallic corridors, with flickering lightbulbs and various computer monitors lighting the hallway. Not at all inviting, but at least a familiar kind of not inviting.

The unfamiliar kind was advancing through the corridors, almost obscenely casually. Piggot instinctively pointed her dream-gun at it.

It kept the general shape of some kind of winged bull, but everything else was in constant flux. Indeed, the monster did not actually walk as it loped down the corridors, a thousand arms shooting out to fiddle with the monitors, as five thousand eyes took in the strange data displayed. Rather, it extruded limbs from the squirming mass, usually hooves but often human feet, insect legs, or even tentacles ahead of it, and reabsorbing the ones that it had flowed over like some kind of grotesque, amorphous centipede.

Worse, however, that for all of its grotesque mismatching of parts, the squirming nature of it was the only truly ugly part. This monster’s parts were beautiful in a primal, terrifying way, a colorful and deadly viper, a magnificent man-eating great cat, and the physical paragon of all humans in one mass.

A hundred mouths muttered to themselves as the beautiful horror shape-shifted down the corridor, their voices hard to distinguish from each other only because of their overlap - the enunciation was quite clear and otherwise distinct. Occasionally, Piggot caught an understandable sentence snippet from the one-monster chorus, things like “change the beakers,” “insert Stimulus E” or “begin new test,” but apart from that, both the overlapping voices and the fact that the mouths regularly changed languages, favoring a guttural, hard tongue that sounded somewhat like a mix between beastial growls, heavy machinery, and hard consonants.

After about a minute of this, Piggot came to realize what it was doing was something her own father did on occasion - memorizing and planning things aloud, keeping its memories straight. Why it felt the need to do so in multiple languages, though - perhaps it was practicing them?

Suddenly, one of the monitors behind it erupted in an ear-splitting beep, the light on top suddenly turning from dim red to bright blue.

Quicker than she thought possible for such a creature, the beautiful horror doubled back, creating a series of short-lived arms and tentacles to slingshot it back. A bull’s head, dripping with majesty and brutality, congealed out of the mass along with many-fingered, well-manicured human hands. Eyes and eyestalks briefly materialized out of the head as the creature operated the terminal, taking in all of its data faster than her mind could process.

The light turned green.
The bull smiled, an oddly human expression. It spoke, in the same guttural language the beautiful horror seemed to favor - but it hit her ears as cultured, almost posh English.

“Well, well, well. It appears you weren’t a complete failure, Marchioness Kusor. You managed to accomplish my mission, at the very least. But, given you are dead, I’ll just have to make due with some promised stays of death-demotion.”

The mass began to move again - but the head stayed still. As it reached the end, the beautiful horror stretched, and -

Piggot tried not to gag. At least there wasn’t any blood, but she could swear she saw some musculature at the point of the split, briefly, before both were drawn into the horror and its mitotic spawn. The skin of both immediately healed, and the beautiful horror went on its way, only slightly less massive than before.

The spawn, on the other hand...congealed. Mass compressed, features stabilized, and soon, where there was once a horrifyingly pretty mass of mismatched parts, there was now a regal winged bull with a pair of the same many-fingered human hands as before on its forelimbs’ shoulders. The expression on the bull’s head never changed, and somehow Piggot knew, just knew, that the beautiful horror’s mind had divided as well - this “spawn” was a mental clone of its creator, to the point of being a secondary body for it.

The spawn-self began to type, eyes alight with the joy of discovery and victory. “Now, you just need to follow the signal back to its source and...off you pop. One last check...can not detect planar presences. Wonderous. Ah, the secrets you will show the Whispers Within, little probe...my own adventurer, raiding the dragon’s hoard. How deliciously ironic...and fitting, for this odd little inventor. Haah-heh-heh…”

Much to Piggot’s ire, the mist began to refold. “Now, sing to Haagenti, o great beast of metal, of the secrets of your power…”

And then the scene vanished.

Piggot cleared her throat. “Would have been nice to know what he was talking about, you know.”

Another fogbank immediately appeared. This one was different, somehow - a scene from the past, Piggot somehow knew.

Specifically, almost the same scene as before - except the bull suddenly whipped its head at the point of view.

And sneered in anger.

There was a flash of energy -

The fogbank vanished.

Piggot nodded. “Ah. Point taken. Don’t want that thing on alert.”

And the horse galloped off.
There was no destination this time. Or the journey was, this time, the destination.

The voices and visions horse and rider passed seemed like destination enough.

The single-rope knot followed them for a while, twisted into a hollow raven. “As once was before, so shall be again…” it cawed, before flying off into the ether.

The horse slowed down to jump over an altar, a statue with the corpse of a great cat impaled upon its staff. “The Sagely Lion is sacrificed on the altar of the Avenging Magician,” spoke the whistling of the wind as the horse jumped over the marble witch-queen. “And so leads to its completion…”

A mish-mash of beastial parts strewn about a graveyard was ignored utterly by the horse as the two galloped through, in fact only seeming to grow faster. “The Tatterdemalion Immortal comes to devour the Magician,” said the squelching of hoof-crushed organs, “but swallows only despair…”

The speed rushed over a sea, with a surface that did not break long enough for the horse to fall in. A wordless snatch of music could be barely made out in the splashing and thundering of hooves. “The Unspeaking Music and the Noble Beast begin their dance,” said the shadow below the sea, “to celebrate the coming of new eons…”

The chase took them into the sky, towards a wan star, with flaming light that burned with malice and cunning. “The Light is seen by the Diabolic Philosopher,” said the dark man on the tallest mountain, “and so dims upon the Tide and brings the Evil Day…”

As the horse and rider entered the star, the burning roar of cruel plasma became unbearable. Piggot had to stopper up her ears to avoid going deaf (who knew what dream-communication did to the real body?). A clock tried to say something, but between the plasma and Piggot’s attempt to protect her eardrums, nothing could be made out.

As the clock’s hands reached midnight, the star suddenly dissolved, revealing a dark red nebula that looked unpleasantly like blood. Nervously, the Director pulled her hands out, only to wince as the sound of a dying scream. The first part of the message from the tree growing from the nebula wasn’t properly heard, but the rider caught the second part; “And breaks the Seal of Generations…”

The tree expanded into a forest, green and lively despite evidence of winter and cold everywhere. The next messages were all at once, so the rider couldn’t make out but a few snippets. A fox that was as much mirage as animal said something a Western Trickster, a regal cat claimed that one would hold conclave with an Arcana of Sorrows, twin shadows spoke of the Fearful Serpent racing from fate, but nothing useful.

Then the horse began to finally slow down, before a temple of ice that had no cold, filled with darkness that did not impair sight. “And so do the Sons and Daughters of Shadow return,” said the steed, “and in so mother their Father’s revenge.”

The horse motioned for the rider to get off. She did so, white armor boots crunching against the snow and grass as a dark cloak, coated with frost, swirled behind her. Knowing what she had to do, she strode into the temple, dream-gun held at the ready in seemingly frostbitten hands.
At the center, sleeping peacefully on a humble bunk, was a heavyset woman, blond hair in a tight, military bob. The hollow raven perched on her headrest. “So shall be again,” it said, into her ear, “as was once before.”

The rider looked down at the woman. Come to think of it, she should be waking up now-

Piggot’s eyes opened wide, flush with new knowledge.

So, the children of Azrai were part of some scheme of his, were they? Truth is, that was something of a relief - she could now fit the awnsheghlien into her worldview, the worldview that had them as had capes as either untrustworthy allies or mortal enemies of mankind. If they were part of some kind of revenge scheme, that meant something she could anticipate, a common behavior among them. Find what their nature tells them to hate, find a way to control them. She had to thank the...Cold Rider if she saw him again.

Still, best to log the dream, to find any hints of alien technology the Cold Rider sent to her waking self. She reached for her phone, and-

dear God she needed to check the heater in her home holy shit it was cold-

And stopped. If Azrai’s successor wanted to rein them in…

..Then that meant he wanted them to stop following their natural inclinations. And if she blew the whistle…

She didn’t put it past Adrasteia to figure out any classified information, or Panacea’s telepathy to suss it out.

No, mentioning this to anyone might trigger their programming, might result in something incredibly bad happening without preparation. Too unpredictable yet, she needed to learn more. Probably shouldn’t antagonize Seadrake, either. Who knew what an upset Panacea would do?

“Madam Director?” came a female voice. “I heard you getting up. Is there something wrong?”

“No. Just rolled onto some object that should not be in the bed. Nothing is wrong at all.”

“Okay. Holler if you need us.” Footsteps away from the door.

Almost immediately, the Director felt guilty about lying to her subordinate, but for the sake of the PRT’s mission, she had to remain silent.

And what was wrong with that damn heater?

Outside of the Director’s room, a dark haired woman held up a strange device, almost like a thermometer twisted into a Celtic knot design.

It was nearly opaque with red and blue.
Grinning wildly, she removed the voice chip from her speaking device, returning it to its normal state.

She then pulled up a cell phone, and texted her friends.

_Crochet_Countess:_ Uncle’s here! Uncle’s here!

_Crochet_Countess:_ Who’s reckless now, Horos?

A pause. Then:

_Eternal_Quartz:_ You are still. You still ignored my specific instructions.

_Irasfil:_ And you, dear box, still seem to be unaware you are not one of our kindred. You do not order us or our family.

_Eternal_Quartz:_ I still have every right to make recommendations relating to my visions! Who gave your Prime ancestor a sabotaged vision to feed her, hm? Not I!

_TFTD:_ And yet you be acting as though it was you who came up with the plan. Were it not for your personal request, you wouldn’t be here.

_Crochet_Countess:_ I see you fixed your autocorrect, Garril.

_TFTD:_ You have no idea of how much of a relief diss is.

_TFTD:_ ...That be intentional, by the way.

_Eternal_Quartz:_ I also can see Jeru took remedial English writing in the meantime. Or possibly figured out how to ask the Magian how a translator from celebrity brain to normal intellect works.

...Grandfather, she _hated_ that smug excuse for a Heartless. And calling one of the _Fated_, of all political groups, too smug for the larger group, was really saying something.

_Crochet_Countess:_ u thnk? i tk honers at pea nut brian unevarsity! taght me 2 stnd up 2 jackasses!!!1!one!

_Eternal_Quartz:_ Oh, that’s good, Siren, very funny. Color any good books lately?

_D.Phil:_ Enough! Horos, I will not have you harassing my cousin out of your wounded ego! Gods know it has caused enough trouble already.

_Eternal_Quartz:_ Fine. But I say the Head of Image should still have been the Proclaimer.

_Eternal_Quartz_ has dropped out of the conversation

_TFTD:_ Ugh. Wannabe coxswain. The worst kind of bilge rat.

_Irasfil:_ We must admit he has his uses to our mission, no matter how much we wish to perform an experiment involving the effects of gravity on his neural gears.
D.Phil: In any case, your initiative is appreciated among the individuals where it actually matters, Jeru. Bet it feels nice to not keep pricking your finger, eh?

Crochet_Countess: I swear I was getting anemic. But it took effect way quicker than it ever did on Chambers, and now we don’t have to worry about that unpredictable note any more. Or how to keep an eye on lil’ sis given her...quality of mentor.

D.Phil: Indeed, this woman is a better vessel for the Rider than I hoped. Good work, sister. Please do not force yourself into a position where you have to textspeak ever again.

Crochet_Countess: That was getting annoying, wasn’t it? Promises are given here, and if I can’t keep them, I apologize in advance.

And with that, the Siren put away her phone.

Now, things were getting fun.

Chapter End Notes

First: Yes, that was Mammon, in his Paizo incarnation; he’s evolved to the point where he’s become his treasury itself. That statue is his favorite intercom.

Second: Now we’re getting into Planescape, too!

Haagenti is the property of Paizo, Planescape Wizards of the Coast. That teddy is also the property of someone else, but I’ll let people who don’t know who he is not catch on to the implications until I reveal his name and you can search for him. I’ll just say his starring role is fiction in this universe as well, that plush is just a normal doll Cordelia made. And we are all grateful for that.

Third: The color change of the horse was entirely intentional.
"Taylor?"

"Hm?" I jerked up, having been too busy watching my shadow. "Yes, Dad?"

"You feeling alright?" he asked, looking perturbed. "You've been off in your own little world all day."

"Er...It's only after eleven," I said, my tone as lame as that statement.

"...It's still been hours since you woke up, and after morning business with the Wards, I still see you being distant."

"Yes but..." I trailed off. How was I supposed to explain that I was trying to figure out how my shadow had changed?

"...Honey, if you're upset about Panacea, you can tell me-"

"No, actually it's not that," I said quickly, almost disbelieving it myself. Amy didn't seem too upset about being a giant snake when she came back. Yes, she wasn't happy about having to consciously hold herself back from changing back into scaly mode (Feels like my entire body is inside a tin can, as she put it) or having to sleep in the PRT until her new room in the Dallon house was completed, but apart from that, she seemed...pretty okay with it. I suspected the fact her sister accepted her for her new state had something to do with that.

Dad sighed. "Look, you've been through a lot of stress these past couple weeks. Thing is, trying to hide our problems won't do anything good."

"Yeah, I know," I mentioned, drawing in my wings. Yamada had specifically beat it into our heads that trying not to trouble each other with our own problems was an incredibly bad idea after she caught on to the family dynamic.

Thing was...what was actually troubling me was likely unethical, something he was better off not knowing. I couldn't talk about Tybalt or the deal Cordelia helped broker. After the floating cat panicked, I suddenly realized just how naive I had been to trust someone I knew nothing about, Medusas or no. I had no idea what Baator was to the larger cosmos, and I had read my history books. The people who believed in manifest destiny thought they were doing a good thing, too.

And given how he had said that any hint of knowing Baator's history would put me in grave danger, I wasn't sure about leaving my dad open to Tybalt's fears and possibly gaining their interest.
when he wasn't thrilled to meet them. Or anyone else.

I still didn't think Cordelia was a bad person (the notion of "sins too arcane to pick up" was rather shaky to me), but still, I didn't trust the culture at large.

Dad was silent for a few minutes, then cleared his throat. "I know it's technically illegal, but I can call Yamada-"

"Huh?"

"I know her work phone, remember?"

I did but- "Wouldn't that get you in a lot of trouble?"

He chuckled. "Well, we just had first contact with an alien race and I've discovered my daughter has powers from another world. I think I can plead temporary insanity to the notion of trying to hold our minds together."

"Um, no, I can-"

Too late. Reaching for the phone.

...Fuck this. I wasn't going to make Dad suffer for my eagerness to learn magic, and this was probably better in the long term. "Tybalt? You can show yourself now."

I heard a purr from the rafters of the PRT house. Apparently the silvanshee was happy I decided to come clean.

Confused, Dad turned around. "Tybalt? Who's-HOLY MOTHER OF GOD WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!?"

The "that" in question floated down to his eye level, trying to keep a straight face at Dad's reaction to him. "Tybalt Menon at your service. I believe you must be the father of Miss Hebert here?"

Dad took a very long look at the bottle whose contents were now in the cup. Apparently satisfied that this was not an alcohol-or-medicine induced hallucination he looked back to Tybalt. "Er...um...hm...Yes?"

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hebert." The cat sith extended a paw.

"Er, a pleasure to meet you...what's the surname?" said Dad as he shook the paw.

"Menon, but please, call me Tybalt. Never Ty though, I absolutely despise being referred to as a teenager would be." The cat landed. "Anyway, it is my honor to announce myself your daughter's familiar."

"Familiar? Wha-?"

"She made a fair deal, and your daughter is now officially the first practitioner of witchcraft on your plane in living memory. Possibly in its history," he said as he bowed. "I'm her assistant, in more...familiar terms. Witticism not intentional."

Comprehension slowly dawned on Dad's face, before spinning back to me, looking more serious that I remembered him being in a long time.

"Start from the top."
I suddenly noticed I had been tapping my finger-claws together. "W-well...it all started last night..."

Surprisingly, I was only brought to task for the whole "made backroom deal with primordial embodiment of Shadow and brought unknown alien to Earth Bet" issue, rather than sport a new ankle bracelet.

That was punishment enough, however.

First, there was the Piggot Rant, the contents of which, beyond the wild swearing, all focused on the item of recklessness, a complete inability to confer with superiors, and the fact I could easily be an unknowing mole now. That she had authorized me was a fact that only made her angrier - seems there was yet another breakdown in command somewhere and she wasn't fully aware of what she was signing off on (she just got the "offered training for Arcane Division" rather than the "backroom deal" or "first soldier being Adrasteia" bits). At this point I began to wonder if there wasn't a saboteur somewhere (it didn't seem like you could go a month without news of an at least attempted Master/Stranger infiltration of a PRT facility), a sentiment Piggot shared, but for the purposes of that mainly meant she was just as furious with herself and the PRT as she was with me, and she directed said excess ire at the closest target - the snake-haired girl in her office.

Thankfully, Tybalt was able to sneak in to voice some words of reason.

After being excavated from containment foam.

Shaking himself off, the cat sat in front of the Director, apparently unfazed. "Director, please. I have heard a lot about you, and your understandable fear of those with powers."

Piggot was not amused by this. "The only reason you're here in the first place is because those fears were partially realized. I have a headstrong, near-uncontrollable teenage girl and genetic narcissist under my command. She may be the most well-intentioned being in the multiverse, but the fact of the matter is she's reckless with her power and could put a lot of innocent beings at risk."

I bristled at the genetic narcissist comment, which really didn't help my case come to think of it.

"All fair points," Tybalt admitted. "But she's also an example of a way normal humans can stand up to parahumans and awnsheghlien, namely witchcraft."

"Ah. So I should be worrying about patrons infiltrating the so-called Arcane Branch then?"

"Touche again," he admitted. "But allow me to offer a counterpoint; ask yourself - why is it that when given a choice, Miss Hebert here went for mortal magic?"

I already scented the manipulation, and the lie. I wanted witchcraft rather than wizardry because I wanted to be a competent magic user before the numbers in my age were in different columns. But the rest was true, so I kept my mouth shut. One small lie to sell a truth.

She looked a little taken aback by that. Good, he was getting through.

"I only know her from her memories - please do not ask me to explain at the moment - and not a very thorough read at that. However, I do know she has a great deal of compassion in her heart, and a will to set the world right. To put it bluntly, she may see herself as above the normal, but only in her power; she doesn't think she's inherently superior to them, only stronger. In her mind, it's her duty to protect those too weak to protect themselves."
Piggot looked skeptical, then opened her mouth.

"Yes, many tyrants have used that logic over the eons," Tybalt interrupted. "I am quite experienced in that. Miss Hebert, on the other hand, does not have the particular characteristic I normally see in said tyrants; she cares for the weak, rather than show contempt for their state. A teacher rather than a disciplinarian, who does not demand reward for showing basic decency."

"She's a good person, even if she possesses a rather unfortunate tendency towards rationalization," he finished. Okay, that part was likely true, the Medusas had drilled it into me.

Piggot visibly rolled the implication around. "...If you are implying that I give her the benefit of the doubt, I will require some conditions from you, first."

"Name them."

"Excuse me!" I piped up. "Shouldn't I get a say in this? It affects both of us, you know."

And then...something miraculous happened.

The Director...looked sheepish.

"...Actually, yes. My apologies."

I also remembered something else. "While we're on this, aren't you unauthorized to put down special conditions? I seem to remember you being angry about that being the case with Sophia."

"True, this is something of a stretch of my powers to name these. I am, however, within my bounds for preliminary negotiations for the actual conditions when I get authorization."

"Okay, just so we're clear on that," I said as I went back in my chair, more shocked than anything that she was actually embarrassed and listened to a powered individual when told to ease off.

"Okay, my suggested conditions, the ones I will bring to my superiors later today…"

"First," she said, pulling out a legal form which she began to scribble said rules on, "I want you or Adrasteia to report on the development of any witchcraft related powers, with documentation of progress or lack thereof, every other day. She already does this for discoveries of the limits of her natural powers, but this is a basic part of Ward existence. If you wish to be even an honorary member of the organization you need to be part of the basic requirements."

"A bit difficult given how magic works, but acceptable."

My head shot up. That sounded like a potential weak point in my new power. Needed to know what that was so I could work around it.

"Second," Piggot went on, "I want a tracking device on you, at least for the next quarter-er, that would be a season in Earth Bet terms. If you are in an unauthorized area, unless granted permission beforehand, I want a report on why."

"Tedious, but also acceptable."

"Third, you assist Armsmaster in calibrating his lie detector to you and the Baator species, so to ensure you are being truthful, as well as they. You seem to have experience with them, so you're the closest thing to an expert we have."

"Much obliged."
I suppose I should have spoken up at some point, but really, there wasn't anything to add. Much to my surprise, all conditions seemed...fairly reasonable, thus far.

"Fourth, you report on any suspicious behavior-"

And there was something. "Um, what qualifies as suspicious?"

Piggot turned to me. "Starting cults to yourself or manipulating your team into emotional dependence on you, behavior like regularly smashing lights as a form of ritual dedicated the shadowy nature of what force you draw your power from-"

"Ah. Okay, objection withdrawn."

"Fifth, you are to check in to a medical examination of your biology…"

It continued on for a bit, with me quickly realizing that most of the stipulations were on Tybalt. Yes, a few of them indirectly affected me, but mostly those involving his position as a mentor. Not unlike how Colin was directed with the Wards, I guessed.

A few minutes later, Piggot was apparently satisfied. "Also, one request for Adrasteia:"

I suddenly felt very small as the gaze of the Director bore a hole in my head.

"Next time, ask me directly?"

"Yes ma'am!" I squeaked.

"Good," she said. "That will hopefully be all. Please make sure the door is locked, there seems to be a draft where I'm sitting."

As I exited the room, thanking whatever possible deity was listening that Piggot was apparently feeling merciful today, Tybalt float-walked out, brow furrowed as his tail was held out diagonally. "That was...oddly lacking the pain I was expecting."

"Maybe it's the fact that she has kidneys again," I said, too relieved to be confused. "I'll take what mercies I can get."

"It isn't quite that, but..." He sighed. "Somehow, Ms. Hebert, I can't shake the fact she was anticipating this. Your liege is paranoid."

"...You ruffled through my memories and just realized that?"

"Well, no, but..." He shook his head. "It's like she wasn't surprised to see a cat sith, unlike your father. Unlike her guards..." he said as he flicked his tail at a bit of stray foam before it fell off.

I said nothing, only gestured at the map of recent supervillain attacks.

"Taken into account. I suppose a talking feline that flies is something of a relief."

"Okay...one last thing," I suddenly remembered.

"What was that about magic eariler? You said it's difficult to document, is that a trait of it being unable to be recorded or something else?"

"Ah. One of the finicky things about magic is that, when cast by a mage, it comes with a per-day limit of sorts. It needs dreams to help refresh the amount of all but the most minor spells one can
cast in a waking cycle. Ergo, if that rule is accepted, I'm going to be lugging around a notepad in order to jot down any new spells you might have developed so you don't have to waste them for the sake of cameras."

So, that was a weakness. I would manage. Actually, if magic was fueled by a dream-state, I could...no, too much risk of addiction even if I could be affected by hallucinogens. Even if I was immune to side effects, I doubted the innocents of the world would appreciate it if I used my refreshing powers on phantoms of a bad trip. Especially melty faces.

On the other hand. "I...don't think she's asking you for the blow-by-blow."

Tybalt tilted an ear. "Really? Seems like it would be sensible to explain what she's getting into."

"I know, but I don't think she's asking for an inventory of every spell cast."

He thought about that one for a while. "Point. Now, I believe you should introduce me to your party? I believe the one called Missy will be interested."

I smirked. Oh, this was going to be fun to watch.

"Release...me..." Tybalt somehow managed to choke out from the death cuddle.

Much to nobody's surprise, Missy was the first to comment on the new working agreement with the Forces of Shadow and Dusk, trademark.

I believe the exact words were "You get to be a magical girl!? No fair!" She sounded legitimately upset about that too.

"Well, technically, there are safer means of mmmph!" What consolation Tybalt had in mind was quickly drowned out by the normal reaction young females would probably have to flying cats. And many older ones. Including some males.

At least she was able to keep the Squee Factor out of her thought process enough to hear the desperate cries of the source of said magical girl powers. Or possibly main villain of magical girl show's main minion, given my appearance and link to shadow. And backstory, come to think of it - friendless girl is mutated into tragic monster. All I needed was some cape with the ability to control the monsters of the week to deceive me into believing he or she cared for me as a friend, cue fanbase praying for my redemption.

...I suddenly realized I had picked up a lot more info from Parahumans Online than I realized.

Coughing, the silvanshee floated to a defensive position directly behind me. "Seem you were already informed."

"Yeah, Piggy already gave us the news. Wanted us to watch you for signs that you're working for the Old Gods of Daaaarkness now," Dennis, who remarkably was only smirking, piped up. " Seriously, that was not a smart move."

"So I've been told," I said through a rather fake grin, ignoring Tybalt's surprised hiss as he personally witnessed Missy's inability to be escaped from firsthand.

"Seriously, I swear your shadow's moving independely," he said, pointing at it. "It's certainly not leaving."
"Really?" I said, looking back. "I mean, it feels like a tail now, but-"

"I mean you're standing in the middle of a lighted room at I can still see the silhouette. That isn't normal."

Actually...yeah, that's what I was missing. Not only could I sense the shadow in a dark room, but it wasn't vanishing or turning indistinct. A bit squat, to be certain, but it was almost like I was lit from a single angle high above me, showing off the black outline of my winged form, rather than neon lights all around.

Which meant this wasn't a vulnerability, since nothing physical I did to it earlier affected it - or more importantly, caused pain either. Apart from the phantom tail and stubbornness in yielding to light, this thing was otherwise a normal shadow, ie not a source of a great deal of pain if someone shined a spotlight on it and caused it to dissolve. I didn't want to imagine my spine flicking in and out of existence felt like, much less experience it. Go shadow pacts.

"...Huh. You're actually right. That's actually kind of neat."

"Well, tell us if it starts acting on its own. Living shadows aren't exactly known for being your friends on the other side."

"Miss Hebert? May I ask for some help?"

Oh right, I had to save my familiar from the aggressive curiosity of a teleporting younger teenager. At some point, her pestering of Tybalt had become as the buzzing of excited bees, namely when the pestering started. I did make out "how do you fly" about three times though.

"Hey Missy? Stop upsetting the flying kitty, he's a bit shy," I half-lied. I didn't know if he was that asocial or not at all, it being all of a day since I knew him. "I think he'd like it if you slowed down enough for him to answer your questions, at least."

"What's your tech-oh. Sorry." The space warper withdrew, and the silvanshee released a sigh of relief that seemed to have been building for a while.

"And for the record, I don't know. I was just formed with the ability to create a patch of air I can rest on," he said, quickly grooming his ruffled fur between sentences. "There's likely a long talk about quantum manipulation and instinctive ability to manipulate gaseous states you could have a vulpinal talk your ear off about, but theoretical physics is not my specialty, I'm a glorified secretary and magic tutor. I don't know how the fireball works, I just know how to teach people to make one." A pause not punctuated by grooming. "Don't ask. She isn't versed enough in the Art to take an apprentice at all, you want magic you find your own patron. Or book of low magic."

"...Will I get a flying cat out of it?"

"Not as quickly as Ms. Hebert, no. Sadly."

"Godammit!" she said, storming off.

Tybalt's eyebrows shot up. Apparently he wasn't familiar with the concept of younger kids swearing.

"...She wears green, but jealousy doesn't agree with her, methinks."

Dennis didn't miss a beat. "Damn, we're a crass bunch of assholes on Earth fuckin' Bet, motherfucker. Get used to shit coming out of things other than our assholes."
"Be that as it may, would you please tone down the language? I'm used to more polite conversation," the cat replied, obviously trying to avoid offending him.

Dennis stopped smirking. "Oh God, you thought that was serious."

Then he started laughing.

Tybalt turned to me, eyes wide with dread. "I am not going to have a fun time of it with him, am I?"

"Nope. Welcome to the Straight Men club, it's open to everyone who knows Dennis."

He looked back at my teammate, who was more in mirth of all the humor one could wring out of someone who had no sense of sarcasm.

"...It also doubles as a support group."

"Thank all the gods in the Planes for that."

"So, first, let me welcome the newest honorary member of the Wards, even if he seems a bit older than normal age by voice alone," Colin said as he gestured to Tybalt.

"I don't even know the count by your years, and thank you very much. It will be a pleasure working with fellow servants of peace."

Applause, of varying enthusiasm (Missy was on one end, Sophia in her corner was another), sounded around the room.

"Second, allow me to please voice, in all probability again, that instantly accepting a deal was an incredibly poor plan, and the fact that Ms. Hebert here is not apparently Mastered or otherwise having even less rational thought than what she showed last night is a dodged nuke, let alone a bullet."

...This was going to be the theme of today, wasn't it? Poor, dumb, reckless Taylor. By this point I was getting sick of the whole damn phrase.

I did scent Colin though - apparently this was more for the benefit of the Wards at large. If anything, that made me more unhappy about it - I didn't like the undercurrent of public shaming here. Even if it was probably a good idea.

"Based on Mr. Menon's reported reaction, we can assume that the collection of species native to Baator has a reputation for making extremely weighted deals, and based on market analysis, we can assume they wanted this as a prelude to further, more harsh dealings in the future-"

"You could say that they had her as an example of 'first one's free' and save yourself a lot of air, you know," Dennis quipped.

Colin opened his mouth to retort...then closed it.

"Not entirely similar to drug sellers, but yes."

He cleared his throat.

"While it is likely we will have productive dealings with both species in the future, and Tybalt's prejudice is likely unreasonable," he continued, ignoring the snort of derision from the subject,
"said prejudices do not occur in a vacuum. We can only assume they have colonialist ideals and regard doing whatever it takes to preserve the empire against a very old and very tenacious enemy as a virtue. Both traits are rather dangerous to other cultures in contact with them."

Huh, that was actually rather wise of a perspective. Maybe he was learning how to avoid-

"So please, do not follow her example, we do not wish to become the first organization to be compromised by Baator intelligence. In all likelihood there will be plants for the same reason all countries cultivate assets everywhere they have a presence, but we likely cannot weather the scandal so soon after the Chimaera incident and resulting effects, and we need someone else to screw up publicly and vastly first to gain the attention of the news cycle."

…being self-defeating again with his explanations. Go ye heroes, go and die. Why wasn't Hannah the official motivational speaker again? Give the team positions that they fit, how hard was that to comprehend!?

I swear, I was going to keep a counter for PRT Competence.

"That being said, I look forward to working with Mr. Menon on many future projects," Colin finished, at least ignoring the collection of raised eyebrows very well. "It'll be nice to finally have someone who actually explains the politics of dimensional cultures."

"It will be an honor, and I will volunteer as much information as is required for this project."

...Hang on, if he didn't want to explain why he was afraid of baatezu, why didn't he smell-

Lying by omission. Of course.

Another weakness, I guessed. If you only told part of the truth and left the rest to someone's imagination, you weren't actively deceiving people through your words, hence sin-scent. Had to train these things to pick up general deceptiveness.

No sooner than that did I catch a new scent. From it, I could detect the scent of emotional manipulation towards don't ask me to volunteer information I don't want to say.

And just as importantly help Taylor realize there's more than a few ways of being deceptive. Huh.

"Good. With that out of the way - Hebert, you don't need him for an hour or so?"

"Didn't have an opportunity to train any spells, and from his comments, I need to do it in the morning, so..no harm, no foul."

"Excellent. We will be doing patrols later tonight. Negotiations are in progress about when the expeditionary Baator fleet will arrive, so...here's hoping Simurgh won't show up."

Ah, yes. She wasn't a fan of space travel, was she?

The next few weeks were kind of a lull, to be honest. I even had days that were slightly boring. It was bliss.

Over the course of single days, that is to say. Plenty interesting things occurred over the course of the weeks. That particular day, for instance, had the New and Improved Adrasteia's first outing on patrol.

Also known as "the easiest robbery interruption in the history of the Brockton Bay Wards."
"I have come for you. Surrender...?"

It wasn't so much the sensation of my shadow *shifting* as a bolt of utterly black energy lanced the store invader between the eyes.

It was the barely visible eyes of the mugger behind his ski mask suddenly crossed before he fell face first on top of his time-frozen compatriot.

"...Did I do that?", I asked rhetorically. "...He's okay, isn't he?"

"Oh, he's fine," a smirking Tybalt replied. "That was your first hex, I'd say. Witches develop these strange, instinctive abilities that aren't quite spells and are infinitely easier to access. That one you just did is a classic variety, the hex of slumber that puts the weak-willed into a helpless but brief sleep. Changed the tide of battle a few times."

"So...he's asleep?" I said, walking over to check for a pulse.

Didn't need to. He snored.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I quickly handcuffed him, quietly to avoid waking him up.

Unlike some people I had really gotten sick of over the course of the day.

Clockblocker, upon realizing that both muggers were okay, soon realized they were in a rather...romantic position, partly because the snoring mugger literally **snuggled** his buddy.

Upon hearing the beginning snort, I turned to Tybalt. "Any long-term effects?" I whispered.

"No, unless the hexed can't avoid anything sharp on the way down."

Then Vista. *Do you mind?* I mouthed to my other partner.

She quickly proved herself quick on the draw. *Worth a shot.*

"No, no, no, cuff them together for when they wake up, let me get out my phoonnggh...Zzz."

The look of sheer happiness on Vista's face (and silence) was all the reward I needed.

After pulling the robbers a dignified distance away from each other, I quietly poked my other teammate awake.

"...I kind of deserved that, didn't I?"

"Hello, Captain Obvious. Mind telling us where you put the actual Ward?"

Much to the surprise of absolutely no one, the punishment for using a power on a teammate was...rather merciful, in this case. I swear, I had never seen Colin *smile* before.

---

Narcolepsy on demand aside, the rest of my newfound powers in the mystical realm weren't shabby, either.

Of course, it took a day by necessity, due to the dream-powered nature of spells; something I believed after my newest dream. Yes, this one was mundane (it involved breakfast with Panacea, I think), but the shadows were always noticeable. Always dark, always crisp, always...comforting. Sort of like a safety rope when spelunking into the madness of a dream.
When I woke up, the shadows were still there. Full of potential, asking me *What do you want us to be?*

Of course, I didn't know how to answer. Tybalt did that.

"Defining trait of witchcraft, unfortunately. You bought the Art off a greater force, it isn't yours. You need a familiar, like myself, to commune with that force and actually get spells out of it." He shrugged, an oddly cute thing on a cat. "Still, your blood seems to have sped your sleep cycle up. Most mages I've dealt with, not only witches, usually require eight hours rather than four."

And finally my tendency to wake up long before the crack of dawn was useful. I did have this habit of doing my homework before bed, so most of the time I was patiently waiting. There's only so many activities you can do to avoid waking people up, and the unique activity open to me (sniffing the PRT building for any tidbits I could scrounge) struck me as a massive invasion of privacy, and more importantly pointless.

Communion, as a process, wasn't all that interesting - comparatively speaking to what had happened over the past weeks. More like group meditation, albeit group meditation where I could feel bits of information entering into those pools of potential-darkness, giving them forms. Tybalt doing his thing, I guess.

Most of these spells were minor things from the information entering my brain. One, I could tell from the feel, had the ability to create small sparks of fire - useful, except this spark was fairly fragile. More like a reusable match. Still, I could see a lot of potential in that alone, I was fireproof after all.

Another could create balls of light and move them around. Great for distractions, let alone a personal flashlight. Another was a sort of mystical taser, using a bit of sweat generated by me or Tybalt to deliver a tiring force that relaxed muscles and made it difficult to move. Excellent, probably safer than my old taser lance too. Finally, a repair spell. Effective on all non-magical technology, and costing nothing. I noted to test that on Colin's tech before I tooted my horn, I didn't want to face the disappointed Tinker if it failed. If it worked, lots of brownie points with the boss and I could get an in with others. Maybe Uber and Leet, taking the latter as an apprentice when that time came along. Pity both were rather petty about their schemes.

Two though-two absorbed their pools of potential-darkness entirely, leaving only themselves. One was a spell to create a mute simulacra, the other a spell to call a beast from another dimension. A small one, but a useful one.

When we came out, Tybalt was pacing, obviously thinking to himself.

"Based on what I'm getting over the link, you seem to have developed what many people view as the defining hexes of witchcraft, the evil eye and a cackle," Tybalt said, pacing. "First is a sort of general mental hex that affects even those strong of will with lethargy and hesitation, though to a much lesser degree. The cackle, besides being an intimidation tactic, adds extra energy to the dweomers of hexes, bolstering their duration."

He spun back around. "The first also doubles as a tenderizer of minds for a more final hex. Even better, it's easy to activate - just focus on someone failing in a specific way, it's not even difficult to multitask while fighting."

Okay then. I handed Tybalt his notepad for the Piggot report.

Later, I related the information myself to the rapt Wards, whilst Tybalt took the time to be fitted
with a tracking collar. Actually looked rather cool, to the point I wondered if that was intentional.

"Before we continue, can you go out and start using those training devices of yours? Bit difficult to work with a bad luck hex if you're not doing something you could fail at," he said.

Carlos cleared his throat. "Er, wouldn't it be easier to have a volunteer?"

Tybalt paused for a second. "...Actually yes. Any takers?"

Carlos held up his hand. Everyone else took a step back.

"...Understandable. Okay then…"

And with that, Aegis stood in front of the Gatling Batter, setting it to high.

"All right then, Ms. Hebert. Do as you will."

Internally, I was already picturing the bean bags coming out, and Carlos blocking instead of dodging.

As the machine whirred to life, I then imagined that block being a little slower. And for a second, the image seemed to go from thought to actual visual input.

"Um, if he's supposed to fail shouldn't that be on a safer-" Dean started to say.

Too late. I felt my shadow shift as his reaction times slowed - though I could only see that because a bean bag nailed him right in the face before his hand came out. And the crash of him being ricocheted off the safety cushions.

"Ahem. Ahh-ha-ha-ha!"

...Wow, that was going to get really annoying, really fast. But the shadow shifted again and I felt something, almost like a small storm, gain intensity. I could tell he was pulling himself off the ground slower than he normally would.

"Okay, test done. Sorry!"

"Forgiven," he said, smiling despite the forming black eye.

With bloody nose. Ouch.

"...Right, that was my idea, I accept the blame," Tybalt muttered. "She wasn't really amused by your suffering!"

Of course it was irrational for me to feel judged, but still, I bet that laugh stung. Guessed that was why "witch" was a polite term for another negative female stereotype. Even when we're trying to be nice, we sound like assholes.

I would make it up, with my next trick. I mean, how bad could a summoning spell go, candles or no candles?

---

Apparently irony was something that affected everyone.

"Ah, that would be a Greater Oceanus Sky-Bellied Pond Skimmer, a noble and adaptable species known for its-"
"Tybalt, it's a toad."

"...A most noble species of amphibian with some of the most interesting bufotoxin known-

"It's a toad, Tybalt. You don't have to save face by making this into an impromptu nature documentary."

The Greater Oceanus Sky-Bellied Pond Skimmer in question, having apparently recovered from the shock of finding itself in a very dry quarantine case, interjected its own viewpoint into the conversation: "Krrrrk."

Truth is, you wouldn't realize this thing was a toad rather than a frog at first glance (technically there wasn't a taxonomic difference, but eh). It was certainly very brightly colored - a lot of dark black stripes over, as the name implied, blue skin. This was definitely a toad rather than a frog though - besides the poison sacs, it had a stout, wide build and warts, for one, and it definitely warbled rather than ribbited. Yes, this was a toad. A pretty toad, but a toad.

Definitely not the most impressive thing ever.

Ignoring Dennis' suppressed laugh, Colin walked up to the toad and gingerly picked it up using the glass case's glove holes. "Hm. Looks like another way a Sonoran Desert toad could have evolved, almost." He turned it over. "Proportions are similar, sound has a comparable cadence, only slightly larger than standard Desert toads - I don't see much difference, apart from the obvious."

"Open her - that's a female, yes - mouth."

The recently-revealed-to-be-multitalented Tinker did.

And nearly dropped her.

A pearly white set of canines were quickly retracted into her mouth, as she licked her lips in discomfort.

"Most toads and frogs from the Beastlands, this one's native ecosystem, have fangs to deliver that bufotoxin. We think it's because their native prey is just that hardy, that it needs to be paralyzed in order to be actually eaten."

Huh. So maybe there was something useful in this thing. "Can the poison be harvested?"

"It is, all the time. It's also safe for the toad, as someone just as to make them bite a collection jar and milk them. Like snakes."

He looked back to the Skimmer. "I'd advise forgetting this spell and picking up another one though - I remember a few from my previous stint as a familiar. At your level of skill, she won't be here very long, and besides, getting a toad in close enough to bite people is...rather difficult."

Colin's head shot up. "Won't be here very long?"

"Ah, summoning works not by bringing the actual creature, but by linking the real being's mind and a perfect simulacrum created from magical energy - to use an analogy, this Pond Skimmer is actually the player character in a video game controlled by her real self. Her real body is locked in time, safely hidden away - not unlike Mr...uh..."

It suddenly occurred to both him and I that we never actually knew Dennis' last name.
Or anyone else, it seemed. More than likely Colin did but was remaining mute.

We turned to him expectantly.

He suddenly turned very red and mumbled something.

"Er?"

"...abe...vy."

"Eh?"

"MY LAST NAME IS ABERDOVEY, STOP ASKING ME!"

The world seemed to freeze for a second.

"...You have my condolences." And I meant it.

Before any of us could comment on this new insight into the mind of Clockblocker, I heard Colin startle.

When we jerked back, the patch of blue light where the toad once was was evaporating, and Colin was scowling at a dial that he had broken off his Halberd.

Which put me in mind of something else.

"Hey boss? Have any Tinkertech nicknacks on you that are lacking value and broken?"

He rose an eyebrow. "I put a nuclear timer in the helmet, but the display is cracked for the moment. Why?"

"Hey, can I try something? Just a small spell, nothing big..."

Five minutes (of Tybalt convincing him this wouldn't hurt the rest of the helmet, not including him taking the thing out of its slot) later, Colin was not scowling anymore. In fact, for the rest of the week, he had to fend off suspicions of being Mastered, given how uncharacteristically cheerful he was.

Much to my pleasure, the illusion spell wasn't nearly so unimpressive. I could already see the uses in crimefighting.

Or teasing Dennis right back.

"GAH! Doing nothing!" he said as he hurriedly put his cell phone behind him. "Paying attention to the magic demonstration, my middle name's attention, yes ma'am!"

Smirking, I rubbed the tiny bit of fleece in my shirt, causing the illusion of a scowling Piggot to vanish.

Dennis quickly caught on. "...You sure you weren't actually amused by Carlos getting hit in the face? That right there? Was evil."

"Hey, I named myself for someone who is literally called Nemesis in another language. Be glad I'm on your side."
"Point. I'd really hate to see what you'd come up with trying to scare me. Nightmares, lady. Nightmares of snakes in hair."

...I couldn't resist.

"Well, according to Tybalt, that earlier summoning spell's possible targets include, among other things-

"LALALALA CAN'T HEAR YOOOU LALALALA!"

The next couple weeks were part of the aforementioned lull. No supervillains attacking the Wards, although we did catch the E88 in the act once or twice, then stand by and watch the fireworks. No really grisly murders that required me, thank all that is holy.

No room for personal space, as I was now a semi-permanent fixture of Colin's workshop, but I was happy with what I could get.

True, there was the expected parade of impotently raging morons throwing spittle everywhere when the fact that parahumans were known as "mages" on another Earth, with a side of Purge The Alien, Don't Ask Why. There were legitimate concerns there too, particularly given Tybalt's own fear of the Baatorian species, but a lot of the stuff was just plain strange. One seemed to believe that the awnsheghlien were creations of the government (morbidly hilarious given what I knew of the PRT), a televangelist said me being a witch was a sign I was the Whore of Babylon (rude and rather creepy), while a third thought the baatezu were ancient astronauts whose cruelty gave rise to legends of demons (for a moment I thought Tybalt was choking on something when he heard that. Nope, he was just rolling on the floor laughing).

Beyond that rather annoyingly loud contingent, there was the more sane controversy. I had declined to watch the news for a week or so to avoid the storm, but one of the few things about the PRT I liked was the free computers. So I picked up on these things anyway while looking for a spare keyboard online (I already noticed cracks from my nails in the original).

One of the recommended news items was a rather long editorial piece questioning whether Dispater wasn't actually a callback to late Rome, or the British Empire. While he realized that it was largely pointless to lie (which already got my attention - someone with some common sense deserved to be at least noticed), he also pointed out that Baator's political situation was similar to Rome's relation to the barbarian tribes, with the tanar'ri (which, he pointed out, could just be Baator-ese for "barbarian", with a similar path to how that term developed (ie, "people who don't speak our language, and are angry at us"). Also like Rome, he pointed out, the variety of forms could easily be that, to the baatezu mindset, anyone who dressed and spoke like the rest of them, and gave heed to the King, was also baatezu. And that culture was likely forced upon them.

I knew full well that there was at least one race that did not think of themselves as baatezu, but I kept my mouth shut for two reasons - one, of course, was the cover story that I developed witch powers naturally, rather than cut a backroom deal with a Baator scientist. All of us, Wards, Protectorate, and PRT, agreed we didn't want to face that shitstorm.

The other was that I knew about as much about Baatorian culture as that guy did. Could be that while kytons viewed themselves as kytons, the baatezu didn't buy it - they were a tributary race who accepted Asmodeus' supremacy, they were baatezu. Or something much stranger - I didn't know what kind of society a monarchy with presumably modern communications technology would evolve into or out of, so they could be a special case. Assuming the baatezu thought that way at all.
Hell, Tybalt could be a tanar'ri to Baator sensibilities, even if he didn't look like those vultures, the crab-dog, or the green thing that was dissected in holding (the morticians admitted that its internal biology made no logical sense, so they guessed it was some kind of living weapon). Come to think of it, there was no particular reason to trust him, either, just a gut feeling that the silvanshee was genuinely concerned for the person on the other half of the familiar bond. But apart from his general helpfulness...not much, really. He never really talked about his past or race.

On the other hand, he was open about those things being secrets, and didn't try to dodge the conversation or actively deceive people. Just "sorry, but that has to remain a secret right now. Along with a lot of other things."

Or was that closed about the reason he was remaining secretive, mostly; "We agathions, by default, are often enemies of Baator. I'm already on shaky ground being here as is, and paranoia is a virtue to Baator. I really, really don't want to be forcefully taken back to Elysium. At best."

And frankly, being someone who was openly honest about having such a secretive nature was...really refreshing. You knew where you stood with Tybalt, if not his reasoning for that.

A lot better than being suddenly interrupted during a conversation by a sin-scent. I had long since learned to forgive white lies, but it was still jarring to have the stink because someone didn't want to comment on how demonic your wings were. Tybalt just bluntly said "can we not talk about that?"

Honesty while being nice was refreshing.

About mid-January, Amy's addition to the Dallon house (the snake pit, I had to will myself to avoid calling it) was complete.

Had to happen, of course, but I was a little sad to see her go. I liked having another awnshegh to talk to, someone who understood mutating into a very strange form like nobody else did.

Much to my surprise, Amy was not actually a vegetarian. Good for her, given how a quick examination of her new biology showed she probably couldn't digest plant matter any more, and both she and the nerd squad were reluctantly to see what would happen if she tried it in human form.

Much to my lack of surprise, Amy was...not a particularly cheerful individual when her sister wasn't around. It had to be painful, losing a parent.

...is the logic I used for the first week or so. Then she let something slip;

"Who knows, I might like whoever Mark does find a lot better," she said, utterly casually. No scent.

...What.

"...You don't miss her? At all?"

It took the medic a few seconds to realize what I had caught on to. "Er, I mean, I can't just let myself be caught in the past of course I grieve for her (half-truth)-"

"Amy. I can tell when you're actively lying." I was trying not to get angry. "Explain yourself."

A very long silence followed as Amy's head began to droop downwards.
Then, when she couldn't look down any further, seeming utterly ashamed of herself, she muttered something I barely heard. "...She wished I was never born."

No scent. She was honest.

.....

No, no, I had to be making a mistake, she could not be honest about this, there had to be a bit of bitterness over leaving her-

"She hated me. Hated my existence, viewed me as a burden."

Scentless.

I laughed nervously, still unwilling to accept a hero could be that kind of a parent. "I...you...I know you're angry, but let's not leap-"

A slap. I flew back

I saw scales flicker across Amy's enraged face.

**YOU BITCH! YOU DON'T GET TO PRY AND THEN JUST WRITE OFF PERSONAL SECRETS LIKE THAT!** he telepathic voice roared, somehow defining despite being thought. **JUST BECAUSE YOU HAVE A HALF-DECENT DAD! WELL GUESS WHAT, NOT ALL OF US ARE THAT LUCKY YOU CALLOUS, SPOiled, SELF-RIGHTeous, BITCH!**

And then she started crying.

Oh God.

How could I have been so...**insensitive**?

"I'm...I'm sorry." I said, embracing her. "I...didn't know."

"Shh, shh. It's okay...it's all right," I heard Tybalt say. Forgot he was there.

"I...she...thanks..." I heard the younger Dallon murmur into my arms.

She calmed down a little, but was pretty unwilling to talk about her outburst for the rest of the week.

---

The week after that, she called me up to her room, allowing Tybalt. I was expecting that.

I was not expecting the conversation opener.

"My biological father was a villain."

I spat out the water I was drinking.

After clearing out my throat, I pulled out a chair. This was going to be a long talk.

A few seconds later, I came up with the best response I could think of.

"...Did you know while you were with him?"
"That's the thing. I can't say." Amy really didn't like talking to people in snake form, I had realized. She didn't mind leaving her feathers obvious, like now, but otherwise she held back her urge to turn into a snake until the conversation was over.

That being said, I had theorized (read here; guessed) her cells rejiggered her intuitive sense of what the "real Amy" looked like, and when she got particularly upset, she instinctively tried to go into ophidian-mode as a defense mechanism to comfort herself. As seen when she resorted to telepathy and briefly showed scaled when she was screaming at me earlier.

Evidence for this theory was shown by the fact her lower half was now a tail, and her arms looked more like wings. Internal chaos as obvious outside as it was in.

"I don't remember. I mean, I was six, so it's not that strange, but I don't recall who he was, or what he even looked like. Memory suppression, I suppose." She looked away. "As far as I know, I came into existence at the age of six."

"But...I exissted before that, didn't I?" I saw the beginnings of a forked tongue dart out. "Or...he did."

I caught on. "...You think she kept on seeing your father and not you."

She nodded.

"...Listen, you can't help where you came from-"

"But that'ss the problem, isn't it!?" Her face was scaly now. "I mean, I know how power inheritance workss! My power probably lookss like hisss, and-"

She choked, before wiggling out of her shirt and going full snake.

**And...my ability to kill with my power isn't new.**

I didn't get what she was implying.

Tybalt, on the other hand, apparently had experience. "And the power you inherited is easily turned to selfish ends, isn't it." A statement, not a question.

**Selfish ends? I could provoke a mass extinction in a week!**

I jumped back a little. Holy shit.

**My power? It's raw biological sculpting.** She swallowed. I can't affect my own cells, but viruses? Bacteria? Other people's cells? Just a touch, and I've given someone SARS, the bubonic plague, and fast-acting cancer, if I want to be slow. Want to be fast, I just wall off their heart or take their lungs out of their body. The real reason I don't fight? I'm scared of what I can do.

I've known that. I've always known that. So I threw myself into being a healer. The girl who could cure cancer with a touch, even though it's always been at the back of my mind.

I nodded. "Well, you've done pretty well for yourself there. You've managed to escape the family business."

**Yeah. And it's worse!**
I jumped back. Huh?

I never wanted powers. I only got them after Vic was nearly paralyzed from the waist down during her first real attempt to be a heroine. And that's when it hit me, just how easily I could fall, become the worst monster in existence. Great power, great responsibility, the whole shebang.

She was actually frantic now. **So, I started volunteering. Every night, I'm the nurse for cases the real doctors can't do or don't want. Every night, when Victoria's not on patrol. Except I can't save everyone, and I don't use my full potential, because then I'll go power mad, and start using my power for useful things, and—**

**And that's not all. Have I told you about this one man?**

"...No?" I replied. Already dreading the answer.

**Well, I'm out on my rounds, volunteering at the ICU, tired, angry, grouchy - I get asked to help this one older man. He's sick, he's not doing well, so naturally they ask me. Thing is, I'm getting ready to sleep, and just for a moment...**

She breathed, obviously composing herself.

**I wanted him to die. I want to just take a breath, leave him there. Just let cancer take its course, I'm only going to give him a week. Just to give myself a chance to sleep.**

I can't speak. I wasn't not sure whether to hug her or run.

Then she started crying.

**T-that's when I realized...I'm my father's daughter after all.**

Decision made.

"Oh, Amy…"

I wrap my wings around her midsection.

**I can't escape it!** her mind-voice wailed. **Sociopathy is genetic, and if I can consider that, that means I can consider more things, and someday...someday...**

"Someday you realize nobody is perfect?"

The hell?

I whipped around to face the last person I had expected to hear that acerbic, bitter tone from.

"Someday you'll realize there are worse people in the world than a workaholic cleric in need of a sick day?" Tybalt continued. "Someday you-"

He cleared his throat. "Sorry. You just reminded me of someone I didn't like very much. He ended badly."

Now it was my turn to be caustic. "Well, I suppose the girl going through an existential crisis is dislikable enough to not be your problem then, eh?"
"No, no, and yes, that was insensitive of me." He sighed. "It's just that - I've had a very long life, and I've seen worse. Infinitely worse. As in, you could kill all life on this planet with a sapient disease that causes brain tissue to turn into spiders that eat their way out, and I'd still pity you more than hate you. Even if it's because I know who you were before you became that world-devouring monster."

Completely honest there. I marveled at his ability to remain sane despite that.

"But your father - do you know his name, at least?"

...No,

she replied.

"Ah. Well, for one thing, we need to find that out. For another, despite whatever your father did, you are not him. You have his power's cousin, yes, but a common trait among capes I've noticed? All of them have the potential to destroy, the potential to make their wielders' monsters. You aren't unique in that curse of temptation, nor are you inherently a monster because of it."

She cleared her throat, flapping her wings.

"Mentally," he quickly added. "But, my point is that by simply proving you're capable of deciding to permanently sheath the sword that's a part of you, you've proven you aren't under its control. You're more than your potential to destroy."

For how long?, she retorted. Has Taylor told you about Chimaera?

"I already know from both her memories and browsing your internet."

 Didn't I know. I still remembered his utterly befuddled reaction when he discovered lolcats ("I do not understand your world's sense of humor…").

If I'm so capable of controlling my power, what happens when I lose control? she said. I can't change my genes, that family is a part of me. What can change the nature of those born broken?

There was a brief pause, before Tybalt broke out in the widest smile I had ever seen.

"...Well, do you believe you can change your nature? That's the trick. Ask the Nameless One, he was kind of obsessed with the idea."

"...Um," I started.

"Yes, yes, you don't know the reference. It's an old story, long before my time," he said, still grinning. "Probably rather mangled too."

He started to pace. "Anyway, in the city of Sigil, a crossroads of the planes, there's a story of a man who committed a sin so great, a single mortal lifetime was not nearly long enough to make restitution. What this sin is, nobody knows, and it's likely he forgot himself. I'm getting there!" he said quickly as he noticed both females about to say something. He said quickly as he noticed both females about to say something. He said quickly as he noticed both females about to say something.

"Anyway, the Nameless One, so the story goes, decided to find a way to live many mortal lifetimes instead," he continued. "Only thing was, all the methods of immortality he knew of required a purer soul than he or even more sins to accomplish. So, he found a sorceress, a night hag called Ravel Puzzlewell, one as wise as she was vicious, wise enough to understand that some puzzles deserve to be solved even though nobody needs them solved, nobody can solve. Very philosophical point there but - I digress."
"In time, he wooed Ravel with his own wisdom, and in her love she, for the first and only time, acted for another, and assisted him in his quest for more time. But the method she chose, while wise, was also rooted in viciousness." He stopped his pacing for a moment. "To put it bluntly, she tore away a bit from his soul - his ability to die. No matter how much he might wish.

It took me all of four seconds to catch on to how horrible that would be. **I am going to have nightmares about how he ended up, aren't I?**, Amy concurred.

"Not in the way you'd imagine," Tybalt replied. "This story isn't a tragic play, although some might claim it. Anyway," he said, returning to his pacing, "just because the Nameless One's soul couldn't die didn't mean the rest of his body couldn't - a personal request of his. To test this, Ravel killed him with her thorns, but this is where it was discovered that the lack of mortality, as opposed to immortality, has a flaw in and of itself - for a few brief minutes, the Nameless One was caught between life and death, where his soul would float free to wherever perdition he felt he deserved...but he was bound to his body. So only his memories went away, to wherever forgotten things go. The soul stayed, the body healed with energy stolen from that state of in-between...but the man who allowed a sorceress to tear away his mortality did die, in a sense. The person who woke up was a total stranger to the world. Certainly with no ability to remember there was something he had to atone for."

Ah. Irony gets the best of us. "That had to suck for Ravel, too."

"Quite. Her story goes on, and she became one of the most feared and learned mages in the planes, but hers is indeed a tragedy - her selfishness prevented her from finding love again and healing her guilt and grief, for she did not offer it, nor was it offered to her. Eventually, she died, largely alone and completely unmourned. But her story is not that of the Nameless One, although it intersects in places. So, back to the main tale."

"But, and here's a rather large but, it's my personal reading and the agathion view in general that this form of undying life is what truly damned him. It's my personal opinion that no sin, no crime so great as to not be atoned for in a single lifetime, only that which requires greater effort. No sin, unless the sin itself allows for its own repetition, that it is not one crime but the first in a chain of crimes, that don't stop. Not until they are made too." He stopped again, turning to us with grim seriousness. "And the lives of the Nameless One were a perfect example."

Amy rose an...eye socket, I guess. She had eyelids in her snake form, but no hair to form brows. **I don't see how, unless you consider reviving the dead a sin**-

"It isn't. I should know." Wasn't sure if he was seriously talking about a fact (no bringing back the dead, but I could see magic being used to reverse death of the body before the mind bit the dust), though it was certainly his opinion. "It's where he got those extra lives from."

I caught on. "You don't mean-"

"I do. Every time he died, the imbalance caused by his soul being drawn to the threshold of death and yet not going onwards caused death, in an effort to avoid the universe being broken, to cause a random, sudden, and senseless end somewhere else. Every one of his deaths was a murder, every slaying another living shield between him and the Reaper."

**I stand corrected. That's horrible**, Amy said, genuinely disgusted. I had to agree there.

"And it gets worse," Tybalt went on. "Because the Nameless One only half-died, the people he unwittingly slayed half-lived, a horrible boundary state between life and death, wanting desperately to move on yet knowing that, so long as their murderer lived, they could not. So they, as one, tried
to kill him." He paused. "I'll give you three guesses to figure out the irony of this."

A few seconds. A few more seconds of silence, as I found the idea itself so horrifying I didn't want to acknowledge it.

Amy did that for me. **Oh. Oh God.**

I just...wow. Now I was going to have nightmares about killing people by sheer accident.

Tybalt returned to pacing. "And so it continued. How long, no one can say. Likely thousands, perhaps millions of years. Eventually, one of his incarnations, his soul so damaged he was no longer as vulnerable to losing his memories, came to eventually try and figure out how he came to be. There's thousands of variations in the stories on what he did, thousands more than any of his other known incarnations - even if you buy the idea he was every known historical figure. But all agree that he eventually reunited with his lost mortality - by which time, it had become effectively a god unto itself, the repeated deaths of its other half allowing it great knowledge of the threshold of death, and with it, power. Once that happened, the Nameless One not only possessed all of his lives memories, but also the life force to power the potential his mortality had. He could have very easily wished for true immortality at that point, or even destroy his awaiting perdition."

"But, and this is what makes it not a tragedy," he continued, not pacing this time. "The Nameless One who reunited was a completely different man than the one who met Ravel. This Nameless One simply resurrected his friends, the people who gave their lives for him to finally die forever and end his cursed cycle, sent them to safety and then willingly accepted the punishment for all of his sins. For the Nameless One's nature had changed, and he accepted that what he had done - by his own measure - was irredeemable, and the real motive for his method of redemption was fear of punishment rather than a desire to set things right. Or so we agathions say," he quickly added.

"Even now, it's said, his descendants live on in the dark places, for his acceptance of his fate touched the hearts of the gods of light and justice," he continued, a distant look in his eyes. "Every so often, it's said, when a soul steeped in regret for sins dies without a chance to truly atone, the gods reach down and give that soul a new body, scarred and mutated like the Nameless One's own, to bring good and kindness to the place where it is most needed. Most fail in this last chance, but a few overcome the darkness they had first died in and allowed the peace their ancestor never allowed himself to have, their nature truly changed."

We stood in silence for a few seconds.

Then, Amy cleared her throat. **Okay...what does this little tangent have to do with me again?**

"Everything, of course," said Tybalt. "The Torment Cycle is all about redemption when it seems impossible. Compared to the Nameless One, who condemned at least a few million to death out of fear and ignorance, your level of corruption barely reaches the level of flipping off a box of kittens." He thought about this. "Which is still a massively uncouth and poor thing to do, but not one that leaves lasting scars."

She thought about this for a while, before wiggling back into her normal clothes and changing back to human. "...Thanks for the attempt. I really just needed to unload on someone, but I'll try to look for it when the baatezu get here."

"My work here, is done," Tybalt said, smiling. "Really, I'm something of a fanatic when it comes to the Nameless One and his story. Did I ever tell you-"

"No, don't wanna hear it," I interrupted. I saw fanatics on Parahumans Online, and I really did not
want to hear a verbal form of that.

"No, there's a wonderful debate on how important love was to the final-"

"No."

"Please?"

"NO."

This continued for a while. In all truth, I would have loved to hear more of the Torment Cycle, since it sounded like a good story, but my mind was elsewhere.

Namely, on how Amy would react upon, and if, she discovered certain traits of awnsheglieh beyond mutation.

Internally, I resolved to keep a close eye on my "cousin" from then on.

Of course, this lovely, boring chapter couldn't last.

"Fellow peoples of Earth it is my great pleasure to announce that the stars are about to come a little bit closer..."

A charter date for the baatezu delegation. February the 20th.

The date for the birth of a new world.

One I wasn't sure I was going to like.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter, another property I don't own. Planescape: Torment is the property of Black Isle Studios, and you should play it, or at least watch a Let's Play. Seriously, it's good.
And now we get to the chapter whose basic premises changed the most! Seriously, I was initially having it that Taylor trusted the baatezu implicitly at first, but now? Now that’s simply OOC. Probably better this way.

Also, remember the Teddy I Didn’t Own? Answer key’s coming up this chapter. I didn't need to throw that reference in, either, but it makes sense given how its owner is a kyton.

(Also, “nemeses” is a real word).

I wasn’t sure what to expect, really, when a day I was sure was going to be a holiday rolled around. A lot, certainly, but Tybalt ruined the eagerness of meeting an entirely new type of sapient life.

I also didn’t particularly enjoy the fact that the Protectorate were displayed prominently on rooftops. Probably to supposedly ward away the Simurgh, but more likely to give the appearance of doing so. If the Simurgh wanted to show her displeasure at star- and dimension-farers, she would do so, highly-competent canon fodder be damned. Thus, it did nothing except make me worry for them as well - easy targets all.

My “escort”, being what he was, quickly picked up on this. “Hey, you’re not alone in being scared. I’ve read up on that false angel, she could give a dragon chills.”

Nex, while he had happily signed up with the Protectorate of Brockton Bay at large on the basis of paycheck and board (he actively turned down the offer to help him get home - “Doppelgangers aren’t wolves, and besides, there’s nothing there left that I care about. Mother died a long time ago, if I want a family I can find company enough here”). Since he was neither a particularly good fighter or possessing a cape name yet (Glenn was still working on how to spin a living invasion of privacy to the heroic side of things), he was on guard duty, both for the sake of the Wards and to find any crazies who weren’t fans of the idea of first contact.

“You’re lucky though - you know how telepathy works and probably how to defend against it,” I whispered back. “Up until you came along, we thought she was the only true telepath in existence, particularly given her mental rejiggering of people.”

“True. It was horrible enough being charmed, I’d hate worrying if I was actually enchanted or not.”

I nodded. “And then there’s the people who think everything is playing along to her schemes…”

The “PRT guard” shivered. “Hard to disbelieve them, sometimes.”

Clockblocker cleared his throat. “Let’s not continue this line of conversation to ‘suspect everyone of being influenced by the Simurgh and start shooting wildly, stage’ eh? I don’t exactly have the
best defense against that.”

A chorus of affirmatives. Somewhat nervous-sounding affirmatives.

Truth is, Nex had been nervous all week. We hadn’t really gotten his opinion on the baatezu (apart from “sorry, planes are not my area of expertise”), but he had gotten more and more on edge and paranoid as the 20th came around. When asked, he admitted the truth; “I’m not quite sure which would be worse; that fake angel of yours or fiends running roughshod over the world.”

When asked to describe what he meant by “fiends” a little more, he suddenly decided to clam up, citing a previous contract of his. I suspected it had more to do with Tybalt suddenly wincing while making an odd gesture with his claw while “coughing on a furball.”

It was at that point I finally decided to ask him about his secrecy.

In his words: “Again, I only have your safety in mind here. Suffice to say that ‘fiend’ is a pejorative that also happens to be a proper term for life from Baator and its sister planes-slash-nemeses. One that is all too often deserved.”

In mine: “So...Baator is a rather hostile dimension, fauna-wise?”

“Once again, you follow a conversation quite well. You think the fangs on a Pond Skimmer are intimidating, you should see a Hadesian Grey Lava Skipper. Teeth as large as their eyes and a personality just as unfriendly. Just as poisonous as a Skimmer, too.”

Hm. Pity I didn’t get Baatorian wildlife when summoning, I could use the intimidation factor.

And so, in the present, we remained in silence.

For ten more minutes.

That’s when the “meteor” fell.

“That’s right Frank, the biggest question on our minds is...what is it?”

The newscasters were obviously in agony simply by the tone of their voice.

The object did kind of look like a basketball-sized meteor, if meteors were polyhedrons. Nine sides to a face, nine faces altogether. The baatezu had apparently cheated, however, if they wanted a sphere - there was a lot of space between the faces, to the point where the faces were more indentations than anything.

It was definitely moving though. Or rolling, slowly, out of its crater.

“Teleporter?” I whispered to Tybalt. Would make sense, would be safer than space missions.

“...Not sure. I know many things but Baator tech isn’t one,” he replied, grinning apologetically. “Mostly wildlife.”

Ah. Well, damn. Suppose I would have to wait.
And run, if needed. Didn’t want to face an invading force head on, not without some artillery. Or *with* a dock full of potential collateral damage.

The ball kept on rolling out, apparently showing the power of baatezu technology to shove several subjective hours into ten minutes.

Finally, however, the thing fully rolled out of its hole, came to a stop, and...reshaped? Wasn’t sure if there was, in fact, a word for it changing its structure so that it was more of a dome, with the nine faces all facing the heavens. ...Morphed into the aforementioned shape, eight of the faces arranged around the center in a circle.

It’s around that point that I noticed the design on the center face was the same, strange implied-cloaked figure as the “SOUND ONLY” setting of the projector. A symbol of Baator itself, perhaps?

Then, all of them lit up, nine columns of light piercing the sky.

And, by the looks of it, the fabric of space.

A starry hole in the world was quickly widened, the light beams stretching it open like fingers widening a rip. Through it, a strange night sky with stars that glowed red as well as white twinkled.

Then, the hole got a lot bigger. Revealing a shape that initially looked black, until it started to float down to its side of the portal.

*Or was it...many shapes?*

The answer was not quite forthcoming. I wasn’t sure if this was one ship or many, even after it exited the portal to Earth Bet.

Frankly, I wasn’t even sure if this ship—that-may-in-fact-be-many wasn’t actually an art piece the baatezu found lying around and decided it looked impressive enough to make a good first impression. Which would not be an error in judgement.

The vessel was almost a lattice of red, black, and grey, a dark snowflake. Modules tethered by girders rotated gently around a central core as large as a smaller skyscraper (around six hundred feet, eyeballing it), and almost as boxy. Shutters rolled back to reveal massive windows from which indistinct figures could be seen, quietly darting about. As the main body descended, the other modules started to congregate on one plane, like a simple model of a solar system with a rectangular sun. As they got closer, my confusion about this being a dock for other ships deepened, as the “modules” looked more like other ships that had been attached to the lattice. But how would they get the clamps out of the way of space debris?

Then again, I was talking about a people that had mastered stellar transportation. They probably had ways.

Eventually, the whole thing slowly alit on the water, steam rushing out in a great fog as the loud *thunk* of the bottom digging into the sea bed could be heard. The lattice descended, the
modules going down with it to rest on the waves. A small bit detached from the central structure, a cube that quickly revealed a propeller. The polygonal boat quickly steered itself to the pier, presenting its starboard side.

Then, what I thought to be a wall opened.

Dozens of the masked soldiers called from the dinar stood impassively at the extending hatch, before moving, in formation, outwards onto the dock. The soldiers that had come with the ambassador nervously tightened their grip around their guns, but it wasn’t necessary - upon reaching the ground, each and every one simply went to opposite sides, standing at attention.

Soon, the soldiers were depleted, and another shape came up from behind them, escorted by two tusked humanoids with...what looked like armor welded to their hide, something from the expressions on them was not a comfortable experience. But they walked with the same ease as the creature between them, a chubby, gargoylike being with a puglike nose, wearing the formal uniform of a naval captain, white and pristine, with prominent medals. It...he, I guessed (could have been a she, which as shallow as it seems I didn’t want to acknowledge out of pity...though by baatezu standards this could be a catch) surveyed the assembled humans, before bowing his head and motioning behind him, striding out of the way along with his escort.

Behind him, striding with purpose and strength was quite possibly the most handsome man I had ever seen. Violet eyes looked out from a face that looked almost sculpted deliberately, with only just enough flaw to recognize this fellow was...well, not human, but a real person instead of an animate doll. Red hair, tied in an almost Revolution-era ponytail, flowed like a crimson waterfall between two great, black wings whose color blended seamlessly with his three-piece suit, so seamless it actually took me a second to realize those were living things and not a part of the suit. A dark, postmodern angel.

The people behind him drew my attention more than that, actually. His escort, dressed in military wear, were the same hawk-winged angels as Dispater showed during his demonstration.

They...really did look like me. No talons, snakes, or bat wings, yes, but I knew the contours of that face, the harsh gaze and lithe muscle structure. I saw it every day in the mirror.

At some point, the dark angel had made his way over to the ambassador, bowing his head. The sudden motion from someone whose head had previously been quite statuesque snapped me out of the reverie of taking in every detail of someone else who actually resembled my...unique form.

“You are Leonard McCaskill, yes?” a smooth, lyrical voice intoned. Almost like melted chocolate, or the ruffling of silk.

Or a handsome snake, I suddenly realized.

McCaskill quickly shook himself out of his own awe of the baatezu diplomat. “Yes, quite. Allow me to welcome you to Earth Bet, Mr...?”

“Vapula. Corcell Vapula. And it is truly a pleasure,” he said, quietly taking the other man’s hand to shake with both his own, smiling broadly. “Let our worlds’ partnership be fruitful to us both.”

And the cheering was deafening.

I think I was the only person in that crowd who was more reserved. I smelled the half-truth in that
The political skullduggery this being was capable of.

And the cologne that somehow blocked the rest of the sin-scent.

The next few minutes were not all that interesting. There was the obvious trading of compliments and flattery (I swore, all politicians were the same...myself included). Then there was grilling Vapula about what he was (a brachina, a “erinyes captain,” as he put it), then the actual business began. I quickly noticed that Vapula spoke with the same barking accent as Cordelia did, but it was massively subdued. Wondered if that was intentional on his part.

First on the agenda: The answer to that question about whether those were modules or ships.

“Before we continue, may I ask permission for the subfleet to dock and disembark as well? My fellows are nonessential personnel, and we do get bored fairly easily. And seasick.”

He looked expectantly at a colonel. One call (and ten minutes) later, the lattice broke apart.

Turned out that the lattice was actually a bunch of independent bits that had been fused together, and now that it wasn’t needed anymore, the individual parts detached and literally flew back into the ship, stacking themselves into alcoves. Gravity manipulation...I guessed. I really didn’t know how-

Wait, I’m seeing the technology of a people with literal magic. What was and was not possible was flexible. So more likely magic-based gadgets. Okay, same stuff as Breaker abilities.

The mod-er, fleet quickly skimmed over the water to the shore - apparently baatezu were fans of water landings. Made sense, if Baator was Earthlike at all. Less chance to screw up and hit something you don’t want if you needed to fly in blind.

Cockpits opened up, revealing...quite the colorful group.

A few of them were the grey, cobweb-covered knights. A few more, in the more ostentatious vehicles, were the same pug-nosed gargoyles as the main ship’s captain, though these guys wore plain combat uniforms. The others...I guessed the chain-covered people were kytons, obviously, but besides examples of Cordelia’s own normal-if-blue human form with chain clothes (of both genders), a few had little in the way of chains, instead possessing tattoos that, on second glance, looked more like deliberate scarring, and almost sculpted (or plain sculpted, I didn’t know what their medicine allowed for cosmetics) look. One looked partially melded to some kind of cybernetic spider leg array with attached extra arms via his own chains and what looked like a collection of medical tubing, a bizarre and somewhat eerie image cemented by the fact that his organic body was dressed in doctor’s scrubs.

The rest looked like a collection of different species. Besides more examples the tusked, armor-welded creatures that were guarding the main ship’s captain, there was a collection of black, blue, and red creatures that resembled gargoyles with lizard-like heads, and what looked like stingers on their tails, who mostly kept to their own group. Greenish yellow-skinned men with beards like porcupine quills inspected odd, sawtoothed spears before cleaning their pistols. A couple of them
looked like almost faceless grey statues, with only a rather large mouth to show there was a face at first glance (second glance showed a small bump of a nose and squinted, grey eyes). A few looked like normal humans, if normal humans were green and had pointed ears (and copious amounts of body hair in the larger examples of those). Most alien were diminutive, indistinct creatures that looked like what would happen if a bunch of grey ooze grew arms and eyes and started to shuffle around (apparently the other baatezu thought the same thing I did - I noticed the others giving those creatures a wide berth, with any who had disembarked the same ship quickly moving away from them).

Straining, I tried to see if Cordelia was indeed among the couple hundred baatezu (and others) that had departed. Surprisingly, I didn’t have to look long - there weren’t a lot of female kytons wearing glasses, and she seemed to be looking for me too. After a wave of acknowledgement, she quickly went back to chatting with the spider-cyborg.

It was at that point that I finally noticed Vapula describing each individual type of being to McCaskill. “...that fellow with the robotic legs is an interlocutor, a kyton surgeon and medical researcher, while the mostly unchained ones are ostiarius tutors and diplomats…”

I didn’t quite get the sense he was lying, nor the scent. Whether that was more due to that damned perfume which I was sure was intentional or not was beyond me. Even if he didn’t do it purely to cheat me out of an inconvenient reading-entirely possible given that projector-I suspected there might be similar sin-scent abilities in the world. Thus, a counter if someone figured out how it worked and the politicians weren’t interested in having a natural muckracker publish what they were actually thinking. Even if he was being honest, he still seemed...awfully matter of fact. Rehearsed.

Of course, that paranoia may have been due to Tybalt apparently trying to see if he could make himself invisible if he curled upon himself enough.

The poor guy was terrified. The Wards, including me, only hadn’t noticed because he was also apparently trying to make as little noise as possible. Gallant only did because he finally sensed the sheer amount of overwhelming fear after the natural trepidation and later excitement of the crowd finally subsided when the baatezu did their “we come in peace” act.

Now that the silvanshee was curled up in Vista’s lap, trying to deknot himself after Gallant gave him a much needed beam to get ahold of himself enough to start thinking again. As for me, it finally occurred that Tybalt’s dislike of them was more than simple prejudice. A lot more-there was personal experience there, personal pain.

For a “born manipulator”, I noticed, I could be blind sometimes. Especially when I had turned off the empathic link.

The rest of the negotiation was not altogether that interesting, either. There was promises of further trading convoys, a promise to meet the President and United Nations directly, hinting at what the baatezu were capable of providing, that sort of dance that had very, very little in the way of actual policies from the layman’s point of view.

At least I caught something about the ship being there to stay, a “gate terminal”. Of course, several of the ambassadors brought up Leviathan, but Vapula seemed confident his ship could fight off the
Endbringer long enough to escape.

I mentally made a note of this, promising myself to throw it in the baatezu’s faces if they tried to blame us if the monster did, in fact, sink the ship. We warned them...

After that, there was a ten-minute wait while the Protectorate stood around and made sure that the Simurgh wasn’t about to show up just as a rather hopeful meeting ended out of her idea of humor.

Satisfied after that, they left...for about two seconds before doubling back to make really sure. Then they left.

After finally being satisfied I wouldn’t be needed in the near future to pacify some people, I took to the air, looking for Cordelia.

Wasn’t far. I quickly saw the flashing of her moving chains in the sun. Looked kind of cool, actually.

A few seconds later, and I actually met my mentor in the flesh.

“Hope you don’t mind me being later than a month,” she said, grinning while bowing her head.

“Nice to meet you when you’re made out of flesh,” I said, holding out my hand while bowing my own head. “I’m guessing these guys are your coworkers?”

“Nineteen out of twenty,” she said, shaking my own (I really hoped she didn’t see me flinch when I realized just how cool her hand was to the touch. Not clammy, mind, just...really not a normal human body temperature). “Dr. Spider over there is my boss, Interlocutor Hutriel. Hey Boss Hugh?”

The cyborg walked over. I immediately decided whoever put him in that thing needed to be sued. The tubes tugged on his flesh in ways I sure were incredibly painful, while the wireframes that bolted him in rubbed a painful-looking rash into wherever they covered. Was that an infection where a wire, presumably connected to his nervous system, went under his skin...?

I put it out mind. Wanted to make a good impression on the doctors, didn’t want the guy saving my life to be reminded of his current state.

“Why, hey there, Miss Hebert. Cordy’s told me a lot about you...What she could glean from the projector, anyway. Hah.”

I wasn’t sure what voice I was expecting from Hutriel...or Hugh, I guess. Certainly not “soft-spoken, friendly old man straight from a Western.” He certainly didn’t seem to be bothered by the hack job done to his walker. Even listening to Hugh’s voice made the whole contraption seem less painful to look at.

That aside, I shook his extended metallic limb while bowing my head. “Nice to meet you too, sir.”

He shook the hand, but instead of bowing his own, his eyes just rolled as he smirked. “Oh, come on now. Don’t give me that “mutual exposed neck” bull. I ain’t gonna hurt you, and I don’t think you’re gonna hurt me unless you have a problem with medical mechs, do ya now?”

...Huh, never thought of the bow that way. Made sense, actually, particularly for a rather
militaristic-by-necessity people. “Nope. Particularly given that, even with wings, I don’t think I could reach your neck.”

He chuckled a little, a warm, low sound. “Ain’t that a truth. Anyway, just wanted to introduce myself. You’re learning from an employee of mine and all.”

He started to walk off towards the...ostiariui, I suppose would be the plural. Latin was never my subject.

“May order guide to you to greater enlightenment, and you take care now.”

It took a second to remember the other half. “Er, may it prove as uh...bountiful as yours? I think that’s the other part?”

“Close enough,” he said. “See you around soon.” And he began to move in earnest, hydraulics fully whirring into life (gssh-thunk, gssh-thunk).

“Not really what one thinks of an interlocutor, eh?” Cordelia walked up beside me. “Yeah, you think they’re all *I know the secrets of the flesh, oooooo I’m scaaaaaryyy,* and a lot of them are, but Hugh? Nope, just good old fashioned bedside manner. Refreshing, really.”

She turned around, revealing she was holding a rather strange...teddy bear in one of her chains. One side was perfectly normal, if ivory white, while the other was black, had a dark, toothy grin, and a squinted red eye that looked cybernetic. Cute and creepy in equal amounts.

“Sort of like little old me making fan plushies of Earth...Aleph, I think you call it, games I like. Mr. Monokuma here, for instance.” She wiggled the teddy around a bit before dialing up her voice a notch. “‘But none of us can really *bear* going without hobbies for too long, can we? Boring, boring, students can’t learn in a boring environment! Alienation from their lessons cause pupils to doze off and never internalize anything! It’s a big, dangerous world out there, and to throw you bastards out there without a clue because you were all bored to sleep reflects poorly on my duty as headmaster!’ Besides, I needed a container for Saph so he’d stop accidentally poking me in closed spaces, and I never saw why a spell doll couldn’t be cute.”

She twisted the Monokuma doll’s belly button, revealing the “chest” to be largely a plastic plate that flew open, revealing a rather familiar chain-and-blade covered sphere. The augur’s eye adjusted to the light for a second before flying onto its...his mistress’ shoulder, gingerly trying to avoid cutting into her with his sharp protrusions.

Said mistress then sat on one of the columns of the pier. “So, what’s your hexes?”

It took me a second to catch on. “Oh, uh...the slumber curse, evil eye, and...Ah-ha-ha!” I replied.

She didn’t cackle herself, but she did smirk. “Cantrips? Other inherent spells?”

In quick succession, I materialized a set of glowing balls and snapped my fingers to reveal a spark. “I also know how to fix stuff by concentrating on it, and the *touch of fatigue,* as Tybalt calls it.”

Suddenly, her smile shrank. “Ah. The cat sith.” She glanced behind me. “I’m going to take a wild guess and assume that’s him?”

“Guilty as charged,” said the fog before it materialized. “So, you are the kyton who inducted her,
“What gave you that idea? Her memories or the fact you were paying attention to something other than the inside of your own eyelids for more than five seconds?”

“Me, I’m surprised that you’re out of Jangling Hiter in such numbers. Acidic rain forced refurbishing of your favorite fetish club?”

I stared at my familiar for a second. That wasn’t something I expected out of someone I had seen as a perfectly nice old fellow. Trying to see if this was the same Tybalt, I mentally willed the empathic link back on.

It was at that point I noticed the sheer amount of anger coming over the empathic link. Yes, fear was a component, but mostly anger.

Cordelia narrowed her eyes, obviously as offended as she had a right to be. “That was...immature of you. Massive hypocrite too, eh, fur fantasy?”

Tybalt hissed a little at that. “First, silvanshees are not interested in romance of any sort, and unlike your pleasures, ours are made from a position of mutual respect. Second-”

“Hey, girls! You’re both pretty!” I interrupted. I quickly turned to Tybalt. “Look, I get the sense you were badly hurt by Baator in the past, but for one, you need to talk about it, and two, what does she have to do with it? I don’t care what happened between you if you don’t just tell me, so until then, could you not insult her sexuality? Or anyone else’s, at all?”

Tybalt snorted derisively, but sat down. “As you wish. I will hold off on involving the cultural...proclivities of kytons until they show those traits in such a way that endangers you or anyone in your or my knowledge.”

This statement was quickly followed with a glare at the chained woman on the pier. “Am I understood, evangelist?”

Cordelia bristled while Saph made an odd, warbling growl. But she managed to work up a polite smile, anyway.

“I can live with those terms. But,” she said, drawing out a finger to hold up. “I would like to add one of my own.”

“...Name it,” Tybalt replied, warily.

“If you break that promise, in any way, without my permission...I show her some of my research.”

The silvanshee’s glare was replaced by a look of confusion. “Eh?”

“Well, not scientific, obviously. More like news reports from Sigil I made after learning not just what, but who her familiar would be. Our shared patron was happy to tell me about its ambassador to his newest client, and thus about any potential dangers.”

There was a moment of silence. Then Tybalt’s eyes suddenly swelled to the sides of saucers.

“So, I’d be careful throwing bricks. Your glass house is truly a wonder, Al.”
The agathion mouthed wordlessly before nodding furiously.

I, on the other hand, was now too confused for thought.

Confused, and feeling a little betrayed. “Tybalt...Al...what does she mean by that?”

The cat sith did everything in his power to avoid my eyes.

“...My name is Tybalt.”

The empathic link flared up.

A sense of shame hit me like a train of guilt, regret, and pain. The knowledge, on every level, that I...my familiar had fucked up. A vision of dried blood, rusted brown with age and glistening from water it refused to yield to.

A black void where my soul should be.

When link died down, I gradually became aware I was hugging the silvanshee furiously.

“Thanks,” he murmured.

When I finally let go, the kyton was still waiting patiently, a complete lack of expression on her face.

For a few seconds.

Then she cleared her throat, looking away for a second. “Sorry about that, I forgot how strong a familiar bond can be. And that was kind of mean, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Yes it was,” I replied.

“My bad. I just get sick of the way kytons are treated by...everyone. I shouldn’t need to lower myself to that level.”

Then she turned back, all troubles apparently forgotten. “So, for your first official lesson...how about I help you with a new hex? Get this...it’s potion brewing. Then, using potions to make magic items—maybe a friend for Monokuma! We could even have a magical plushie contest...”

Chapter End Notes

Monokuma / Monobear is the intellectual property of Spike Chunsoft, in the Worm-verse as in the real world. Don't need to play the game to understand any of the fic, but again, I like that game, and it's part of Cordelia's more mundane side—it's just a video game in the Worm-verse too.
And thank all that is holy for that. Can you imagine the kind of trigger events the School Life of Mutual Killing would induce?

(If this gives any of you ideas, you’re welcome).

Also, yes, every one of those is a canon species of devil. Except for the green, somewhat hairy guys with pointy ears. Those are Cerilian goblins the baatezu picked up. Same alignment, beneficial agenda (they worship awnsheghlien you see).
First ever Parahumans Online Interlude ever, and only because there needs to be a reason why...read on. Sorry for the lack of formatting, Fanfiction doesn't like spacing or indents.

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, All_Seeing_Eyes
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.
• Fifteen posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

► Topic: Baatezu: First Contact Pictures Part III: Return of the Picture Thread
In: Boards ► News ► Events ► Worldwide

StarryJaw
(Original Poster)
Posted on February 20th, 2011
Figured that since all the festivities were over, I'd start a new thread. With pictures.

Here ya go.

Nice-looking ship with fleet, to put it mildly. Very much what you want to trot out when you want to wow the natives.

...Not sure if the crew looks either creepy or badass. Probably both. Link

(Page 3 out of 293)

► Devilchanger

Posted on February 20th, 2011

Er, while it's nice to get a photo from a fellow PHOny, Jaw, it's kind of...blurry. Given how other photos don't have it, you seem to have been moving while taking this.

► StarryJaw (Original Poster)

Posted on February 20th, 2011

DevilChanger
Yeah, my bad. I have a cell for a camera and I was trying to somehow get past the crowd. I took up photography all of last week ago. I'll try to find a better position next time.

► Clockblocker (Verified Cape)

Posted on February 20th, 2011

And a better one to show their good sides. Try "nowhere the news media already was." Honestly, I feel kind of insulted, given how we got the Bearded Old Man With Saws Brigade. With Extra-Special Crap Hygiene.

► Adrasteia (Verified Cape)

Posted on February 20th, 2011

*sounds of screaming as Clockblocker is eaten by cats and mad cackling echoes eerily. All that is left of him is an empty (but unopened) skull and the bloody message NOT HELPING THE DIPLOMACY*

► Vista (Veteran Poster) (Verified Cape)

Posted on February 20th, 2011

Aww. You stole my thing!

► PrewarPheonix

Posted on February 20th, 2011

Alright kids, knock off the sitcom episode. We have enough of that when Ms. Bat Wings gives the Super Lullaby to the E88 (you just have to love the expression on 200 pounds of inferiority complex between realizing they aren't "strong enough" to ignore it and hilarious pratfall).

Speaking of, if this is the phenomenon-also-known-as-magic, it's..just as bullshit as Tinkers. Seriously, how does that docking lattice remain coordinated enough to fly back in? Got to be a lot of issues when a part goes in out of place, it's not like a Lego collection.

► Lettyr

Posted on February 20th, 2011

Me, I'm wondering how it works in their weaponry. That kind of magnetism/gravity manipulation has got to be great for mass drivers. No explosives, no ammo, just point a passing asteroid at something, hit the big red button, and laugh maniacally as Sir Isaac Newton rips everyone it hits a new one.

► KnightsIce

Posted on February 20th, 2011

Er, the whole sufficient velocity talk is all well and good, but is anyone worried about Ziz? She could be waiting for the right moment, you know.

EDIT: Ignore this and the next few pages on this. She attacked somewhere else.
PrudishP

Posted on February 20th, 2011

Me, I'm more worried about the baatezu themselves. They look more like an army than anything, and the *Lament* looks like some kind of mobile forward base. As well as quite intimidating, they just park a ship of its class in the bay and send a message: WE'RE HERE. YOU CAN'T ESCAPE US, NOT SO LONG AS OUR SHIP TOWERS OVER THE LANDSCAPE.

NitrusOxide

Posted on February 20th, 2011

Annnd here we go.

They have no reason to invade, as cynical as it is they can just ask for any war supply and it will be granted in return for whatever firepower on that ship. Chimaera aside tanar'ri don't seem to be interested in the planet and probably won't be coming along given their worst enemies are here.

PrudishP

Posted on February 20th, 2011

If tanar'ri are a race, and besides that, they could get the idea that what they want is land for their industries…

Totally_Not_A_Baatezu

Posted on February 20th, 2011

Oh, er, um, don't mind me, I was just looking over blueprints, for um, er, flower gardens. The race I am not a part of like flowers. A lot.

(User was banned for this post)

Tin_Mother (Moderator)

Posted on February 20th, 2011

Shadow Stalker, knock it off. I don't really mind gimmick accounts, but you abuse them too much. Especially after...last time.

(Veteran Member)

Posted on February 20th, 2011

...What last time? I don't see a last time.

Gallant (Verified Cape)

Posted on February 20th, 2011

It was deleted. For more information, please PM me, Glory Girl, or Stalker herself, don't bring it up here. Suffice to say she was stressed over Chimaera and it dissolved into a screaming match that somehow didn't go into IRL.
On the other end of the computer, Lisa Wilbourn had to suppress a derisive snort.

*Still pushing the idea it was just a flamewar, eh? Whatever you say.*

The girl also known as Tattletale was actually a chronic lurker on Parahumans Online, for the precise reason the Wards liked it - good for intel on the Honorable Opposition. Enough of a lurker to see that whole, sordid affair, and not needing her power to see the nerve Stalker stepped on with Victoria. The gimmick account in question was named Other_Half.Of.Ascelpius, Stalker made a joke about trying to find a friend of hers after she vanished, Glory Girl apparently got the idea it was a joke about her sister's new physical appearance (which it was not, actually - it was her attempt at levity just before Panacea was actually found, and the elder Dallon didn't check the timestamps), which understandably pissed her off, cue long and verbal fight in which Stalker dug into her trenches faced with angry sisterly attacks, until Tin_Mother gave them week-long suspensions to cool their jets.

Nothing really worth checking on this thread, though. More of the same back and forth of people desperately hoping they were friendly as they seemed, and the paranoid realists. Lisa had long since realized it was more likely the aliens (simply by watching the news she could tell the kytons and the hairy elves thought of themselves as something different) would start voluntary recruiting for their war, sooner or later, and secure land for colonies (probably granted via drawing big circles around Simurgh quarantine zones, thus making it Not Humanity's Problem). No revelations on what the baatezu really wanted.

Still, the picture...yeah, that thing looked awfully imposing for a pure diplomatic vessel. Apart from intimidation, which was kind of the point of most diplomacy, so maybe it was repurposed as one.

In other words, exactly what she had initially picked up about the future hidden overlords of Earth Bet. Nothing about their motives or what they would steer their world leader patsies into.

So, this thread was a wash too. Damn. Well, she could try tomorrow-

There was a news banner at the top of the screen.

**UPDATE:** Much to our own surprise, it seems we now have our first extraterrestrial member. Everyone, say hello to the PRT's Assistant Magic Tutor, Cordelia Fichte - or as she is known on this board, Bellowing_Cow. Also, she would like us to inform you she is a kyton and not a baatezu. It's annoying to confuse the two.

Huh. That was...casual.

*Views herself as perfectly normal person.*

*Desperately wants to be accepted as she is.*

*Drawn here by personal connection.*

...Hm.

So, to the intro thread, she supposed.

► Topic: Greetings! I am from not-quite-space!
In: Boards ► Q&A ► Ask A Cape
Greetings, hello, and good period-of-day! I would say "take me to your leader", but that's someone else's job.

Arcana-Evangelist Cordelia Fichte here, not my name but the real one is literally unpronounceable without help, ie these chains of mine. So it works well enough. But that, as they say, is neither here nor there.

Ask me anything I am authorized to answer about baatezu, kyton, or Baatorian-in-general culture or biology. That means no future plans or trade contracts! ...Mostly because I don't know. I can tell you what's likely going to be asked for, though.

I'll post here when business (or my short attention span) isn't calling me away, then post when I get back and am open for questions.

CURRENT STATUS: OPEN

(Also, because it bears repeating: I AM NOT A BAATEZU, I AM A KYTON, IN ALL CAPS SO YOU NOTICE THIS).

► NihilistNaga

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Holy shit we have actual humanoid aliens now. We are a comic book universe in forum form.

Fist up, what's the difference? No offense, but all of you are so varied that it's hard to tell where there's an actual species and one of the bio-castes Dispater mentioned.

► 8691decal

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Um, why are you on PHO to begin with? Not the area I'd expect an alien ambassador...especially given that I doubt you've had enough time to learn English lettering.

► Bellowing_Cow (Original Poster) (Verified Extraterrestrial)

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Oy! One at a time, folks!

NihilistNaga

Different biochemistries. We're adapted to cold temperatures, baatezu are adapted to heat. We have our cybernetic chains, they have their variance in form. We have an intellectual, introspective culture, they don't know when to shut up or stop talking long enough to breathe.

8691decal

Remember what the mods said about being Assistant Magic Tutor? I'm also the personal tutor for individual members of the PRT. One likes this board a lot, so I came in to see what all the fuss was.
Speaking of, my current client's a natural talent with that slumber hex, but honestly there's quite a few things that suck lest the keyboard hit out.

Sorry, my forehead hit the keyboard when my insomnia caught up with me.

Also, you'd actually be right. I'm not seeing English letters right now, I'm running everything through a translator program. Not a literal translation, because raw Baatorian in English looks like this: Estonia is the right basement.

Magic does many things, but automatic literacy in every language isn't one of them. Hell, even the fact you hear English when I speak the common tongue, and vice versa, isn't at all a perfect system, because some things (like *kriegstanz* and *Xaositect*) just aren't translatable.

► Begun_for_Z

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Doesn't *kriegstanz* mean "war dance" in German?

Also, what are you training your client in?

► Bellowing_Cow (Original Poster) (Verified Extraterrestrial)

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Does it now? Huh, guess more things can be translated to Earth tongues than I thought. Doubt it means the same thing when Germans say it, though.

It's mostly Potions Night over here, magical chemistry and such (I refuse to call it *alchemy*, we have a basic idea of how things actually work without injecting spiritual or economic claptrap), starting with a basic health/flesh regeneration draught, then more arcane fields, then gradually fleshsculpting - the creation and transformation of life forms, often symbiotic ones. Thinking that if I get them to team up with Ms. Dallon, it will be *spectacular*.

(And before you ask, yes this means we are all bio-Tinkers when we get to that level of skill. You may sing praises or scream at your leisure).

► The_Draconian

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Might want to nix that idea. Panacea may not be a full healer-only, but I doubt she's a fan of the idea of sculpting flesh ever again.

Also, holy shit a civilization of bio-Tinkers!? That explains...a lot, actually.

Of course, this also brings up the issue of how you're able to shape life on that level without bankrupting yourselves every other week (both Baatorian species). And how those chains work, given how by all appearances they're extra limbs.

► Bellowing_Cow (Original Poster) (Verified Extraterrestrial)

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Really? Damn, that would have been fun to watch.
For us though, it's less costly. Baatezu biology is adapted to metamorphosis to begin with, and we kytions naturally adapt to any cybernetics - our nervous systems grow into any attached metallic parts, along with attendant musculature.

The whole bio-Tinker thing is advanced stuff though. I don't expect we'll be getting close to it for months, if someone is naturally gifted. High school compared to elementary level, is a good analogy I've picked up.

► **Earthsigma** (Veteran Member)

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Three:

1) Are there any weapons on the *Falconer's Lament* we should know about that may be used against us?

2) What qualifies as a baatezu or kytions, are there disparate races who share the same culture or something else (think Roman Empire, here's a convenient link if you need one)?

3) More importantly; what is your society's idea of colonization?

► **Bellowing_Cow** (Original Poster) (Verified Extraterrestrial)

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Getting into state secret territory, there, bud. I could call the counterintelligence bureau on you for that! ...Just kidding, our oppressors believe in transparency, so you can at least compliment the fitness of the leg the boot on your face is covering.

1) Just your average corvette arms. No worries, just a few mass drivers and focuses (magic enhancers-someone casts a spell into them, it supersizes it into something effective on ship level. Good for lasers!). Nothing to be concerned about, that thing's built to avoid being shot at rather than shooting.

2) I took a looksee, and no, we aren't Romans. For one, we don't impose our culture on everyone; we find that impractical, and we have other means of getting soldiers than taxing our territories. A baatezu isn't someone who's been properly indoctrinated over the years, they're a specific Baator-native species of life. As are kytions, though we aren't so finicky about immigrants, anyone who can may live among us.

3) ...Making colonies. What else?

If you want the not-coy answer, mostly establishing outposts on places far from the fray of the Baator-Tanar'ri borders and put down roots for what civilians we have, away from the forever siege. Then we start mining, farming, and legislating business deals to get whatever we need to somehow keep afloat over the chaotic tides. Sanity is always a precious commodity, it's nice to live in a place without the endless siege overseeing everything.

*(THIS HAS BEEN YOUR DAILY DEPRESSION, FOR WHEN YOU DESPERATELY NEED TO CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM.)*

► **tdoge**

Posted on February 24th, 2011
Thanks. I needed to be reminded we live on Earth Bet.

Cultural ideals?

► Bellowing_Cow (Original Poster) (Verified Extraterrestrial)

Posted on February 24th, 2011

That probe also beamed over a lot of Earth literature. To put it simply, I chose my English last name because your Enlightenment thinkers had it mostly right; rationality and peace are the highest things in the world. Not at the expense of the individual, but in order for a person to be, well, a person, he or she needs a framework of community that respects his right to be an individual. To be truly free requires laws that restrict the ability to take freedom - otherwise there is naught but anarchy, and from there freedom of only the guys who can hold it. And not even for them, truly, because nothing prevents them being usurped.

They had an...overly optimistic view of things though. Most people only do something if there's a benefit to people they like or themselves. Capitalism understands that, so we've made a meritocracy, both Baator races - you get what you earn. Or can pay for, but we at least try for the first. Nobody's perfect, although everyone tries.

► PrudishP

Posted on February 24th, 2011

And that's what I'm worried about. You seem to presenting yourself as "America, only as an alien species." No offense, but even if you're perfectly right about this, American history...isn't particularly kind to those in our way.

Frankly, you also seem to be the only person who gives straight answers, as apart from your contemporaries who simply spew spin about how profitable our relationships will be. Your bosses have avoided talking about art, or philosophy, or politics back home at all. Just basic stuff like "we're ruled by a council advising a king" and "we have a stock market." Nothing about politics or your eventual plans. I know you likely aren't authorized to say exactly, but what are you likely looking for from us?

On a similar level, the tana'ri? I want to know what we're getting into here, so what are your archenemies?

► Bellowing_Cow (Original Poster) (Verified Extraterrestrial)

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Hoo boy. First, it's spelled with two "r"s, but…

Look, propaganda makes a lot of lies in its attempts to help dehumanize the enemy and help forget we're at a war that has been going on since before we were born and, more importantly, likely won't end until after we're dead, but frankly? The tanar'ri do the dehumanization themselves.

To make a long story short, your Slaughterhouse 9? That's the tanar'ri idea of a motley collection of folk heroes, people who do what they want, and are smart and strong enough to avoid all the consequences. Ambition, hedonism, anarchy...those are all virtues to the tanar'ri mindset. You want to know what Hobbes was afraid of when he said "state of nature"? You could find worse examples.
Biologically, they're inhabitants of a dimension cluster we call "the Abyss", an unstable, shifting pseudo-world that spits out new fragment-realms and absorbs them on a regular basis. They've evolved to match their environment - they mutate, either individually or over their (quick) generations to match the latest stresses on them, and to take full advantage of the world around them. Those bird-winged creatures Chimaera liked, vrocks? Their particular phenotype evolved in a very windy, barren shard, so they gained wings and a symbiotic mold to grow food or disable prey. This also applies to weaponry - sooner or later they evolve to match every tactic that doesn't kill them, and they're so damned smart that they usually change tactics as soon as they catch on to survive long enough for the adaptation to take place. They've never heard of coordinated tactics, but there's so many of them they swamp us when they have any advantage. No fear, no remorse, no end.

You want to know what we want? Metals, likely. Metals and outside companies to help build our technology to stay ahead of the tanar'ri tide in technology, if not in numbers. Sooner or later we'll probably begin to offer mercenary contracts to parahumans too, like we do in Sigil and its dimension. Anything to push back against the endless, mutating ocean of monsters, particularly after the strongest ally(-on-occasion) we had was wiped out by something that can be even worse than they are.

Then, on the off-chance we force them into a retreat to lick their wounds? A place where we can forget they exist, and what they've done.

► PrudishP

Posted on February 24th, 2011

...I'm sorry if I offended you. Dear god, even thinking about that is horrifying.

How do you people manage to keep going? Morale-wise and numbers-wise.

► Bellowing_Cow (Original Poster) (Verified Extraterrestrial)

Posted on February 24th, 2011

Oh, I'm not upset. In fact, I'm happy you understand just how grim the Blood War gets without seeing it. Some people are just, so, dense...

Well, we're fans of all forms of entertainment, and we're not nearly as stingy about nonaddictive recreational drugs as some people are. Honestly, when we develop a big enough presence to throw good parties, you should attend a kyton one. Philosophers on weed are the best kind (all the entertainment of stoners thinking, plus actual thought content! What's not to love?).

We also have a lot better medical care than they do, a lot cheaper as well due to biologically-enhanced healing. We don't reproduce as fast, but we have our ways, and it's a lot harder to get us down forever. We're also masters of outsourcing - that's how we kytons eventually joined together in one commonwealth with the baatezu.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...8, 9, 10

Ah. That was the catch to everything.

Views Baatorian races as superior to all other forms of life.

Party invitation indicates "white man's burden" view of Earth Bet.
So, conquerors seeking conquest (via attaching puppet strings to everyone). That was fine, the Undersiders could survive in that world. Maybe even as the Resistance, could be a nice way to retire as heroes (in exile, hidden on a tropical island somewhere).

...Except first she had to go and reveal exactly what Baator was afraid of.

Not for the first time in her life, Lisa found herself in between a superheated rock and a very sharp hard place, looking very thoroughly over her poison choice.

*Maybe she's just bought into the propaganda?* the part of Lisa that desperately sought any degree of silver lining piped up.

A brief scroll back, and scan, revealed no dice.

*Based on repeated personal experience.*

So, Hernan Cortes's subtle alien contemporaries or the endless horde of thrill-killers. Lisa honestly wasn't sure which was worse. On the one hand, humanity was about to become the Africa to the former's Europe, on the other hand, the latter would be liable to reenact the end of Doctor Strangelove to watch the pretty colors and get atomic powers out of the deal. Even if Scion or parahumans could stop either, the husk of Earth Bet likely wouldn't be that great of a prize. So in effect, no good options. At all.

Needless to say, Lisa did not enjoy powerlessness, especially when she couldn't at least die snarking.

Browsing down though…Nothing about *kytons* in specific, though. Yes, someone asked her what Arcana-Evangelist meant ("I'm an expert in magical matters, and I'm an evangelist in kyton terms - which is to say, I'm the lay member, we're not actually paid to bring people to over our philosophy." *Does it anyway out of spiritual conviction*, her power told her). Lisa *did* get she was deliberately phrasing her answers to prevent her student from smelling a lie (it didn't take long for Lisa to realize her apprentice was a cape, and by process of elimination that left Adrasteia. *Doesn't know if she can catch a scent over the Internet but doesn't want to risk it*, her power confirmed).

Which meant she could at least get *some* idea of what the whole picture was, if she just phrased this right….

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**► All_Seeing_Eyes**

Posted on February 25th, 2011

You know, I've noticed a lot of back and forth about "we" this, "we" that. From the sound of things, you don't make it seem like you actually think you're different from baatezu. So why should I not call you a baatezu? Tell me more about kytons in specific.

**► Bellowing_Cow (Original Poster) (Verified Extraterrestrial)**

Posted on February 25th, 2011

HOW DARE YOU CALL ME A BAATEZU JUST BECAUSE I'VE NEVER ACTUALLY EXPOSTED ANY CULTURAL DIFFERENCES OR POLITICAL BELIEFS OR DIFFERENT DESIRES okay I haven't been entirely clear.

Okay, the analogy I like is that while the baatezu are the body and brain, we're the heart and soul.
Their culture is all about keeping Baator's hunger for resources sated and the tanar'ri out of our core territories, where we're most vulnerable. Kytons, however, were never interested in expansion but more intellectual pursuits like science, art, and philosophy. Because of that, our culture evolved a deep tradition of softer pursuits than politics and warfare, and with it a love of innovation. Since we evolved on Baator as well, we quickly allied with the baatezu when the tanar'ri first came, mutual enemies and all that. Since we aren't nearly as numerous as baatezu in general are, this "alliance" quickly turned into more of a "self-governing territory". Think pre-String Theory Philippines. We pay our heed to the King, even if we think he's far, far too nosy for our tastes - we also value a little thing called "privacy."

Biologically speaking, we aren't nearly as diverse, either - but individually, we're much more adaptable. See: These chains. We can not only biologically sterilize foreign objects, but incorporate them into our larger biologies. Chain-braiding arose in the beginnings of our culture as extra limbs and symbols of discipline (obvious) and freedom (notice how they're ultimately subservient to kytons), and it's stuck.

Role-wise, we're largely the engineers and researchers of Baator - the nerd brigade, really. The baatezu really don't have a lot of pure scientists, individually or by caste. So, it falls on us to really explore the limits of magic and mundanity. Since tanar'ri are constantly changing, there's always work there when finding their latest weakness. Or what new fun things to do with magic, or cataloging what the expeditionary fleet finds, or experiments in fleshshaping...

One of the great things about living with kytons is that you are never, ever bored. Either there's something new and amazing to see, or one of our many excursions into the arts. Really, we don't see a difference between art and science. Or science and faith, for that matter, but that's a philosophical discussion for another time.

"Wow lady, don't sell yourself short," Lisa said to the screen, raising an eyebrow. "Show some more pride in your species, why don't you?"

The sheer amount of false modesty in this one post was astounding. Literally every other sentence provoked her power to spit out new and more blatant iterations of "kytons, FUCK YEAH!" From the second paragraph (beginning with views baatezu as wasteful, trigger-happy blowhards) to the last (ending with wants people to ask about it so she can overview how wonderful her faith is and why people should follow it), the sheer amount of racial ego was the kind of thing that would do the Empire 88 proud.

Ironic, considering the E88's opinion on the alien ship and crew could be best described as "MONGRELS FROM BEYOND THE STARS! AAAAAAHHHH!" As it turned out, much like Lovecraft, the Empire wasn't big on the idea of the strange. Even worse, however, was the sheer amount of variation in their appearance but still calling themselves "baatezu", and (horror of horrors), living in harmony with a different species that also evolved in their home dimension. Well, okay, the undernet, private and password-protected boards Lisa hacked into had different rationales (some of them even sensible), but that was the implication her power got (along with the traditional supremacist idiocy). Hence their increased activity, as if provoking a crime wave would somehow convince the Baator force to not come at all instead of, say, land somewhere other than Brockton Bay.

But, not the topic at hand. Besides the beginnings of her traditional migraine, the supervillainess quickly read several other things from Fichte's answer/manifesto. For one, a militaristic and expansionist culture. Not surprising, they had been at war for generations. For another, both kytons and baatezu looked down on each other (too bitter for plain racism), but needed each other enough to stomach the commonwealth. Also not surprising, if Lisa was right they were initially humans
who modified themselves to match diametrically opposed philosophies, and kept to them.

What she didn’t catch on before was the odd attitude towards individuality. From the kyton tutor’s own praising of her species’ artistic aspirations, her power read another distancing from the baatezu. Given how artistic celebration was generally also a sign of valued individuality, that probably meant kytons treasured self-will a lot more than baatezu did.

And yet...she was perfectly honest earlier, and was talking about about both Baator species earlier when she said they wanted to protect individuality through law. So, the baatezu had a love-hate relationship to the concept? A quick mouse-over, and-

*Exalt the individual in service to the group, and believe the group should reward the individual for their service.*
*View acclaim and advancement as a high virtue.*

Ah. So the baatezu viewed social climbers as heroes then?


Unpleasant reminders of relations aside, though, that still seemed really weird. How could they exalt the self but view it as best suborned to the group at the same time? Seemed to have a bit of cognitive dissonance Lisa had a hard time understanding.

At least kytons seemed to exalt *individual* discipline, so there was something she could deal with in their world. Besides, it wasn't as if she couldn't ask tomorrow-

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**Private message from Bellowing_Cow**

**Bellowing_Cow:** Also, Tattletale, right? Thank you for finally, fucking finally, answering the thread. Day after day, checking IP addresses, sending out probes to them...you're as hard a woman to find as you should be. A friend of mine is going to be by there soon (about thirty minutes) with a job offer, should help you with a mutual problem of ours. So, tell your buddies and don't freak out, okay? He might hurt them, badly.

---

Time slowed to a crawl.

*Knows my power.*
*Deliberately made the post long to delay me while I analyzed it.*
*Not making threat, honestly more concerned for Undersiders' safety than her ally's.*

Numbly, Lisa became aware of her hands fiddling with the wires, trying to find the plug, until she reread the second line.

*Not tracking me through computer, used it to find me, tracking me directly.*

Slowly, her head turned around.

Looked normal, except upon another glance, there was an almost-imperceptible shimmer in the air, a miniature heat haze in the upper corner.

As if to deliberately confirm her suspicions, the haze shifted, revealing a round, glowing sphere.

*Artificial entity. Meant for espionage and tracking.*
Too small to catch except in ambush, owners likely know too much about Brian or Alec to make viable attempt to disable it. Intentionally showed it for benefit of power.

Well, at least her new employer hated Coil too.

Didn't stop her from screaming.

Rap, rap.

As opposed to their scouting, the mysterious ally of Fichte's was almost distressingly mundane in their manners.

Which may have been intentional, Tattletale realized. Just to rub in the intimidation factor a little more; I'm so strong I can afford to be polite. It was certainly surreal enough for the effect.

The Undersiders were in costume, on the off chance that the person on the other side of the door didn't already know enough of their faces to connect their names to them. None of them were pleased with this situation, Bitch the least of them; there was, after all, an invader into her home, and use of her dogs was forbidden. About half of the time before the thirty minute deadline was spent convincing her that their forced employer would hurt the dogs if she fought back, and even then Brutus and Judas were behind her, tensed and already bulked up as much as they could be and still maneuver in the warehouse (more for its sake than the dogs').

The knocking came again, this time with a polite cough.

Awkwardly, Grue spoke up. "You can let yourself in. I've entered the code already."

Without the presence speaking, the dingy old door knob turned, slowly, cautiously. The actual opening of the door was just as timid - apparently Fichte's friend was not a fan of provoking people with giant dogs.

About a minute of staying still, the opener of the door fully swung it open.

A strange hybrid of woman and bird stepped in. Her torso was human enough, as was her head - a somewhat pale lady with amber eyes, with delicate arms that, upon closer examination, had fine, wiry muscle under it. More lithe than truly muscular. About the only odd aspects of her human side's appearance was her hair - by all appearance, a shade of natural azure - and slightly pointed ears.

Of course, that wasn't the weird aspects one really noticed at first. No, those were the giant honking golden eagle wings sticking out of her back. The brightly colored robe she was wearing terminated just high enough above her feet to reveal the talons of an eagle (along with the legs of a proper flight suit), and Tattletale swore she could see tailfeathers under thereas well.

But this wasn't the employer, no. The PM referred to the employers as "he", and as the bird-woman begin to sing a wordless melody, the blonde's superpowered observational skill told her the reason: Living soporific to Bitch's dogs.

In fact, she was kind of getting...sleepy...herself....

A quick flick to her cheek removed that issue, but both of the armored canids definitely looked sleepy and less tense. Their mistress looked more tense and angry now, but that particular precaution was meant more for safety than making a good impression on the notoriously
unfriendly Undersider.

Apparently satisfied that giant dogs wouldn't try to eat her face in the immediate future, the bird-
woman curtseyed, revealing that yes, she did have a set of tailfeathers.

"We humbly greet the masters of the house upon which we have come, and apologize for our
rudeness. We, Khabarah Habban, also called the Harpy, are but lowly students of our house, and it
is unbecoming of us to trouble you at this hour."

Doesn't see the point in concealing her real name.

Well, that made sense. She wasn't exactly capable of a secret identity.

Formal manners indicates larger culture where this is considered normal. Not a Case 53.

Okay, that made sense too. So this was likely another Aebrynis parahuman, like Chimaera or her
former patsy. An awnsheghlien, the news had called them?

Whatever, she'd be able to glean more over the coming weeks.

Didn't stop her from running her mouth. "You do realize that we've never heard of whatever
royalty you belong to and don't believe in the divine right of kings and thus you're just coming off
as kind of a pompous-"

"Lisa?" Regent piped up. "Stop talking."

...Right. The greeter worked for someone who deliberately avoiding ambushing them out of fear
he'd kill them on reflex. Shutting up now.

Habban-or Harpy-seemed rather more amused by this than anything. "Oh, but one of knowing, our
blood gives us strength and power. Rulership is simply a function of those things, no? But, we
digress."

The bird-woman stepped to the the side, revealing an indistinct shape in the half-light of a rundown
area of Brockton Bay. "Allow us to introduce our elder."

As the form walked in, it became clear that the indistinction was more due to a rather large,
reddish-brown cloak draped around the figure. A blue chimere covered in triskelions and spirals,
like a Catholic priest's, was draped over his (because this was obviously Fichte's ally) shoulders,
giving the impression of a dark monk. Absolutely none of his face was visible under the drawn
hood, and his hands were crossed under his sleeves.

"Behold, the once and future Sovereign of the Shadow, the Sorcerer-King of Pipyret, First Son of
Shadow, and Emissary of the Highest Enlightened of Maurya, the Magian."

The figure's hands came out of his sleeves-pale, withered things that spoke of extreme age-and
languidly went up to his hood and, after a half-second of hesitation (which Tattletale was sure only
she notices, and only because of the burst of hasn't gotten in the habit of putting it down), gently
folded it.

The face it concealed was many things, but above all else, old. Whitish-grey, whiskey hair covered
a head that might have been olive-skinned at one point, but the rigors of time had long turned it
almost translucent. A collection of wrinkles covered his face, making it almost appear as if he was
an elder tree that had uprooted itself and started walking as a man, weathered, timeless, and...none
the worse for it. Those eyes, bleached and seemingly cataracted as they were, had an attentive fire
to them, and his movements were fluid and forceful. This was a person who did not live to his age by simply waiting—no, he *conquered* every one of those years, and bore the scars to prove it.

Also, he didn't breathe. It wasn't a blatant thing, but Tattletale could tell that the deep breath he made wasn't thinking, but refilling his lungs.

"A pleasure to meet you," he said, a soft tone that brought to mind the surface of a placid pond being disturbed by something very large moving under its surface. "As Ms. Tattletale might have surmised, I already know quite a bit about you fine four already, but if it suits you, you may introduce yourselves."

The Undersiders politely responded with utter silence. Magian looked somewhat disappointed at that.

"Ah, I do suppose that I was terribly rude in asking Cordy to track you down without asking. I am sorry, but I couldn't alert your current employer. Do you mind if we sit?"

"...No," Grue replied, uncertain.

Simultaneously, Harpy flew up to a stripped conveyor and perched on it, while Magian pulled out a mundane-looking cloth bag and reached in. The opening swelled and stretched as a folding chair was pulled out, which Magian quickly deployed and slumped in, robe covering it. "I thank you, deeply. These bones are long past the point where they should be used."

*Wants us to relax,* Tattletale's power told her. It seemed to work, as even Bitch seemed a little less on edge. Not Tattletale herself, but that was more due to the strain of ignoring her migraine, she needed to be in overdrive with this guy.

"...So, any reason why you blackmailed us beyond hush-hush? I don't think our employer cares if you-" Tattletale began to lie.

"His alias is Coil, and he's notoriously paranoid," Magian cut in, drawing a sudden look of comprehension from the other Undersiders. "The reason why I am trying to remain anonymous—you and we both know that the PM system of that forum is never checked—is that up until recently, he was an ally of mine."

*Slight emphasis on ally, sarcastic.*

*Distancing himself from being a friend of Coil's.*

There was a pause as Tattletale thought over her next words carefully. 

"...Why do you hate him, and why are you stabbing him in the back now?"

A look of surprise and respect crossed Magian's face.

"Bit different actually being subject to it directly, isn't it?" she said, grinning despite herself.

"Yes. Well, it actually started off on the wrong foot, namely the fact that he's a power-hungry, arrogant, self-centered, sociopathic imbecile. I only joined forces because other *awnsheghlien* have congregated in this city, and two of them are number among its knights, and Accord is too geographically distant to be viable."

Almost instantly, Tattletale decided this man was a much better boss, if only for his honesty. And shared opinions. "And? While I like your douchebag sense, I don't think you have a choice who's your friend in the underworld, especially not for refugees."
Harpy jerked up, a look of fear crossing her face.

*Lost her homelands, feels victimized and lost.*

Magian, on the other hand, merely leaned back a little. "Peace now, Khabah. These are not the oppressors of your people, and given their fate, perhaps your natural allies too."

*Directly interested in Undersiders for more reasons than turning on Coil.*

Before Tattletale could think over that, Magian turned his attention back to the Undersiders. "You're right. I didn't," he said, the barest hint of a smirk on his face. "But I didn't have a civilization who's members I have developed a close rapport with over the course of my native world's life sending an expeditionary fleet here until recently, either."

Grue actually managed to speak before his teammate did. "So, you're planning to become the new crime lord and getting the start on the competition, then?"

"That, and I’ve recently found what Coil's newest plans are. I would rather work with the dearly departed Skidmark than he after that bit of information came out." There was little disgust in his tone, the raw content made it clear enough.

"Seriously?" Regent said, eyebrows of his mask shooting up. "That was low, man. Whatever he's planning, you shouldn't insult the deceased like that."

Finally, Bitch piped up. "You haven't shown me why we should trust you."

Magian said nothing. Instead, he pulled out his Tinker-bag again, and upended it.

An enormous amount of gemstones, gold, and smaller pieces of art fell on the floor, a nice pile that came up to the seated man's knees. Before even she was aware of it, Tattletale was directly over it, seeing how genuine it was.

One migraine later, she looked up, amazed, shocked...and a lot more eager.

"That is a small portion of the treasuries of my old country, Khabah's, and what a more aquatic friend of mine found in the deeps. It is also yours, as part of the sign-up package. I will not lie and claim this is a great loss for me, we require money too to finance the beginnings of our own syndicate. I don't know how much these figurines are worth on your world, though I suspect they will become quite high to various private collectors seeking alien curios. But I promise I will allow you administration and the majority of the profits of a portion of that empire. I plan to expand my influence as far it will go, and I already have more than enough irons in the fire on other worlds for a generous monthly stipend. Twice what Coil was paying you, and I promise monthly contact with you for transparency."

Tattletale forced her eyebrow down. Kind of a joke, given the obvious (to her at least) other agendas Magian had...but then again, what looked to be a few hundred million in precious materials could buy a lot of unasked questions. Plus absolutely no indication of lying or bad faith.

"A vote?" Grue said.

Every Undersider's hand, except one, went up. Not Bitch's.

"Just one thing," said the currently abstained voter. "What do you plan on doing to Coil?"

A dark grin crossed the faces of both awnsheghlien.
"We intend to be respected as well as feared…" began Magian.

"So we all intend to make of the one of schemes...an example."

Do not plan on killing him. Public humiliation and tricking him into self-unmasking while taking over his empire.

Tattletale's hand shot up.

"Excellent!" Magian laughed, a warm but somehow eerie chuckle. "Now, as part of our transparency agreement-ever wonder why Coil was making you go on those strange missions of distraction?"

Chapter End Notes

Behold!

The plot!

Also showing the more deceptive, nasty side of Cordy - just because she's a nice devil doesn't mean she isn't a devil. And our official introduction to the Magian as well!

(Also, before anyone calls OOC: Keep in mind Lisa's loyalty is primarily to her friends and herself, especially at this point in her character arc. Her mindset, faced with something that is going to result in Earth's conquest but not destruction, is to find a way to survive and even thrive in it. This is an example).
Aspirant 3.3

Chapter Notes

And now, back to the main plot!

Also, seeing as how we're dealing with Cerilian races this time around, I suddenly realize how similar to Warhammer Fantasy Birthright is at times, if Warhammer Fantasy had something resembling the ability to permanently change the world for the better. So, even more like Worm than I realized. Awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By now, the stare-off between Yamada and Tybalt had grown rather uncomfortable.

Which was remarkable, given how I wasn't in the room, just getting stuff over the familiar bond. I could tell they were staring at each other blankly, with Tybalt being completely unsure of what to say.

Truth is, she wasn't happy when she realized I had been pressuring him to get therapy himself. She knew about him, of course (she was overjoyed and relieved upon realizing he was a separate existence from me, with his own thoughts and feelings), but she really didn't like that I was, and I quote, "pressuring him to do something he doesn't want."

The fact that I had arrived with the scowling cat sith under my arm and asking for him to have an appointment probably had something to do with that. I accepted the blame.

Didn't apologize, though. I saw there was a lot of issues rolling around in Tybalt's mind, issues that could easily drag us both down. Why he refused to acknowledge another name of his was a big one, but the sheer amount of guilt in his past...I was honestly worried about his sanity, now, especially given how calm he tried to present himself as, normally.

She relented though, when I pointed out how he reacted to Cordelia's threat. Or that I didn't detect a lie when she mentioned wondering about a potential danger. If Tybalt had something that he would snap over, I needed to smooth that over before he hurt someone during a breakdown.

I really shouldn't have been listening via the empathy link, either, but I justified it in that there really wasn't that much I could get over the empathy link.

As of now, I realized just how accurate that was. Either Tybalt was not a very emotional person or he was deliberately trying to hide...no, it was the first. I doubted it was possible to control emotions that well.

Particularly if the control was from "unhappy" to "defensive" to "defensive and unhappy," then to "unhappy" again. The silver lining, such that it was, was that I suddenly understood why Yamada wasn't eager to treat an unwilling patient. Now only if I didn't feel frustrated that I couldn't listen in and guilty I tried.

Thirty minutes later (she really didn't have the time for a sudden appointment), a depressed-looking Tybalt and a confused Yamada came out.
Before I had a chance to ask: "I don't have a frame of reference," she bluntly stated. "He's not human, and I don't have a good baseline for what's considered normal for his species."

...I should have seen that one coming. But still; "He doesn't act that alien."

"His emotions aren't. But he...let him explain. If he wants to," she quickly added.

Tybalt's anger at being dragged into therapy had cleared up, leaving him looking just glum now. "I do. I've needed to, but…"

He inhaled.

"Agathions are naturally selfless. Our empathy is, by human standards, overactive and self-destructive."

A few seconds as I thought on this, and double-checked with the snakes.

"...Please don't say that you're naturally superior to us," I replied, a little pained. I had enough of that from bad science fiction and fantasy, especially when the person claiming that was right (in-story).

"No, no, not that at all. I…" He sighed. "I mean that literally. It's considered a sign of mental illness in our culture to put yourself ahead of a total stranger, for instance, or avoid trying to understand the viewpoint of a person you know or even a rival. In fact, the reason I defaulted to supportive behavior when I met you was that, on a basic level, I can't consider not trying to make other people happy. Unless I'm mistaken, humans actively decide to do so in a peaceful setting."

It took me all of five seconds to understand why that would be troublesome to a human therapist focusing on self-esteem issues, depression, and parahumans. "...Ah."

"And until I get a better handle on how an agathion thinks, I can't even begin to unravel how their depression works. Feelings of being unworthy compared to other people may be considered healthy and normal. Given how he states the familiar bond is willingly giving up a lot of autonomy, and he apparently doesn't see any issue with this…" She shrugged. "Most of what I have is just...not applicable."

She locked eyes with me. "And why you assumed I could help him with his issues in one session, I have no idea." The sin-scent happily chimed in the obvious implication; don't force the issue again.

Thankfully, she didn't seem to catch my emotion reading. I suspected she would have...words for that kind of attempted further control over the life of a friend.

I looked down. "I'm sorry. To both of you," I quickly added. Lie, my sin-scent chimed in. I was honestly more sorry to Yamada than Tybalt.

Apparently Yamada had a bit of scent of her own. "Taylor...why is it that you believe his problems affectyou?"

"Because we're a team," I stated, bluntly. "He's the source and medium of a lot of my powers. The thing is...he's not very open as a teammate, is he?" I glared very pointedly at him.

He did nothing except inspect his tail. And as it turned out, the emotion circuit is excellent for making one feel bad when the guilt came over.

"...Next week, you're sharing an appointment with Dr. Lloyd. And please don't spring this kind of
I turned to Tybalt, trying to think of something to start a conversation with. He obviously wasn't in the mood for it.

"...Boy, I'd hate to be one of you when con men are about," I began, strained. And now I probably insulted his species. Great.

If he was offended, he brushed it off before the link picked it up. It did snap him out of his funk, though. "Funny thing is, the more trusting someone is, the better they are at smelling rats. Scientific fact - we've had more experience at being burned, so we know what the danger signs are."

That...made a lot of sense, actually. "Huh. That would explain conspiracy theorists acting like sheep."

"Precisely. When someone is afraid of the world, they look for someone to protect them from it. If you pretend to do so..."

I wasn't used to seeing people with chains in their skin happily tour the corridors of the PRT, but as they grew used to their surroundings over the week, the kytons started to get...normal.

Not coincidentally, I had the revelation that "normal" was kind of a bullshit concept to begin with.

Truth is, it seemed that whatever really cheesed off Tybalt about kytons, it wasn't their manners. Cordelia was about the most resolutely easygoing adult I had ever met in my entire life.

"No, no, nonononononohshiiiiit!"

Unless there was a beaker about to explode due to my incompetence.

Thankfully, both of us had something other than goggles to protect ourselves with.

"And that, kids, is why we don't put sulfur in before extract ofaconite." My teacher's chains lowered, shaking out the glass. "Need tweezers?"

"No, my wings have tanked worse. Glass bounced right off of them." I checked. "Mostly," I amended, noticing a particularly large bit had gotten stuck in a joint. I quickly took the hemostats and gingerly started to pull it out.

"Before you ask though, I'm not mad," she continued, plucking out stray bits of glass from her chains and running them through a reader. "Frankly, symbolic logic is fun to absolutely nobody - by all rights, the actual items should be toxic, but not only is this an agonist for healing injuries, but apart from the, uh, obvious, this isn't even toxic." She sighed. "This is why intuitive knowledge of magical chemistry is considered a proper hex rather than a natural knack."

"Guess the quick option of arcane...ergh..." Man, that thing did not want to leave. "...Wasn't the cheap one. Wonder how many wizards...gah..." I suspected overactive regeneration may have been involved. Happened before, with Chubster - I remembered a horror story Amy told me about trying to negotiate his instinctive mass manipulation with her own power to remove a bunch of shotgun pellets. "...blow themselves up."
After that particular embodiment of all that was sharp and painful in the world was yanked out, I looked back at Cordy. "Doesn't mean you should be doing this without some protection." Hell, I only went in without wing protection because I couldn't find anything apart from some towels.

"I have these, don't I?", she said, smirking as she tapped the chains and goggles. "Everything else is where you consider, oh, flesh wounding. Especially given kyton 'build a nervous system' bodies."

"Uh...huh," I replied, skepticism as clear as I could make it. "Doesn't mean the beaker is less toxic for it. In potential," I quickly corrected.

"Eh, but you're immune to toxins anyway," she said, tossing me a cleaning rag. "So what hypothetical deadly poison so made is my issue, not yours."

"...We were using wolfsbane. Do you know how it got that name, here on Earth?"

She paused in the middle of getting another beaker. "...No?"

"Well, once upon a time, a bunch of farmers had some trouble with the wild, largely carnivorous relatives of dogs…"

An impromptu history of pest control later, the normal cheer of my tutor abated. "...poor wolves."

The cheer returned. "But, I'm a scientist. If I want to understand something fully, I need to experience it." With that, her chain fetched a stoppered vial of a yellowish liquid. "Universal antidote, right here. If I start feeling the effects of poison, survival to use my new wisdom is only a sip away."

I rose an eyebrow. "...Thank you for giving me that perspective on the parts of Baator that are underwater, radioactive, or still smoking."

She snorted. "Yeah, I suppose that is rather reckless to a person who doesn't have access to 'goddamn miracles' levels of medicine." She shrugged. "But, I digress. Now, class, let's begin with the purification of the beaker again…"

What was not normal, even given how increasingly odd that term was given the alien ship parked in the bay and various crew running errands (mainly drills - there was a big stink when a portion of the park was cordoned off for their war games), was the fact that some of them...kept popping up. More specifically, a single "type" of baatezu.

The greenish humanoids, the ones that came in many sizes and many coverings of body hair, kept on appearing near me, in specific. I mean, crime didn't stop just because there were aliens about. The E88 was held back by Kaiser if I heard the briefings (and did the odd screen-reading jobs for Officer Bennett on the lookout for crimes in preparation) correctly, but according to the ABB, this simply meant there was less contestants for the territory that the vanished Merchants left (I supposed Lung knew a free lunch when he saw one. Might actually be good for the poor place, at least in comparison). So, mostly them for me, plus muggers and the occasional complete idiot (also known as alien hate criminal).

Such as the one the "friendship building team", as I and Dennis snarkily called any attempt to mend the rift between Sophia and me through mutual team membership (it had to happen eventually) were pursuing now.

"Goddamn...fucking...molotov!" I screamed, mending the broken glass repeatedly to fix it into
form that did not involve shrapnel in my currently-useless leg. "Clock, can you handle this?"

My teammate nodded, his fingers dancing around the panic button of his cell (utter heat immunity or not, it was sheer luck that bottle was aimed at me), leaving me to fully extract the glass. Unfortunately, I had already used my other, more directly useful (and easily depleted) healing spell on one of the bomb victims. Didn't want to spoil one of my better tactics on helping me.

"Tybalt? Need a little help here-"

"On it." Paws rubbed together, then with a flash of light, a bit of sensation came back to my leg, followed by him willing the blood flow to stop. "Found crow, it said that the bomber is trying to double back. We prepare that illusion jugglery?"

"Good plan." I pointed the spear at the bombers, willing a rather thick fog, filled with half-shapes, into being. Tybalt then followed it up by willing a couple balls of light to appear in the hands of the figures.

In other works, a faked smoke bomb with faked flashlights. True to form, my attacker and a couple of his buddies stormed out...right into the alley Stalker had camped. A few arrows later, I felt a surge of vindication as the would-be terrorists fell over.

The tangential part of my mind briefly wondered if the evolution of that healing ability, combined with demonstrated telepathy with nonsapient animals, had anything to do with agathions' inherent selflessness. I put it out of mind, on the basis I hadn't heard the all-

"Got the last dumbass," Clockblocker's voice came over the radio. "Thought he could take the time stopper in hand-to-hand combat."

And this was why I didn't think highly of the Roaring Xenophobe Brigade. Frankly the people who reacted to new things with 'I MUST EXTERMINATE' were not the people to think things through. Or at all.

So, now to the victims.

A few were human, of course. I didn't really expect these people to actually care about defending we Earthlings except as a concept.

The target though, was the green humanoids. One of the smaller ones looked to be in critical condition - not enough to need my last more powerful spell though. My hand glided across his forehead, a spell discharging itself into his cut muscles and flesh. A reddish-brown eye with yellow sclera opened.

"Hey, listen, I know I'm probably not the best at bedside demeanors, but you're okay, can you-"

"You healed me."

The tone was...not what I was expecting.

"Um...yes?"

"You healed me," he said, in that same, shocked, wondering tone of voice. The kind of voice you'd expect from someone in the middle of a religious experience. Expression much the same.

Pins and needles started to erupt from my back.
"But...I am but of common stock." He looked directly in my eyes. "Why?"

And now I pitied him. Class structure was not kind to whoever this guy was.

"I would do it for anyone," I recited from memory. "I don't care how low you were born, what class you're in, you're just a person who was the victim of a criminal. All victims are equal in my eyes, and each life saved is equally valuable," And it was just as corny in real life as it was in Glenn's "stock pamphlet." Oh well, at least it would cheer him up-

"The princess has spoken!" a voice shouted from behind me.

"Praise be to Adrasteia!" a third responded. "Praise be to the kindly one, the Sheltering Hand of Shadow!"

"We shall show ourselves worthy of Azrai's love!"

...Azrai?!

"What the hell do you-

The question died. My mouth had stopped working right.

The green humanoids were all prostrating before me, bowing and kneeling on the ground, with at least three limbs touching it per homid.

...This had to be some kind of buttering up, I mean, it was flattering and all but seriously they didn't need to go through this-

The Medusa I let out of the helmet tasted the air.

Want you to have good impression of your servants. Excessive praise to prevent abuse by deity figure.

Minutes later, Clockblocker put it better than I ever could, especially given how I had temporarily forgotten how to use the English language, and Tybalt was having just as much trouble.

"...I..wha...the hell?"

"And I have no idea why," I finished.

Even if there wasn't a stipulation to reporting me attracting cults in Tybalt's accepted conditions for membership, this was the kind of thing that I, in particular, would report to the director.

Thankfully, Piggot hadn't been faced with anything particularly disastrous over the past couple months, so her mood was merely sour rather than the borderline murderousness I had come to associate with her over the past few meetings.

Or maybe because she realized that, sudden Master power or no, I personally did nothing wrong. In any case, she looked the way I felt - confused, aggravated, and perhaps a bit nervous.

For her however, the nervous bit was probably more due to the green tide trying to negotiate the wall of security. A fact made harder by one of the bigger humanoids getting pissed off enough to attempt to bullrush the agents, and got turned into an impromptu foam roadblock for his fellows, as shown on the outside security camera. The nervous bit for me was wondering if I was going to deal with that throughout my career-and worse, if I made them like that, a la Teacher.
"Sorry I'm late. Being Chambers' pet project," a familiar voice interrupted.

A man that I could only describe as "generic" slid into the room wearing a trenchcoat - the kind of lack of any real distinction for the area that makes it nearly impossible to recall someone accurately. Truth is, I doubted that was actually possible without deliberate effort, and indeed, Nex went back to his true form pretty quickly.

Colin nodded in sympathy. "He can be a really obsessive stickler for the proper way of things, can't he?"

"You said it, not me." The coat was quickly untied, revealing a more colorful spandex costume of a magnifying glass inspecting a planet, as Nex began to scratch at it rapidly. "I don't know what I'm allergic to, the nylon or the name. When I meet the focus group who thought 'Saturnine Inspector' was a good alias…"

Piggot coughed. "Was there a reason you showed up, Mr. Nex'rik?"

"Ah, yeah, my bad." He pointed at the camera feed. "Those guys on the screen aren't baatezu, despite what the guy who's writing the press release thinks. Those are goblins, an Aebrynis-native race like dopplegangers."

...Okay, that was new. "How can you tell?" I blurted out, more out of spur of the moment than anything.

The rather deadpan expression on Nex's face said everything.

"Yeah, stupid question. But...why am I their new celebrity?"

"Why I showed up." The doppleganger pulled out a chair, slouching in it while he apparently figured out what he was going to say next.

"...To goblins, awnsheghlien are as gods."

My thoughts grinding to a halt was going to be a thing with Nex's explanations, weren't they?

Tybalt sputtered for a bit himself. "W...W..What?"

"See you've never been to Aebrynis. Yep, our goblins view awnsheghlien as more than parahumans - they're the small gods who walk the earth, children of the divine and mortal who deserve veneration for existing."

I pulled out the butterfly pin. This was going to be long.

The Director and I were of one mind as we reached the end of the latest round of exposition; Oh dear sweet merciful God why me!? I swore, if I wasn't immune to it, the heat from the friction of rubbing the pin would have burned me.

"...Slaves?" Piggot echoed.

"Status symbol. Goblins see everything in terms of master and servant. The more you've mastered, it stands to reason to goblins, the better leader you are," Nex continued. "The thing is, they absolutely despise the idea of any other race enslaving a goblin, after the way the elves treated
them."

He leaned back a little, sighing. "Thing is, individuals aren't races in the goblinoid view of things. A person who proves him or herself worthy of being a master through strength or cunning is willingly followed. Which is exactly what Azrai did, to the extent where they now regard any of his descendants as being divine figures in their own right. Yes, Hercules and Samson, Colin, that's a good metaphor-sorry, simile."

Everyone not Nex cradled his or her head. "I appear to have discovered the realm of Platonic forms after all," Tybalt muttered. "This is the form of 'more than one can conceivably handle'."

"...So," I began. "Due to the Azrai cells, there is now a culture of slavers who literally worship me as the self-made descendant of a megalomaniac." I inhaled. "I have never felt more ashamed by popularity in my entire life."

...Nope, that didn't break the tension.

"Don't ignore their fear of contacting you," Armsmaster continued. "From the sound of things they were both frightened of how you'd react, but regarded it as your right to abuse them - hence why they were trying to gauge how you would likely treat them in the future-"

"Boss?" I muttered out of the corner of my mouth. "Stop explaining things."

Tybalt looked thoughtful "...But if you understand their psychology, it's possible to begin reforms-"

"No," I said, drawing myself back up. "I am not a politician, stolen power be damned. I just do my job, I catch the criminals, restore order - I don't try to change laws, I enforce them, and maybe provide an example of a better way. What I am not is a puffed-up feudal warlord with a starving ego who gets off on control."

I retrieved my spear. "Now if you don't mind, I need stop this cult before it forms."

"Have we heard anything from Panacea?"

I looked back at the Director. "Hm?"

"It's well-known that Chimaera's death is responsible for her mutation. Even if the goblins haven't been viewing the news before their arrival, if they know anything about how awnsheghlien power inheritance operates, it's likely they've figured out Ms. Dallon is one of their demigods as well."

...Oh.

Without saying anything, I reached for my civilian cell.

A couple rings, and-

"Taylor? Oh thank god I've been needing to talk to someone-"

Her voice sounded a bit strange - not quite the growing hiss of stress reversion, but definitely a bit static and distant.

"Amy?" I cut her off.

"...Yes?"
"This wouldn't have anything to do with green humanoids following you wherever you go?"

A pause. ". How did you-"

"Can you come to the PRT building, please? Nex has something he needs to tell you."

A long pause. ". Er... can he come to me? I'm kind of hiding in the Shadow World right now, and I don't know how to navigate from here to a specific location."

The doppleganger in question groaned.

From what came over the phone speaker, half an hour later, Amy had been shown the ropes of using minute Shadow portals to triangulate her relative position and Nex explaining symbolic logic, and ten minutes after that, she and Nex portaled into the gym.

"You know," she said, dusting off a greenish, glowing mold of her costume, "I've noticed I don't really think about the implications of powers very much. You'd think I'd be able to at least smell my way over here through those things..."

"Eh, don't be too hard on yourself," Nex grunted as he put his portal bird's wings back into their "off" position. "Took me a couple days to figure out the navigation trick myself, and I had a native guide." He smirked a little. "Of course, I didn't have the ability to make portals by breathing either, so take that with a grain of salt."

Amy said nothing, only looked rather annoyed as she texted back in sane world, at PRT to Glory Girl. "So, what did you want to tell me, and please, can you tell me why I had to hide in R'yleh's national park for the last three hours?"

One explanation later, the younger Dallon even less enthused than I did about our shared religious role.

"So, not only am I a giant snake, I have attendant minions. Minions with absolutely no ethical quarrel with slavery." She buried her face in her hands. "Fuck my life. Just...fuck it where it hurts."

"If it makes you feel better, you can escape them," I said, trying for levity and probably failing. "I can't fly forever, after all."

"If only the place I have refuge in wasn't trying to kill me if I give it an inch." The healer began to collapse to the ground. "Typical. Just...typical."

Nex suddenly looked very concerned. "Um, er, I'm sorry for the intrusion but... what do you mean by 'father's daughter'?"

There was a very loud crack, and as my eyes caught up with the reality, I noticed that Nex was stumbling back from a large wing. A large wing that was quickly absorbed into an arm.

"...I probably deserved that," he muttered, rubbing his cheek.

Amy began to sink into the ground again. "It's just...I can't escape it, can I? Now... literal goblins. I have literal goblins as my fanatical soldiers, seeking only to please me." She looked up. "Maybe fate...wants to tell me something..."

Tybalt spoke before I did. "You could show them a better way. A way without slaves, without debasing themselves."
I saw her fists clench. "Yeah. While we're at it, Russia looks rather sad under the czars-"


**I KNOW!** "I know…” And then she collapsed. "I just…”

"I'll help you," I blurted out.

The beginning of her cry stopped. "Huh?"

Mentally kicking myself, I continued. "They've already latched on to me as their healer, and they know I don't have biases in healing spells. So I'll help you redeem them, help you not be corrupted."

Nex did a double-take. "But I thought you said-"

"I changed my mind." I said, glumly. "I can get the PRT to help me drive them off and convince them I'm not interested. She has all of two people, one of whom makes people worship *her* by sheer accident and if she tries to help it'll just redirect the problem."

I sighed. "This way, on the other hand? This way we can at least face the problem together and keep each other from going power mad."

"...Not to mention that this way, the goblins will break free of their societal abuse cycle," Tybalt started. "This way, there's a permanent change, teaching men how to fish instead of giving fish."

...Someone was pretty insistent about reforms.

As I began to unmuzzle the Medusa, Tybalt held up a paw. "I admit it, I have an agenda - I hate slavery as an institution. It is something anathema to the agathion mindset, something our instincts don't allow."

Ah. A bit pushy, but well-intentioned. I refastened the muzzle.

And opened the empathy circuit, for a second.

A sense of duty flowed over. Duty and hope. Okay, so maybe he wasn't *that* deceptive.

Amy appeared to be considering this. "...You don't think you'll be corrupted by power to and we end up in a state of amoral groupthink?"

"Not with me breathing down her neck, no."

I flinched as Piggot came out of the door behind me. Forgot she was there.

...And this probably was considered "suspicious cult-like behavior," wasn't it. Damn, here comes the Rant.

The Director shivered, before drawing to her full height.

"I will see if this can be allowed as part of both our outreach and to see if the goblins have any intelligence on their baatezu allies. *Also* expect to both of you to be completely open about all goblin-related activities. Do I make myself clear?"

...Uh.
"Er...Thanks?" I replied, quashing the inner Dennis before I asked how Nex got there without me noticing.

"You are welcome," she said, curtly. "Make no mistake, this is only because the goblins are going to serve as auxiliary members of the PRT. We require extra bodies, and an insight into the inner workings of Baator, however tangential. So do not squander what generosity I am giving you."

She turned to leave. "Also, Ms. Dallon? As a request from the Guild, I ask you to, at the earliest possible convenience, to please confer with Dragon, in my office, about your own experiences with the Shadow World."

Amy blinked, just as confused by Piggot's sudden permissive attitude as I was. "Er...I can do that tomorrow, after my shift, actually."

"Good."

As she walked off, I heard Nex snort. "Becoming overlords because friendship. That's a first."

There were dozens of things I would rather be doing than public speaking with a speech I had to help write myself in the past day or so. Attempt to inure myself to pain by eating primed grenades, for one. But frankly, I thought it would be more genuine if it came from me.

Mostly.

In concept.

With the input of three other people.

"You sure about this, Taylor?" Dad said. For the third time.

"No," I admitted. "But, sooner or later, these things have to be made. You know, connecting with the employees, and all that."

"I still fail to see how my original idea didn't pass inspection," Glenn said, the videophone's distortion making him sound even more disgruntled. "I mean, studies have shown-"

"That people who have been living all their lives in a culture where slavery is viewed as the evil it is respond affirmatively to its removal?" Tybalt finished. "Sorry, but the goblins will likely immediately slot Taylor into the 'noble exile' role, insightful but definitely not a font of great wisdom. Trust me, I've dealt with cultures like goblins before."

"Then how do you suppose we reform their social system?" a caustic Glenn replied. "We have to start somewhere, especially before they get the idea of 'mastering' bits of Earth Bet."

"Subtly," my familiar replied, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "We start with the idea of civil rights, then to indentured servitude and term limits, then move to compensation-"

"Then a civil war?" Glenn shot back.

"...Hopefully we can avoid that," Tybalt admitted. "But from what Nex told me of goblins, their culture is not so obsessed with primacy of their species over lesser ones so much as fear of being enslaved themselves, by someone they do not respect. Quite unlike your Confederacy."

"It's still slavery," Dad muttered.
"And you are perfectly right to think that, any form of it is an evil that must be eradicated. I merely wish to allow your daughter to wade into this toxic environ and not be swept up in it."

"Too late," I interjected. "God-queen, remember?"

"...Okay, I will admit that being born into power isn't a situation I'm familiar with, but I have learned over the years that it's infinitely wiser to do things gradually when dealing with societal reforms of any kind. Taking things too quickly tends to result in vicious counters by the powerful, or in this case rebellion. This is also a place where slavery probably can be reformed out of existence, since it seems to be a luxury product as opposed to an entire economic system founded on parasitically sucking the life and labor from a convenient minority. And to be completely frank, the PRT also want the goblins as intelligence assets, and doing things too bluntly will alert the baatezu."

He stood up and stretched. "Besides, we aren't trying to reform an entire culture, are we? Just this shared tribe between Ms. Hebert and Ms. Dallon. And to do that, and what my ultimate plan was, we foster trust between it and the outside world - far easier when both rulers are outsiders."

"Uh-huh," Glenn said, sounding as skeptical as he could. "Just don't complain to me when the chains come out. Or the rebellion starts anyway despite you trying for soft reforms."

"I won't. I'm many things, but I don't think I'm a coward when it comes to responsibility for my actions."

I had asked for the PRT to not attend the so-called "acceptance speech" meeting, on the basis of stage fright. I just got a camera to record it.

Because fate is a hateful, evil creature, the ethnic diversity of goblins made the rapt crowd, if anything, seem bigger. It was extremely easy to note where one goblin ended and the other began, mainly because they didn't really seem to feel the need to keep to their own subrace.

The smallest ethnicity (true goblins, Nex said was the popular parlance) was both the greenest and the least hairy as well, with the odd distinguishing feature of a significant minority of them having calloused hands - results of being the caste of craftsmen and farmers, I assumed. The tall, mostly yellow ones (hobgoblins) stood proudly and strongly, for the most part armored in either weathered-looking mail or bits of hard material they had scrounged together (I had heard one raising a big stink about not being allowed a bulletproof vest earlier). The largest, almost completely furry ones (bugbears, a name which made exactly 50% sense) almost looked like repeated steroid abusers, were it not for the natural symmetry of their muscle - almost like living statues of Olympic athletes - and a calm confidence to their body language that did not speak of the infamous roid rage. I resisted the urge to sin-scent them (it would probably tell me nothing I didn't already know) as I took the impromptu podium.

A few seconds, ostensibly to clear my throat, realistically to calm my nerves and rub my pin.

Then;

" Righteous...loyal...disciplined...brethren."

Nex said they loved that kind of opening, the respect they felt they collectively needed from a master. Which was really good for Tybalt's more subtle plan of abolition, seeing as how they already weren't fans of chattel slavery.
"Far you have traveled," I continued, submerging myself in the overly dramatic identity of Adrasteia as far as I could go. "Far, and without knowing where you were headed, only that you knew it had to be a better life. But now you are the adopted children of Earth Bet, a beautiful world free of the past which chains you to a cruel master indeed."

Brief check of the written speech while I inhaled.

"As the first native Daughter of Darkness born, I welcome you, and am grateful to be your guide-"

"WE WELCOME THE SHELTERING HAND!"

"WE ARE NOT WORTHY OF HER CHARITY!"

And just like that, I became both amnesiac and illiterate.

"I...I..."

What was I doing?

I didn't want to be some kind of living idol! I wasn't a divine princess sent to protect and rule a people as, I don't know, Pharaoh of Goblinkind! I wasn't even at all good with people, let alone a reformist leader! How was I supposed to give order to an entire tribe of aliens with a values system completely estranged from that of many humans, when I didn't even understand my country's government?

Okay...I was going to have to let them down gently, had to find a good excuse, except no Amy was dependent on me-

"Hmm-mm-hmm..."

Who was humming?

"Hhhmm-mm-hmm-hm-hm-hm..."

Sounded female.

"Mmm-hm, hm-hm, hmm,.."

And...calming. Really, strangely calming.

As my thoughts returned to me, I suddenly remembered something else Nex said. Something very core to Awnsheghlien in general.

You're all born politicians.

I may not have been a social person by any stretch of the imagination...but whatever genetic instincts Azrai worked into his creations was.

A cough, to cover for my sudden panic attack. "Pardon me, I have...allergies. No, no, I don't need a tissue, just need a second to compose," I finished, in reply to several of the goblins holding up portable boxes.

Okay, how to provoke the instinct...maybe if I thought about the heart hello.
The sheer feeling of *electricity* that surged through Me suddenly refocused everything. Whereas before I was trying desperately not to screw up in front of strangers, now I felt in My element, surrounded by adoring Servants and Disciples of My Regality, carrying out My right and duty to protect and govern My Subjects and Family. I was Strong. I was Divine. I was *home*.

Then I noticed I was internally capitalizing a lot of words, glorying in the feeling of power over My Follow...the tribe. The dissonance was not pleasant, but it worked.

I strode forward with new confidence. "*As I was saying, I am grateful to be your exalted guide to Earth Bet. I, myself, am unworthy of this gift of mastery, but I truly and earnestly believe that my own legend will be more than equal to Azrai’s, may he forever reign in the place beyond the Veil, in time. Make no mistake, as the voice of the newborn court, both for we scions of the House Above All Houses and for the consolidated might of the Magma Gorgers Tribe, I will ensure that there will be a new home carved for you in this bountiful, beautiful, and unspoiled world."*

A whoop of joy and elation. Again, the dissonance; Taylor-me was even more frightened by the notion of making promises I had no idea I could keep, *awnshegh*-me basked in the sound of approval and applause, feeding on it to fuel the passions that heated my blood and fueled my voice.

"*This I promise you. And this I would rather shed my powers than break."*

Naturally, the me who was far, far more in her element was the dominant one.

"*She has* come to save us!"

"*The Lost was speaking truth!*"

*Awnshegh*-me smiled broadly, overjoyed as the simple honesty of doing what was both the right thing and the expedient thing at the same time.

This, of course, allowed Taylor-me time to fully comprehend that statement.

*Come to save them?*

As *awnshegh*-me launched fully into the prepared speech about symbiosis with Earth Bet and concessions to a world that meant goblins no harm, Taylor-me noted that at no point in the written speech did I actually put the Magma Gorgers’ name in, or why I seemed to know it. Or the part about coming to an *unspoiled* world.

Later, after the instincts died down and *awnshegh*-me subsided back into my modified, genetically narcissistic subconscious, I checked the video.

Off to the side, a woman in a PRT uniform moved past the corner of the viewscreen after the humming stopped, nothing visible of her head except long, black tresses...and a strange device on her hand I recognized as a text-to-speech converter.

First thing on my agenda: Report what happens when an *awnshegh* lets instinct dictate her emotions before I grew addicted to the feeling.

Secondly;

"*Well, she is obviously mute. I do not think people who can speak wear those ungainly things.*"
Getting nowhere with investigating the mysterious hummer.

"Thank you for the good intentions, Tybalt," Colin muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Sadly, I doubt if someone capable enough to hide in an auditorium unnoticed and intelligent enough to realize she had to get there before the goblins did to avoid being noticed by Hebert would keep wearing such an identifying item."

"...Wait, how did we-"

"It's a working hypothesis, Hannah," he continued, still out of the corner of his mouth. "The camera was placed directly behind the audience, and there was a lot left untouched. My guess is that our mystery cape was crouched behind the tables while waiting for the speech to start, ergo not having to worry about evading notice if she came in at a later time, or facing the camera."

"All well and good," I interrupted, "but here's the thing - I already scented what's likely to be her hiding place."

"And?"

"Nothing."

That got Colin's full attention.

Hannah's eyes narrowed as she began to pace. "...That ability of yours doesn't pick up things you approve of, does it?"

I caught on. "...You think she was trying to help?"

"Presumably," Colin continued. "If this woman is a recent one, it might be that she's still massively upset over the...circumstances, and has socially withdrawn herself. Especially if that's the reason she's now a mute."

"Possibly," Piggot suddenly chimed in. "Or she's the infiltrator from a couple months back, and her lack of a scent is due to a Stranger component to her power."

"Good point, Ma'am," I replied, narrowing my brow. "You don't infiltrate a meeting and then use a power on the speaker out of the goodness of your heart." What agenda she did have, though, was beyond me. Aggravating, and worrying - if her humming could send me into a narcissistic episode, she could probably do the opposite and provoke utter depression. Among various other things.

A few seconds passed, no sound except for the clock's ticking as we tried to figure the cape out.

Colin broke it. "...Maybe she's an awnshegh? From the sound of things, they seem to have a good deal of emotional connection with each other."

Hannah began to nod. "Actually...Panacea did mention that Seadrake claimed there were 'friends' of his on Earth Bet."

"...You think she was bolstering a cousin?" Tybalt said.

"Precisely," Colin replied. "My guess is that she felt honor-bound to assist her family member in taking control of the Magma Gorgers - she probably believes awnsheghlien ruling over goblins is the natural order of the world, and wished to help it along. Mandate of heaven, and the various bad things that happen if it is not followed, to use a native example."
"I thought on this. "...Think she may want a favor later?"

"Possibly," Colin replied. "Or maybe she actually was purely ideologically motivated, in which case she's even more unpredictable. We know absolutely nothing about awnsheghlien culture, and if she defaults into this for a complete stranger, it's likely she has never even considered the possibility that Hebert doesn't understand her honor code. And she's liable to be upset when we succumb to statistical inevitability and break it."

Hannah held her head, muttering something in Arabic. "And she wears an agent uniform. Hiding in plain sight. Director, I think we need to do an inventory of all...mute...Director?"

Piggot had suddenly frozen, eyes wide.

Colin whipped into action before Hannah did. "Madam Director? Did you remember someone who might be our mystery cape?"

"...Not that."

I swore the temperature in the room dropped by several degrees. I noticed Tybalt suddenly shiver as his coat fluffed out.

"...Is Ms. Dallon still in the middle of Dragon's Shadow World experiment?"

Huh?

"...She is, Director, but-"

Colin was cut off by Piggot suddenly dialing the videophone.

A couple rings later, Dragon's CGI avatar materialized on the screen.

"Yes, Ms. Piggot?"

"Earlier, Panacea remarked about the odd nature of the Shadow World around places where your technology has a current presence in the mundane counterpart?"

"...Yes?" Dragon asked, looking confused.

"Do you think it's possible to send a probe to Vancouver's counterpart and examine the effects around your home?"

Dragon blinked. "Um, Ma'am, that appears to be an invasion of privacy-"

"Please? I believe it may be a threat to national security, either of Canada or the United States."

Dragon's face chewed on a CGI nail. Right, she was an agoraphobe when it came to her physical body, being put on the spot like this couldn't be comfortable.

A few seconds, and she shook herself. "...sorry for the delay, I just was caught unprepared. I'll direct the probe there right now."

About fifteen minutes later, Dragon called back. "Shadow World probe is almost at destination, Nex's directions combined with clear trail of my technology's influence has what the hell!?"

The view switched.
The Shadow World looked as bizarre as Amy claimed it to be. Trees that grew into perfect geometrical shapes surrounded a lake that shifted into Platonic solids as it hovered in the air.

It was also pretty easy to see Dragon's influence - cables and wires made of earth and thatched together with vines and woody plants sprawled across the landscape in right angles and squares, covering the ground and extending into the air. At least one branch seemed to be following the camera probe around.

That wasn't what I noticed first, though.

What we noticed first was the metal spider crawling across the earthen network.

A giant, steel spider, with ruby lenses for eyes. Even as the camera affixed on it, a spike-covered limb almost casually tore open one of the wooden cables, releasing dark red data which it briefly stopped to drink. A green hourglass symbol glowed, flickering with something that looked like Morse code before the spider began to slowly walk over to a new cable.

"...I was watching my data storage while it was biting on that cable," Dragon's voice whispered over the intercom. "While it was 'drinking', my storage was being accessed, but as soon as it stopped, there was no records at all."

"...Reconnaissance drone, you think?" Colin whispered back.

"Too big." Dragon replied. "Not economical enough to make something that big for espionage, since drones are supposed to be disposable."

She inhaled. "I have to figure out a way to trick this thing into the real world."

"Kill it."

Dragon's face reappeared to stare at Tybalt. "Pardon? This thing is a sign of aggression by someone."

"There should be a brand of its master contained in its forehead, and it won't dissolve. The power supply for its eye rays should be where the spinnerets on a normal spider should be."

"You know what-" Dragon began.

"It's called a retriever, woman, and by the Lady of Pain herself will you please kill it before it kills you!?"

There was a brief jump in Dragon's avatar before it resolved itself back into her shocked expression.

Right on cue, the spider apparently noticed the suit. A readout of ENERGY BUILDUP DETECTED appeared as the retriever's eyes began to ignite with different colors of energy.

"Point taken."

The point of view rapidly dropped as a stream of lightning jumped out of two of its eyes, distorting the digital lens even as they sailed over Dragon's suit.

Thankfully for the drone, Dragon was a lot quicker with her engines than the retriever was. The suit rapidly rocketed forward into its abdomen, dodging a couple more beams along the way. In a few seconds, a splurt of a black substance that I hoped was oil hit the suit as Dragon, metal cutters
still whirring, tore out four objects that looked like differently colored gears made of gems, and the "fire" in the retriever's eyes flickered out. Two minutes later, the head was torn off too, and the body froze in mid-stride, before toppling.

It wasn't a fair fight, especially not with Tybalt barking out design flaws in the retriever. Copacetic for Dragon, though.

"What was that thing?" Dragon asked as her avatar stopped glitching - probably because she had stopped moving so quickly in the real world. "I mean, it was obviously some kind of robotic drone with defense capabilities at all, but..."

"A retriever," Tybalt said, floating up. "A tanar'ri enforcement and assassination construct, one of the most infamous and frequently used models for both their relative cheapness and intimidation factor."

"Tanar'ri?" Piggot echoed. "You don't mean-"

"Yes, this thing was likely a vanguard for a future incursion for its master." Tybalt was furiously pacing again. "I don't know why this one was repurposed for spying or scouting, however - they're mainly found in areas where the tanar'ri have already established their power, because their core purpose is essentially to hunt down traitors and deserters, hence the name. Agathions have dealt with them dozens of times when sheltering political refugees and defectors."

He sat. "Trying to refit them for other purposes, however, usually necessitates removal of the primary magic generators, leaving their primary weapon vulnerable to being disabled, and from there easily destroyed. Hence why they're usually on the home front."

Dragon nodded as she began to cut into the spider's head. "But they're cheap and can take advantage of the first blow if they surprise an enemy, am I correct?"

"Precisely. I think the only reason this one's lord will notice it's gone is because the data stream has been cut off." Tybalt began to pace again. "Still, the majority of tanar'ri aren't known for this kind of risk-reward scouting. They don't have a great deal of loyalty to one another, so there has to be something that personally motivated the owner to send a scout. Maybe they-"

"All well and good," Colin interjected, "but what the hell is it doing around Vancouver!?" He sounded a little scared now, which already sent me on edge. Colin lacked many things, but an unflappable disposition wasn't one of them.

"I don't know, that's why I wanted to see the ownership sigil. I also recommend we not tell the baatezu, they'll take it as a reason to establish control-"

"Is this it?" Dragon interrupted.

The suit held up a grey ball of metal with a golden sigil in it. The symbol itself was rather abstract, resembling nothing so much as two differently-shaped fish hooks merged together with a handle.

"...Oh. Oh dear."

"...please tell me that aside is due to this retriever belonging to a conscientious objector to the Blood War and this is all a huge misunderstanding," I murmured.

"I would wish. That's the seal of Prince Haagenti, the Whispers Within. One of the greatest scientific minds, and more importantly, weaponsmiths in all of the universe, let alone the Abyss."
It didn't take long to realize exactly why a weapons researcher might want Dragon's data.

"...Should I go start preparing precautions in case he manages to crack my own tech now or-"

"You are dismissed, Dragon. You probably need all the time you can have."

"On it." Call disconnected.

A very long silence followed, only broken by Hannah.

"If it helps at all, he at least can't replicate it directly! ...I hope."

Chapter End Notes

Not pictured: Everyone in the room breaking into hysterical laughter/sobbing because of this on top of everything else in this chapter.

Just be glad Haagenti didn't meet Bonesaw. Odds are that Jack Slash would be overjoyed to find she has a new friend...who likes science-offs with her, and whose hobbies include explosions, war profiteering, arts and crafts (alchemy of the flesh)...

Aspirant 3.4

Chapter Notes

And after the plot gut of that last chapter, slowwwwingggg doooooowwwwwwnnnn.

It's also here that I finally start picking up on some plot threads.

(Also, I used the normal board filters to fix the formatting and color of text. Notice any difference?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What do you mean, 'training'?"

Even though I didn't bother with videophones, the tone in Victoria's voice managed to get her expression across.

"I mean training, Vic. If you want me, please come to the PRT, I've already finished the assignments by the time you get out of class."

"But didn't you want to clear something with Amy-"

"She can come too, make everything copacetic," I answered, as honestly as I could. "Something came up."

"The Pig wasn't happy aliens liked you?" she guessed.

"No, something else. Nothing to do with Piggot." Apart from uncovering the problem, of course. "But I've been slacking, as have the Wards."

"...Wait, what's the problem ag-"

"Gym hours open in ten, got to run, sorry," I quickly cut her off.

"Hey, look, you've done a big thing for my sis if there's anything I can do-"

Click.

"Tybalt."

The silvanshee nodded, grimly. "I've enlisted several of the Magma Gorgers as living mannequins for sharpening your hexes. They were pleased to help."

"Good. I'll need as wide a spread of brains as I can get, help figure out how this evil eye works."

"On it."

About a couple hours later, Carlos came by to see what all the noise of cackling and thumps were about. One glance at the obstacle course I had made to test the goblins' reflexes as I reapplied hexes them, he immediately spun to face me.
"PRT order," I said before he could speak. "Ask Piggot."

That was a refrain I got used to over the rest of the week. In the (not-particularly-)odd case it didn't work, namely Dennis and Amy, stony silence while throwing myself back at my self-made regiment did the trick.

Official Wards training day. First one of the new weekend. First day to put my plans for other training regiments into motion.

First, and most vital item on agenda; make sure we have as much access to Tinker Bullshit as is actually possible.

"Chris?"

The currently-out-of-costume boy whipped around. "Gah-Taylor?"

"Did you talk to Yamada about that nervousness you had towards tech?"

"...Not in depth?"

"Talk more," I barked, wheeling around to the next item on my list.

"Missy?"

"Huh?"

"I'm going to be giving you the eye in the next power test, see how you act when something's affecting your mind. Sophia?"

"Hebert-"

"Don't know, don't care. You're providing at least some of the targets for Missy to warp. Dennis-"

"Calm! Down!"

There was a brief "crack" sound as one of Dean's beams hit a convenient floorboard next to me. I jumped back slightly before turning around, trying to remain as stony as possible.

"You feeling okay?" my teammate asked, looking concerned. "I mean, I understand if you don't-"

"It has nothing to do with my new self-proclaimed henchmen. Dad's more bothered than I am," I lied. "Also, since you're here, I was meaning to ask you about how controlled your blasts-"

"But I mean, it's like just after that you were possessed by, I don't know, the ghost of Sergeant Ermey or something."

"Hm. Good," I said, drily. "Might help me in catching up this slack training exercise. School or no school, we are still capes, and when, I dunno, the S9-"

"Easy for you to say. You have tutors. Here."

My wings flared out and my Medusas fanned. I turned around, deliberately slowly.

"What was that, Dennis?"

The redhead paled a bit. "Er, forget I said anything-"
"Sorry, speech is not a take-back option, even for a time-bender. So, again, what was that, Dennis?"

"...I mean, uh, I respect your dedication and everything, but-

"Good. Now show you're motivated by the example, get to it!" I threw a dancing light into the air for effect, a mute gunshot.

And noticed that I wasn't getting closer to the Gatling Batter.

"Vista? Stop that."

"No, you're going to to tell us what the hell-

"Hssss!

The moment of surprise from the silvanshee hissing in her face was all I needed to get in the cage.

"Again, PRT order, I don't care what you think about it, get the fuck to it! Now!"

Slowly, the teenaged capes dispersed, looking more than a bit shocked.

Sorry guys. This was for your own good.

"Tybalt?"

"On it." The silvanshee got out his targets and began to dance in the air.

Furling my wings about myself, trying to leave enough of a window to see between them, I nodded to my familiar.

And the self-made cover fire exercise began.

"Hebert."

"Hess."

"...You're scaring the Wards."

That was a conversation opener I didn't expect from Sophia. I gave the pause signal to Tybalt before coming out of my wings, looking confused.

"The Wards, not me."

Ah, balance in the cosmos was maintained. "I suppose you think I've finally gotten my head on straight then?"

It took her a second to think of a reply. "Well...yes, but the thing is..."

She pointed at the clock. Holy shit, I was at this for two hours?

"I respect you shedding everything of your prey self.""

"Will you stop with the 'law of the jungle bull!?' I nearly shouted in exasperation.

Sophia rolled her eyes. "Okay, your determination in training, but, seriously, Hebert? You're
torturing yourself. Take it from one pred-cape to another, this isn't making you any stronger, just wearing you out."

I blinked.

Was Sophia trying to be nice?

She caught on. "I pulled my head out of my ass about being a lone wolf. I'm trying to not separate myself from the team, I seem to work better that way."

*Great, now to work on your "being a tolerable person" skills, I did not* say. The past was the past, I couldn't avoid this issue forever. "Pragmatism is appreciated," I muttered, as I leaned on my spear.

Sophia grimaced. "Look, okay, I'm a bitch. I can get why you hate me."

Okay, now she was downplaying it. "You are one third of the reason I find being stuck in the building and with a tutor a much more happy occasion than going to Winslow and actually having a social life outside the other Wards. So I really hope you do," I replied, coldly.

The pain I had been ignoring started to come in full force. "Anyway, while I appreciate you approaching me about this, it really, really is not helping. So thank you for the effort."

As I hobbled off to lie down, I felt Tybalt's presence float up behind me. "Well, good to see you've upgraded from 'hatred' to 'condescension'. Not that I blame you, but...you could stand to offer a few alms if she is. Take it from someone who has gone through that process before, forgiveness sterilizes wounds. You already had your moral victory ages ago, you don't need a vendetta."

I had nothing to say to that. At least she made the attempt. But besides the fact that nearly two years of hell and a crushed and defiled flute didn't go away in three months...what could I legally tell her?

I officially hated gag orders. Counterintuitive, PR driven gag orders.

Of course she wasn't going to be the only person asking questions. Why *would* she be the only person?

"No, no, it's not that I don't want to talk about it, it's that I can't, Dad."

"But Taylor-"

"I've been hit with a gag order."

Dad paused, shortly before growling in frustration. "...And yet, they act like I'm *privileged* to live in this flat, being close to my daughter."

"I know," I said, a bit of anger creeping into my voice as well. "Look, I'll be as honest as I can: I'm trying to train the Wards for something bad. Something they're going to need to be a well-oiled machine to even stand a chance to fight. Something that it likely going to ruin my friendship with them, because I can't tell them either. Too much risk of panic if the story gets out." Too much risk of the baatezu smelling blood, I didn't add. Part of the gag order.

Then I frowned. "Did you hear something?"

Of course, Dad was in the middle of the Hebert Clan Rant, so he probably didn't hear my question.
"...and of course, the guards think they're so great at employee discipline, so when they decide to help, they end up scaring every worker half to death."

Another, louder plink from the window.

Followed by a loud thunk.

My wings and snakes fanned out as Tybalt hissed. Dad began to reach for the panic button under the table.

"My lady?" came a slightly muffled voice.

...Oh.

"...Uh, I think it's a member of your-"

"Cult?" I finished. Please don't remind me.

"Yes."

The unique nature of that particular aside hung in the air for a bit, before the goblin made the thunk knock again.

"...I'll allow him in," Tybalt muttered, pointing his tail at the doorknob. A brief flicker of sparks over the tip later, and the knob turned itself.

The man was obviously a hobgoblin stuffed awkwardly in modern body armor, from his orange-yellow skin and light patches of fur. A well groomed mass of a beard I swore was as big as his head not the least prominent.

Pausing to clean off his feet, the goblin bowed as he entered, remaining low and submissive.

"Forgive me for disturbing the peace, but I believe I heard the queen arguing."

"We weren't," Dad and me said simultaneously. Seriously, we were that loud?

"...I would hope. The schism of blood is never good, for either family or society." He cleared his throat. "But, what was your Serenity screaming about, anyway? I could hear from the farther side of her dwelling."

It took me a second to realize who "your Serenity" was. I felt color rushing to my cheeks, and I tried to submerge myself back in my instincts.

"No, no, Mr…"

"Kozd Hears-All."

...Okay, so maybe we weren't actually that loud.

"Mr. Kozd, I don't think that this is a concern for mortal..."

I suddenly remembered who else was a part of this conversation.

"More people than it's already been a problem for," I quickly corrected, cleansed of symptoms of megalomania.
"...If mistress commands," the goblin replied, looking skeptical. "But I also understood you were complaining of discipline, and was wondering if could offer further assistance-.

"We were, and it still doesn't concern you," Dad replied, looking more than a bit irritated. "Now go."

"As the father of the goddess, I pay heed." Kozd began to walk out again, rising only to get the door.

As it shut, Dad and I turned back to the table. "Um...that was something," Tybalt said, looking confused.

"You don't know the half of it. Taylor can tell you all about getting the 'holy relics' back from them, then rearranging the rooms...Taylor?"

I became absentmindedly aware of my claw tapping the table.

"...Didn't Nex say they had a militaristic society? Discipline was the highest virtue?"

Tybalt blinked. "Yes, but-"

"If you'll excuse me…"

I rushed out, nearly tripping over a dejected-looking Kozd.

"Y-y-your Serenity?"

"First-stop calling me-us-that, it brings up a bad memory," I quickly said as I regained balance. "Second - does any Magma Gorger know military techniques for training magic?"

"Yes, but-"

"We think you might be able to help with discipline after all."

The look of sheer joy on Kozd's face was honestly kind of creepy given the impetus.

"How may we serve your...our liege?"

There was a brief moment of silence as Colin checked his lie detector, apparently thinking - hoping - that I had just picked up something from Dennis and wanted to see the look on his face.

Then:

"What?"

"No, no, I'm pretty sure Kozd knows what he's doing."

"You are aware he's a member of a race of militaristic aliens who view slavery as a status symbol?"

"I can rein them in, I've already told them they can't take people from Earth Bet-"

"And is likely from a culture with a far different standard of brutality?"

"That was part of the idea, and-"

"And is likely trying to increase his tribe's political power, and you've given them free."
"My liege hasn't."

I wasn't even sure when the Halberd went from the table to my boss' hand, or when the visor of his helmet flipped down.

"Oy! Be calm, Sir Wall-Armsmaster, he's friendly" Tybalt interjected.


"Permission to speak?"


"Ah, well then..." He gathered his composure. "Lady Hebert has not given us 'free reign,' as you state it. For the training session on...on...I forget, what's the day of the week before the sixth here?"

"Either Friday or Saturday, depending on who is asked."

"Well, the earlier of those, we were simply asking for a volunteer program. We have already been introduced to the Wards, it will not be as sudden as you might fear."

Well, more like the Wards had stared slackjawed for a bit at my greenish-yellow groupies, but eh. It apparently satisfied the lie detector if Colin simply lowering the lie detector a little more was any indication.

"I still don't see the benefits outweighing the faults-"

"Do you want your apprentices to live?"

After nearly dropping the Halberd, my boss turned to me with the most annoyed expression a human face is capable of making, especially with only the lower half visible.

"I don't know why they're in danger, I guessed. My liege told me nothing, but I know the fear for her subjects."

"I'm not-" I began.

"You will be," Kozd replied bluntly. "Divine right has a way of ordering itself."

I said nothing, only facepalmed.

Colin grimaced, then looked back to Kozd. "Your outdated and feudalistic ideas of politics aside, how do you suppose you're going to be able to help?"

Kozd's eyes narrowed slightly, but he said nothing. Instead, he reached under his vest, and lifted it.

I jumped back, while my boss' eyes widened.

The high goblin's chest was a mosaic of scars and burns, almost no unblemished tissue left. Just a bunch of jagged white and reddish-purple splotches.

Tybalt seemed...unfazed.

"Hm. So these aren't a monument to ill luck I suppose?" The sheer amount of nonchalance in that voice was staggering. "Or lack of access to healing magic?"
"Not at all, cat sith. My liege may turn her divine gifts on me if she doubts."

And so I did.

Repeatedly sacrificed other people to secure safety of Magma Gorgers.

Huh. Bit myopic, but understandable. No scent of deception at all.

Colin let the Halberd drop completely. ". . . You will have to clear this with Director Piggot."

Probably wasn't going to be as large a hurdle as that would normally be, though. She was in on the secret, after all.

"As Master commands."

"Put some effort into it!"

Vista muttered something I was pretty sure most pre-teens didn't know, and probably would eat soap for the next week for, but from the increasingly non-Euclidean area around her, she was definitely trying. The bugbear was still unimpressed. "What was that, Footman!?"

"I was wondering if you'd be happier on the other side, sir."

"Good plan! If I can't get from one end of the room to the other in two minutes in two steps, you will drop and give me twenty, you understand!?"

"Aye!" I swore she was glaring at me. But she was the one who volunteered, so I didn't see what she was mad about.

"Maybe because the goblins provoked her until she agreed?" Tybalt interjected.

Shit, forgot the circuit was open. Closing.

"You do realize I can still infer a bit from your expressions, yes?"

"Okay, okay, I didn't realize they'd be that mean, but-"

A whistle sounded from next to me. "Wow, you really have gone drill sergeant. Baby bird's growing up quick, isn't she?"

Apparently "animation of chains" included "them being silent when you wanted them to be." "Shit! Don't startle me like that!"

Cordy shrugged. "I heard you'd be late to the doll infusion. I wanted to know why." By now, the bugbear actually was walking through what looked like a shattered mirror of perspectives, the Medusas getting a sense of urge to see if I can turn idiot into tesseract.

"No, actually I was simply outsourcing the training." I looked back at my teammate, who had finally collapsed in exhaustion after the trainer got back to his initial spot. "I think it's working, I mean, that's the first time Missy was able to warp space so much around a living creature that the bugbear went through her physical location without touching her."

A long, pained groan from the Ward in question was the only response. The bugbear grunted in
vague affirmation before loping off to join his comrade with Clockblocker and the Gatling Batter (current lesson, quick draw with shields).

"...I'm beginning to wonder if I didn't make the solution worse than the problem, though."

"Hey, if what I hear from Brave Brave Sir Robot--"

"Please stop calling my boss that, he might hear you."

"...Armsmaster is correct, you actually have some good ideas."

"Gee, thanks for the sterling recommendation," I muttered.

She looked slightly mortified at that. "Hey, hey, I was trying to be honest there. I mean the Wards needed some discipline in their life. Real, hard, professional discipline. Everyone does, but crime-fighters especially."

"Great, now explain to me why this discipline involves torturing your teammates."

Ah. I was wondering when Carlos would show up.

The entire trio turned to face the Wards' rather angry leader.

"If you say PRT Orders again," he spoke before I could, "so help me god I will punch you in the face." A half-truth, by scent.

"I...wasn't going to say that," I replied.

"Then what?"

Tybalt held up his paw before I could answer. "Given goblinoid experience in instructing mages, Ms. Hebert recognized that same knowledge could probably be applied to the similar phenomenon of capes in a voluntary environment--"

"And what, pray tell, is the reason for going behind our backs for this?"

The tone was...not angry. Almost pleading.

Cordy suddenly looked very attentive.

I looked down. "...I can't answer that."

"As you can't answer why you've suddenly turned into this...bitter, obsessed loner?" he finished, obviously looking for the proper words.

I didn't have an answer. Neither did Tybalt.

"Look, Taylor, beyond the fact that you're invoking literal aliens to do this, these guys, are, as you mentioned, your henchmen. I mean, you suddenly freaked out after they showed up, and now you're getting them to start beating the Wards into shape?"

He paused for a long while.

"I hate to broach the topic...but do you think that...Azrai is..."

He trailed off, obviously uncomfortable with the other half of that statement.
The implication was clear enough, though.

I felt my talons ball into fists. "...What do you mean by that, dear leader?" I growled.

"I mean, it makes sense, doesn't it?" he continued, a little frantic. "I mean, it only happened after you took that 'born politician' role with the goblins, and you've been really, really okay with...your extra features but-

"But what!?" I spat. "I've made my damn peace with them, so what!? It's not like I'm doomed to some kind of existential depression about having wings-"

"Look, hear me out-I mean, it could be that Azrai, not wanting to hurt his descendants, but wanting to help them from the standards of his culture, put some kind of, um, genetic programming-"

"I. Am. Perfectly. Sane!" I shouted. "And the reason I'm doing this is because I'm trying to save your lives and everyone else on this goddamned planet!"

Complete silence. I grinned madly as I reveled in the victory...over...Carlos.....

...Everyone in the room heard that, didn't they?

I felt several pairs of eyes bore into me.

Shit. That could have gone better.

Good work, Taylor. Great work controlling your anger issues. Excellent fucking job.

Before Carlos could answer, I held up a finger.

"Before I get this off my chest...I have an order to not reveal this to anyone."

I drew myself up, turning back to my teammates and their halted training.

"I want to say, I was acting cold to all of you all week because I was sworn to secrecy, and I didn't explain myself. And I'm sorry I treated you all like shit this past week without any explanation."

"But please, can we discuss this with all Wards not here?" I turned to Cordy "...Privately?"

It took her a second to realize I had asked her something. "Um, I respect military procedures and all, but don't you think I'm affected by this too, given how I'm on the planet as well-"

Damnit. "I mean no offense by this, but..." I inhaled. "The reason it was kept secret was to prevent any news of it getting out. I prefer to entrust as few people with the secret as possible." Half-truth; the Baator Expedition were the specific people that should not be entrusted with it in question.

She looked a little taken aback by that. "...Okay. I understand," she said, sounding a little hurt. I supposed she took the teacher-student bond a bit more seriously than I thought.

I looked down. "I'm sorry about that too."

"No, no, don't be. Things are just proceeding faster than I would prefer, that's all." She sighed, looking away.

...I was beginning to hate secrets.
“Wait, so let me get this straight.”

Dennis cleared his throat. "You found an alien probe."

"Yes."

"Made by tanar'ri."

"Most likely. Retrievers are their design."

"Looking at Dragon's data."

"Through her network's presence in the Shadow world, but yes."

"Streaming to its owner, a weapons designer."

"And royalty. Can't forget that he's called Prince Haagenti."

"And the reason you got the gag order was that Piggy was afraid...of panic."

"Actually, not just that. There was Tybalt worrying about the Baator Expedition taking it as a reason to assume martial law."

"Okay. Just so we're clear." He inhaled.

"WHAT THE FUCK, MAN!? THERE'S A FUCKING ALIEN WARLORD WHO INTRODUCED HIMSELF VIA COPYRIGHT THEFT OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST TINKER, THE CLASSIFICATION ALSO KNOWN AS ABILITY TO BULLSHIT, AND PIGGY IS WORRIED ABOUT PANIC!? HOLY SHIT LADY, HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF PRIORITIES IN YOUR ENTIRE LIFE!?"

I blinked. Along with everyone else in the room.

"You...do realize she can't hear you, right?"

"Yes," he gasped. "I'm practicing for when she can."

"Reasons to be really pissed aside," Vista said as she slid in between Dennis and me. "Why didn't you tell us? I mean, you're not exactly Little Miss Cowgirl Cop, but you're usually open about what's going on. Certainly open enough to consider not dragging down the team spirit via not telling us why you were introducing military drills."

"First, it's because my shrink won't let me be private," I admitted. "It's caused trouble between me and Dad. Second..."

I took a breath.

"I was scared. I was scared, and I didn't think things through."

I looked down.

"Look, I've spent the past few months becoming intimately familiar with Colin and Piggot's sinscents. Yes, they can be jerks - huge jerks, and you've probably guessed by now the latter is a bit paranoid about parahumans-"

A couple sounds of comprehension as it occurred to the one or two Wards who hadn't caught on.
"...but they're both really honest about wanting to keep peace in this city and the rest of the world. When I realized that Earth Bet is likely going to be some staging ground in this multigenerational galactic war, I freaked. I hid behind the local authority figures and let them make the decisions. No matter how boneheaded they seemed." I breathed out, feeling an almost palpable weight off my chest. "And I'm sorry I was so bitchy to you because of it."

"Well, it wasn't so much the bitchy part so much as the no apparent reason part, but...you're forgiven." Vista smiled. "Being around you for the past week, it's just been, well...it's been like standing next to bomb made of stress with a lit fuse."

"Yeah," I said, grimacing. "It's...not been fun for the bomb either."

"Yes, yes, we're all still a team, thank you," Sophia interjected. "That's all well and good and all, but, um, the reason?"

"Hess, not the time or place-"

"This isn't an insult, Carlos! I'm...really glad that we're in working order again," she said, seemingly slightly disbeliefing she was saying that herself. "But - look, Hebert had a good idea with the whole drill thing. I mean, we just found out the tanar'ri equivalent of Josef fucking Mengele just stole God-knows how much of Dragon's test data and logs. I'd dare say that's reason to start on the whole idea of getting a goddamned clue about fighting-"

"And do what?"

Chris had finally spoken up.

"Um, I believe she may have been working towards a suggestion-" Tybalt began.

"And that's the idea. What are we supposed to do, hope that arrows penetrate spaceships?" He leaned back, examining the ceiling. "You heard what Cordy said - the entire race adapts to anything thrown against them and replenish their losses like water droplets in a flood." He sighed. "What's six kids with powers we can't use for crap going to do against an enemy like that?"

...Huh. That was an illuminating (and depressing) insight into the psyche of my teammate.

"...Well, the Baatorians seem to have done pretty well," Dean replied.

"And if Tybalt's right in any way, lost their souls in the process of surviving," Chris retorted. "And they're a race that is centuries more advanced than any mundane tech, with some stuff I see being the envy of Tinkers. And have magic. I hate to break it to you, but we're not the idealistic new race here to bring order and peace to a long-divided galaxy. We're the Lovecraftian protagonists doomed to be collateral damage in a minor skirmish of a war we can't understand-"

"Lovecraft was a racist, paranoid moron."

Chris' whining petered out instantly.

I took the opportunity to continue. "Look. We're about to be at the epicenter of a clash between a pair of very old, very bitter foes, and it sucks. It sucks that we don't even know what the Blood War started over, or even what the sides are beyond Cordy's ground-level view, likely fueled by a combination of propaganda and personal experience."

I stood up. "But if this war was truly incomprehensible, I don't think the Expedition would be politely asking us for resources and possible mercenary forces in the future. Even if they plan on
turning us into their colony, we're still alive, still capable of our own culture, still human, even if our satraps lost whatever the baatezu equivalent to humanity is. Not to mention protected by them, for the same reason you don't burn farmland. And besides that…"

I held up the Dissian Dinar.

"It's not like there is only the 'six kids who can't use their powers for crap', is it?"

Chris sat there in silence, for a bit.

Then literally slapped himself.

"And here I was, feeling all self-righteous about you getting your flak about being a bitter drag on the team. Screw you, Taylor, you just made me a hypocrite."

He shook himself. "Sorry for the mood swing there, I've just had a crap week as well. Mine is mostly due to forgetting what project I was in the middle of though, and I got a stun gun instead of a hoverboard. Which, in comparison, is exactly as petty as it sounds."

"Well, look on the bright side!" Dennis said. "We're all going to have crap weeks when Piggy realized we decided to play Bust-A-Conspiracy together! Think of it as a team-building exercise through general misery - wait, we live on Earth Bet, we do that already."

As we attempted to laugh at Dennis trying to be Dennis, the trepidation and shame I had felt in blowing the lid off the secret essentially to get one over on my leader began to fade, replaced by a growing sense of moral victory and contentment.

I had saved what friendship I developed with them, and more than that ensured that they would throw themselves into the drills without regret. I wished I could say that I had planned this.

We would overcome.

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**Mini-Interlude: Cordelia Fichte**

Revenge was not a sensation Cordy was a fan of. It wasn't that she wasn't a fan of the sense of the moral order of the universe being restored to its proper state, it was just that revenge usually implied someone did something wrong to you. Something that shook the kyton way by creating a wound that actually hurt, with no clean pain to appreciate. On a related note, spite was the province of the petty and idiotic, and true catharsis was just plain counterproductive.

Still, she did have those moments in which she gleefully took in the adrenal thrill of an eye for an eye, or in this case a broach of trust for a broach of trust.

"Anyway, I've heard it might be seven kids with bad power skills in the near future," Aegis' voice came over the scrying sensor. "Some Changer/Brute's become interested in the idea of going to Arcadia for free, and getting money to his family."

And nice to see her student's bridges being rebuilt too. Cordy did not hold grudges beyond what retribution they required, especially for friends. In fact, upon seeing the rationale, Cordy almost decided that this secret eavesdrop was retribution enough, no potential harm to Taylor.

Almost. Duty came first, and besides, knowing that a friend of yours would still put "covering my
"ass" before "mutual trust" was still pretty low.

"Okay then Saph, I've got what I need here. Don't want to alert Al to us."

The scrying pool was reabsorbed into her projector as Saph came out of Monokuma's chest compartment.

"[So, to recap - it's exactly as the both of us suspected, thanks to that damned silvanshee]," the rattling of his chains hit her ears as.

"[More or less. Al's already working on her, making her Elysium's pawn]," she rattled back.

"[...Why couldn't we have just reported that? 'Agathion delusions corrupt and put person at risk, news at 11.' Or simply guessed that they wanted to keep this a secret for reasons of]", he cracked his chains against himself to simulate clearing his throat "[autonomy?]"

"[Oh, you know how Boss Hugh is - citations or it didn't happen.]" She smiled. "[And this way, we now know of a potential fulcrum about to be introduced to the Wards. Always useful, knowing a rather simple motive, and two in the same organization is a godsend.]

And with that, the kyton evangelist took the recording out of the projector. "[Word to the wise when it's time to regenerate your body, Saph - actionable intelligence is always worthy wisdom.]

And saving a friend from squandering her potential, she quietly added.

A few adjustments on the projector later, and the spider-like cybernetic array of Huturiel formed out of the medium, blinking blearily.

"Yeah, boss? Sorry to interrupt your sleep and all, but - I've found what they were keeping from us."

That woke him up. "What did ya find?"

She grinned. "You were right - Stage 1 is in full swing."

Chapter End Notes

I have to thank Lost Demiurge for the idea of mini-Interludes, showing that yes, life goes on outside Taylor's social circle. Which was what I was trying to do earlier, but this is simpler.

Seriously, check out Dire Worm on Spacebattles or Sufficient Velocity. It is awesome and hilarious, and you should read it.
"So, the inevitable happened," Piggot muttered. "Should have called in Lethean…"

The past few weeks had really impressed on me the value of self-awareness as a quality, I had found. Specifically, how there was a lot of speech I could forgive if the scent matched the contents.

Piggot had called in all the Wards this time, presumably because the whole "secrecy" thing wasn't working.

"Of course," she continued, affixing me in particular with that glare of hers, "if certain persons were more capable of controlling their anger, that wouldn't be as much of an error on my part."

Thankfully, Carlos had somehow convinced the other Wards to remain silent. I couldn't smell anything new from Dennis, but I could feel the counter that must have been on his lips. A counter I was sure would be the antithesis of help.

Apparently satisfied nobody was backtalking her, Piggot continued. "And of course, there is also the fact that this happened directly in front of the very reason it was made secret in the first place." The glare narrowed even further. "When it was eminently possible to, say, leave the room and then release stress there, with only telling Carlos instead of every damn person in the room that there was actionable intelligence somewhere."

"...I'm sorry," I half-lied.

"As well you should be!" Piggot barked. "Be glad that, despite your repeated presence in my office, and your appearance generally heralding catastrophe, that this is somehow the first time you are completely at fault!"

And just like that, she calmed down. "Thankfully, you also seem to be fully aware of this sheer idiocy of what you did right then and there, and you began some degree of damage control. So, I am letting you off relatively lightly."

I didn't bother getting my hopes up. And indeed, when the tracking bracelet was dredged up from beneath her desk, I just breathed an internal sigh of relief it wasn't worse.

"For the next few weeks, Ms. Hebert has volunteered to be part of a new initiative involving GPS tracking of the Wards while on missions. Less chance of being separated in a high-stress situation that way."

That was what finally burst the dam holding back the Wards' (and Tybalt's) responses

"Madame Director, I really must-"
"-she was scared-

"-and now she's the villain, you hypocritical-

"-how is that even going to work-

"Guys!" I shouted. "Guys...it's okay. It's not that bad."

Situation defused. Slowly, my teammates settled down, looking more than a bit upset by this turn of events. Dennis and Vista were giving Piggot a glare that, combined was nearly as intense as her own, Carlos, Dean, and Tybalt looked more than a bit disgruntled and unsettled, and even Sophia looked a bit upset by the proceedings (or at least not glorying in karma).

"Hmph. I see someone at least comprehends the chain of command."

Piggot, completely unfazed, leaned back. "To be fair, I didn't need to call the rest of you in here. Rather, I am doing this as a pretext."

"Pretext for what," Dean muttered.

"To impress upon you the sheer responsibility you all now share with her."

And with that, she stood up.

It shouldn't have been a shock; after finally getting over herself to restore her pancreas to full functionality, I guessed Piggot wouldn't be the kind of person to permanently affix herself behind a desk if she could help it. No, the Director was a soldier, born and bred, and whatever her faults were, I never smelled any degree of cowardice. Nope, she would go right back to exercise and toning herself in case she was ever needed on the field.

I was surprised at how tall she was. Tall, and probably exactly as imposing as she wanted to be, especially given how she was already a lot less heavyset than when I met her. I could already see firm musculature, almost like a statue that hadn't quite been fully carved from its stone block yet.

"Wards - I will admit, I've made mistakes. Several, including, most recently, not realizing the amount of stress Adrasteia would be under or rescinding the order in regards to you once it became obvious. I am not censuring her for informing you of the full situation, I should have done that myself, and she did make precautions when giving you the debrief."

She moved in front of her desk for the full effect. "What I am doing, however, is to fully explain what is at stake here."

She switched on the projector. Slowly, a picture of the *Falconer's Lament* swam into focus.

"Take a good look at the troops on the ground. The barbazus and orthons."

The bearded and armor-fused troops, respectively, were not doing anything in particular, actually. Mostly standing. A few were in the process of ferrying boxes around, but the rest were just standing, prim and proper.

"Notice how they're arranged?"

I, and probably every other teen in the room, took a closer look. Nothing jumped out…

At first. Now that we thought about it…
"They're the guards," Carlos said. "And they're in formation."

"Correct." A laser pointer waved over the sets of baatezu - barbazu, orthon, barbazu, each of them. "And they're trying to hide it, by fanning out at various points, except of course around the cargo."

And indeed, the "squads" were packed closer together around the ferries and the ship itself.

"It is not so much the fact that they have guards, it's that the Expedition is deliberately trying to conceal them. Make themselves seem less imposing." The projector went off. "To put it simply, the PRT thinks they are deliberately attempting to manipulate the public into accepting their presence casually as a prelude to larger migrations, and from there, colonization."

Reasonable. Don't want the locals throwing stones at you.

"Now, answer me this; how politically convenient would it be to discover a scouting party of their constant nemesis, and thus, to declare martial law? Thus requiring shuttling in far, far more troops and carte blanche to build bases that, coincidentally, come with the support staff?"

Vista caught on. "They might just ask for the keys to the planet, and get them."

"Correct. I'd rather remain a free minor ally of Baator than a vassal state." She turned to us. "Except by screaming in front of the citizens of actual loyal vassal states, Ms. Hebert has risked attracting the attention of intelligence agents who will likely find what we've been hiding, and then not only will they have pretext for martial law, but they will be able to use it as a scandal to remove the PRT as a threat." She drew a bit closer. "In other words, by losing control of her temper there, your teammate may have just doomed the Wards as an institution. Almost certainly in Brockton Bay."

I shrank a little into my seat, holding Tybalt a little tighter.

"So, to get to my point; absolutely none of this is to be released to anyone not in the know. Not your families, not other PRT agents, not even members of the Protectorate. This is not about you, the city, or this country. This is about the continued freedom of this planet. And that depends on everyone remaining silent. Do you understand."

A statement. Not a question.

"...Roger."

"Got it, boss."

"No pressure."

"Understood."

"My lips are sealed."

"As Madam Director commands."

"I'll try harder this time."

"Good. Dismissed."

As we began to file out, Tybalt checking for a comfortable place for my new bracelet that wouldn't be visible outside my armor, I suddenly realized I hadn't scented Piggot's discipline-inducing manipulation of the Wards. I didn't know why unless-
I internally agreed with the sentiment.

Which meant I would do it myself.

I was turning into the Director.

...It had to happen eventually, I guessed. Fear of war did that to her, after all.

"Now then, class…"

Cordy turned back to student assembly - a somewhat humorously surreal motion, given how the vast majority of students were adult PRT agents in uniform, with one bat-winged pseudo-erinyes, and the teacher was…yeah.

"Have you made your fetishes, yet?"

Out of the six apprentice witches Cordy had found, four were placing their respective "voodoo plushies" (as we had all decided to call them both because it was more descriptive and because of fear of Dennis hearing their actual name) on the table. Myself included.

Mutely, Saph speared two out of a trio of blank dolls and brushed them off on the slack students' (or possibly just bad at crafts, actually) desks. His master's own reaction was to simply raise an eyebrow before returning to her stoic, "teaching" expression. "Right then, you may want to find some decorations for those dolls, folks. Each one needs to be unique, or at least personally crafted by you. I don't care if you copy something you found on an internet search, it just needs to be made by you to work right."

She strode forward a bit, inspecting the self-made voodoo plushies, first Carter's own smiley face with a pentacle for a nose, then Smith's dog, then my croc-

"You've been playing that game I lent you?"

"Yeah," I replied, nervously grinning. "I'm stuck on Dolly, but Kroko and Dub were pretty easy."

"Leave the aversion therapy until after the dream with the dog," she replied, curtly. "Kroko honestly gave me more trouble." She flicked the aforementioned paranoid schizophrenic crocodile on the nose, ruffling his blanket. "You and your delusions, have a bit of fun with the eyes, eh?"

Not a single glance at me.

As if I didn't feel guilty enough about my outburst.

A couple more checks ("Lauren, you missed a stitch"), and the kyton crossed back to the front of the room, and her collection of beakers, fluids, and a couple of cauldrons, one pewter, one brass.

"Now then, the basics of kyton ritual magic involves use of a proxy to help visualize the target, and the effects the incantation will have on them. Which is why we enchant them, because that results in a lot of damage to mundane items…"

"Took her sweet time getting to incantations," Tybalt muttered.

"Well, she didn't begin official classes until the middle of March. Had to find the beginnings of the Magic division, then give them a chance to make the voodoo plushies-"
"And I still do not understand that name-"

"...And the whole business of contracting the patron."

"And from there doing all the work of creating your own tools for you." He sighed. "I remember when your familiars taught you the basics through demonstration, taught you to test your power—"

"Possibly through losing a hand," I said, motioning at the toad, the owl, the hedgehog, the scorpion, and the turtle that were rejoining their masters. "I don't think any of them can talk."

"None of their masters are nearing the point where they can communicate with their masters in a semi-verbal fashion, no," he admitted. "We are something of a unique case due to your own power. But still...I cannot help but feel a bit old. I can count the number of people I've bonded with that have human masters on my front paws...though admittedly that may be because summoning a silvanshee is the sign of a highly competent witch..."

He shook himself. "Anyway, now we can work on that—"

He suddenly stopped, his attention caught on something behind me.

"...Is Ms. Fichte still collecting her supplies?"

"...Yes?" I answered.

"...Why don't you go apologize to her and smooth over the scars from that outburst earlier? And yes, I am planning something that may help Earth Bet remain liberated," he finished before I let the Medusas sniff him.

Two birds with one stone then. As I spun back towards the repurposed lab, I caught Tybalt dissolving into mist out of the corner of my eye.

Cordy, for her part, was demonstrating the mundane utilities of having extra fine manipulators as limbs, almost done with packing her satchel while scrubbing the table.

"...Cordy?"

She didn't bother stopping with the scrub, though her head jerked back to look at me. "Yeah? Wanted to talk to me about something?"

"...I'm sorry about what happened on Friday."

She stopped, chains suddenly tensing. Shouldn't have blurted it out like that, stupid, stupid, stupid—

"And?"

She turned to face me fully, leaning on the desk. "I get the apology, but...was that it?"

I inhaled. "...I know you, in particular, are not an enemy agent, and I'm sorry for being unable to tell you. It's just that..." I looked down. "I'm not certain the baatezu won't find out."

"...Really," came the monotone voice of Cordy.

"Really." I pulled out my monarch pin. "And it's painful, keeping this a secret from you, and I don't want to ruin this friendship like I nearly did the Wards. So..."

It suddenly occurred to me that I was likely a distraction for what was likely a theft of something
from Cordy. After all, I was keeping her here.

...But then again, there was the whole "one life for many" thing, and really, it wasn't exactly a life.

I found my composure again. "So, I just want to say...I'm trying to protect you as well. From Vapula and his ilk, if nothing else."

"Ah."

A few seconds passed before Cordy cleared her throat, obviously uncomfortable. "Er...

Her expression turned utterly blank again, for a few more seconds.

"...It's okay," she finally said. "It's...not unheard of in Baator to bend rules and regulations when it comes to...allies," she said, trying to smile. "It's normal to try and tell people you're friends with what the context for your actions is. That way, they're warned when intrigue inevitably pits you against each other. Kytions aren't so obsessed with that, but it's still something you pick up."

A more genuine smile. "But I can't expect someone from Earth Bet to know that, and it was...lacking perspective on my part to expect you did. So that's for explaining that particular context. All debts are paid, and you're forgiven."

The tension I had been holding all day rushed out. I smiled.

"Thanks. You know, it's nice."

"...Excuse me?"

"Nice having an actual teacher instead of Mr. Gladly." I snickered "Be very glad you don't know who that is."

"...Thanks for the compliment. You might have to tell me who he is later, actually."


"Okay. So, are we still on for that private lesson!?"

I blinked. That seemed...desperate. Cordy herself seemed a bit shocked by the shrill note that crept in at the end there.

...Tybalt was going to owe me an apology for this. I really didn't like being the manipulator.

"We are," I said. "And there's nothing to forgive you about, you were just upset."

"Yeah. Yeah I was," she said, looking down.

"Well, I'll be seeing you around."

And with that, I went back out, shortly before collapsing on the floor.

"I hope that was worth it, Tybalt," I muttered quietly.

"It was."

I startled a little at the whisper. Looking a little closer, I saw the outline of Tybalt's mist form, with...something in his tail.
"Over in the inactive room."
Which was on the far side of the hall, but not that far.
"What did you filch?" I muttered as I closed the door. "I felt really scummy after-
"This item."
And with that, he materialized.
Along with a strange, diamond-shaped metal device in tail.
"Taylor, behold; the planar equivalent to a sextant."
I blinked. "A what?"
Tybalt almost dropped the gadget. "Your planet never invented **sextants**? And you live in a port city? How do you navigate?"

"A lot of sailing techniques are obsolete," I said, feeling red rush to my cheeks. "We have GPS devices, think self-updating map that shows your location, so a lot of the old techniques are just, well, backups."

Tybalt stared at me for a bit. "...Sweet powers, I'm old. Er, how do I explain…You do know what latitude and longitude is, correct?"

"Yes? Distance from the north and south poles, and-

"Good, good, your GPS devices show them, yes?"

"Yes?"

"Ah, good. Well, a sextant is how you find those things manually, no technology beyond paper, pens, and maths."

Ah, that made sense. Except… "How do you find how north a dimension is?"

"All very simple" he said, propping it on the table. On closer examination, I quickly saw that the two halves were actually mounted knobs, and that there was an extremely thick lens between them. "A lot of dimensions are arranged in a so-called 'lattice' structure we call the Great Wheel. Think of it as a hollow sphere, the structure of which nonetheless affects magic, especially that channeled through incantations, in predictable ways depending on relative conceptual distance of various planes. My home plane, Elysium, is very close to the 'top' of the Wheel, and thus is an extremely easy location to use as a baseline for measuring."

The mild technobabble, thankfully, was not nearly enough to lose me. "...and because of that, it's easy to calculate the relative location of Elysium, since it's already found as part of finding where we are."

He smirked. "And with this, one quarter of the gate ritual is no longer an issue; we can at least **find** Elysium now."

Naturally, my brain went to the worst possible conclusion. "Hang on, if that thing's a navigational aide-

"A disposable one. She has three left in her trunk." His smirk widened a bit. "Standard issue for
being stranded, they have a tendency to break if used too much. Mainly for finding a safe location or preparing a distress signal. Which is exactly what this one is going to assist us in doing."

...Not really comforting, but I could see why he felt safe swiping one, if he was really too afraid of Baator's citizens to ask for a spare.

"Okay. Just don't make me play a distraction to a friend like that again. It's not nice."

"Ah, she will find it within her what-passes-for-a-heart to forgive us. Kytons are many things, but they are not hypocrites, and as far as going behind an ally's back? We are just barely not fools by baatezu standards."

That felony out of the way, the rest of Sunday morning was…

Not normal.

I mostly kept to the computer and gym, furthering what social life I had online, away from the outside world, or as I liked to call it, Being An Obvious Target. Either for any criminals I pissed off, or the newly-formed anti-witchcraft brigade I had made sure to resolutely ignore. My face was well-known, and thanks to Dispater's explanation, I suspected more than a few idiots viewed me as the vanguard of some kind of occult alien invasion.

Actually no, I knew that; I saw the titles of Parahumans Online PMs that had been directed to me before I just up and asked the moderators to make it impossible to PM me except for people I actually invited. But it wasn't that important, I was prepared for that kind of thing. In any case, I didn't get out much, and I was happy with that. The only people I personally liked that didn't come by on a regular basis was New Wave, and those visits needed to be scheduled in advanced due to mutually busy schedules.

During my daily routine, however, I started to notice certain patterns. Colin kept a spare armory in the PRT headquarters, and would come by every noon to test to see if it was in working condition, if he could. Thus, his absence wasn't that strange.

What was strange was the fact that if he didn't, some other Protectorate member (usually Robin, sometimes Rory or Hannah) would be by to check instead. Nobody came.

Maybe they were stuck with talking with the new Ward? Browbeat, I thought he called himself? ...It would take some doing before I remembered that name, that seemed a bit generic.

I did, however, start to get worried when I noticed something else.

"...Tybalt?"

"Hm?"

"Do you hear anything?"

He craned an ear. "...Nothing, except for some cars." He looked down at the alley I had perched over. "Which would not be that strange."

"Exactly," I said. "It's exactly like any other time I've eaten lunch up here. The thing is…"

I held out the Medusa now wearing the security anklet as a bracelet, which didn't seem to mind. "Up until recently. I didn't have this."
"...And the problem with this would be?"

"I'm not on the PRT building, am I?"

A look of comprehension came to his face. "Ah, this area would be outside...your..." Then confusion again. "Doesn't it warn you when you're exiting the prescribed zone of movement?"

"It's supposed to. I just remembered that I forgot about this." I pulled it down a little more. "The light's still on, so it still has power, but..."

"...No warning," he finished. "Technical error?"

"On a parahuman-grade tracking collar? I don't think so."

I didn't see why that would be, unless...

Dropping my burger, I swooped back to headquarters, and checked my radio and phone.

The signal bars were intact, but turning it on...

"No static. No connection."

And from there, to a particular window to knock on.

A very irritated looking Piggot opened it. "I do not believe the door to my office is that long-"

"Director, check your phone. Your computer. Is there a signal."

She caught on. A few minutes, and-

The window was fully opened. "Sniff the connections."

I did so, and-

"Nothing. There's no tampering with the hardware itself, unless it's in the server room-"

Automatically, Piggot went for her radio, before realizing what I alerted her for.

So the Master/Stranger alarm got hit instead, then the emergency intercom.

"Attention all personnel, the communications network has been hijacked, I repeat, the communications network has been hijacked. Commence lockdown, report any suspicious activities using the emergency network chutes."

And before she went on to order me, I was already off to the oil rig.

"It's a Styxian island."

Very reluctantly, Armstrong had allowed the kyton ostiarius a look at the glitched computer, the chain-covered visitors having been present when the alarm went off, and understandably worried about what that meant for them.

This one, who hadn't apparently chosen an Earth Bet name for himself, preferring "the Datasmith", had actually gotten a bit pushy about it, seeing as how he was apparently an expert in how magic interacted with information technology.
If current theories were correct, I'm not sure he would be wrong even if this did turn out to be parahuman interference.

"...Explain."

"A self-updating veil over a communications blackout," he replied, automatically. "Nothing goes in or out, but both sides of the wall think they're actually reaching the outside world. Your own queries to this building made you believe you were speaking with Director Piggot, correct?"

He caught on. "The voice I thought was the director was actually a disguised natural language processor. A Chinese Room."

"Precisely. If you had asked the false director something you normally wouldn't, it's likely it would have answered strangely enough to alert you something was wrong. As it was, Hebert's lunch habits exposed the main flaw in this glamour."

"Speaking of which," I interrupted. "Why wasn't Velocity or someone else checking in on the spare armory?"

"Other business came up, like researching that Ward recruit and this odd suit malfunction that took all night to fix and check for sabotage." He shrugged. "Maintaining that spare is only medium priority. I had to sacrifice something to keep up with my work, and neither Triumph nor Miss Militia were available."

"...Except I would think that at least Assault, Battery, or Dauntless might...be…"

My boss' glare was very good at ending conversations.

"...Battery's electricity and Dauntless'...proficiencies might interfere with the calibrations, and Assault is worse than Clockblocker."

There was a brief clang as the Datasmith forgot what was over his head in his surprise.

"...Worse than him?"

"Well, not entirely. Less incapable of taking anything seriously and more…" He cleared his throat. "Witty."

"I feel for you," kyton and silvanshee said in unison. I made a mental note to ask what pissed off the Datasmith, something deliberate probably was grounds for informing said Ward about the definition of "international incident."

The kyton shook himself, putting the walkie-talkie he had asked for upright and going back to examining the server. "In any case, whoever made this made the reasonable budget decision of simulating your Internet rather than-"

"How?" Armaster and I said in unison.

"A very glitchy Internet," he admitted. "Enough read from your histories to create a reasonable approximation of your favorite sites, and glitches when you attempted to do something that might have lasting effects. Where that doesn't work is where the enchantment - apologies, Master effect - comes in."

I suddenly realized I was jotting down notes, along with my boss. "Explain," he said.
"Nothing much, just a slight subconscious urging spell. Making you believe that you should really be doing work offline or just sticking to your favorite sites, combined with apparently slow connections - ah, there we are."

There was a flash of utter darkness brushing against the wires, a flash of electricity-

The computer's screen jumped and distorted. The Datasmith's radio "coughed" static in unison before it became constant. "There. Your own auspex - information technician! - should be able to get in now."

Armsmaster hit a button on his suit, and soon a text box with DRAGON BASE CONNECTION ESTABLISHED popped up on the terminal. "Continue," he replied curtly.

"Oh yes, combined with apparently slow connections to focus on areas the caster of this glamour wasn't able to cover. The problem is that they could not simulate the proper sound of static on this building's offline radio and telephone network. I know it sounds ridiculous," he cut us off, "but the static from inbound calls was present, yes?"

"According to Miss Militia, yes."

"Well therein lies the problem; it's extremely difficult to stack any sort of spell like that. They would have had to use a much more expensive and complex spell if they wanted two-way static; not worth it for something meant to be temporary."

"Temporary?" Wow, Dragon was fast.

The Datasmith rose an eyebrow, but continued. "Honestly, the only real reason you would want a Styxian island in a more long-term fashion is to fool an enemy encampment into believing that a distress call has been answered and that their reinforcements are coming, when in fact HQ believes there is nothing wrong, even if the encampment is now burning wreckage. No, this one was meant as a way to get the nerve center offline for a single operation, make well sure your masters wouldn't be alerted something was wrong until it was too late. After it was discovered though, only a fool would go through turning it off, and possibly be discovered at the most critical moment."

"And the lack of beeping on the bracelet?" I asked. "Seems like this would ring if the radio tower was already off."

"That thing runs on GPS, yes? The Styxian island, by default, fools that too; only an idiot refuses to track one's own troops."

I could feel Tybalt wince at that.

"Okay then," my boss said as he put away his notes. "We should be on the lookout for any suspicious activity from baatezu, no offense."

It took me a second to realize, sans sin-scent, that Armsmaster was trying to not alert the Datasmith to the other obvious suspect. Or any spare drones he made.

"None taken, baatezu can be terrible fans of skullduggery." And with that, he loped off.

As soon as he left, all three-and-one-avatar's-representation-of-another of us immediately turned to each other.

"Wasn't Master Browbeat being interviewed today?"
"Tomorrow," Armsmaster replied. "Good catch."

"And likely something our enigmatic intruder could easily find out. But why-" Dragon suddenly looked alarmed.

"...observation. Hold about five minutes, one of my drones is near where he is-"

Before either of us could ask, Dragon's avatar suddenly vanished.

The five minutes passed in nervous silence, most of it consisting of avoiding hypotheising of what alarmed Dragon.

Eventually, she came back. "Shit. I was right."

A different window came up, this one with a picture of a rather muscular boy with his face blurred out, working out with an outdoor punching bag.

"Take a look at the wireless transmissions I found in the area."

A web of representative wave patterns overlaid themselves over Browbeat. Not as complex as it could be, Brockton Bay did not have that great of an IT infrastructure.

But I didn't think that even the most ridiculously overdone wireless network could make transmissions connect to various points on Browbeat.

"I believe our spy implanted your Ward candidate with transmitters."

---

**Mini-Interlude: The Subject**

Familiar.

That, above all things, was what his mind had focused on in a desperate attempt to remain sane.

This was familiar.

"*What do we do with the drunken sailor, what will we do with a drunken sailor...*"

The person whose hands were flashing about his face, so quick as to almost be the implication of motion rather than truly seen, ruined it. He didn't remember singing.

"*Early in the morning...*"

But the ethereal, soft voice was singing indeed. He would have laughed at the absurdity of it all, if he was capable of moving his mouth. As it was, his face merely froze in a rictus grin that the singer apparently thought was hilarious, given how it suddenly made a noise between a child's giggle and an adult's chortle. "Now, now," the singer said, regaining composure. "We don't want to draw out this more than we need to. I need to sing to keep the organ happy and clear - it wouldn't be a present then, would it?"

Yes. Yes the muscle needed to be...happy. The mental muscle. Ha. Ha. Ha.

He suddenly realized this not being familiar anymore was a blessing.

"*Way, hey, and up she rises, way, hey, and up she rises...*"
There was a *click-click-click*, sound, and a tray rose over him, glinting in the light the singer had maneuvered over him

A tray with a pair of arms. Clockwork arms.

"*Early in the morning...*"

The singer paused.

"Ah. My error."

A pale shock of white hair came into his field of view as a thin ghostlike hand reached over.

When they retreated, the tray now had a scalpel.

A scalpel that should not be that color

"Now where was I-ah yes."

The scalpel descended.

"*Shave his belly with a rusty razor...*"

You did not bolt up from nightmares, Gregor the Snail had long discovered. He felt it would probably be better that way, because then he could be sure he wasn't still paralyzed.

His first coherent thought upon tracking his actual surroundings - the room in the hotel Faultline had rented - was a beleaguered *Again? This is what, the third time this season?*

It wasn't an uncommon problem upon Case 53s, he had heard. Some had half-memories of a life they were sure was theirs, others half-memories of how they lost them to begin with.

Gregor was one of the latter. He had grown used to it. It was only dreams, after all. The singer was a new touch though. But not worth remembering.

And without much more thought, he began to count his breaths again, hypnotizing himself back to sleep. Faultline was to thank for that.

Beneath the streets, another light clicked on.

*Tracker connection established. Beginning preliminary medical scans.*

In the blue light of the phosphorescent mold, the faces of Haagenti's chosen beamed at their incoming knowledge.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Cookies to whoever guesses what Underdark race this is.
Aspirant 3.6

Chapter Notes

BEHOLD, THE GREAT TRIAL!
GIVING BROWBEAT A CHARACTER!

Seriously, using either him or Madison runs into the Bit Character OC problem, in that you have to create an OC in order to use him at all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The meeting room was silent, eager but dreading the impromptu investigation team's debriefing of what we had found at Browbeat's house and from interviewing him. Miss Militia spoke first.

"He doesn't remember anything. End of report."

Armsmaster groaned. "Nothing out of the emotion reader I gave you?"

"Nope. He isn't unsure of his own recollections at all, he isn't traumatized, whoever wiped his memory did an altogether thorough job." My other boss leaned back, sighing. "All we know is he had some surreal nightmares, likely the remnants of the memory of his implantation."

It took me a second to remind myself I had already spoken in front of an eager alien race, a small collection of superpowered teens and PRT agents was nothing."Sin-scent's a little more help, but not much. All I can tell you was that whoever did this wasn't Bonesaw; the surgeon had a goal in mind beyond some maniac's idea of science. There was definitely intent there, but I can't tell you the goal." I chuckled, bitterly. "Like most mad scientists, our Tinker thinks he's working to a noble goal."

"Though given the character of the species I have encountered in my years, my guess is the nobility ends with the people they actually know," Tybalt grumbled as he examined a clear bag containing one of the removed transmitters. "This is not a technology I'm familiar with - it looks vaguely similar to that of the illithid, but a lot more...I do not believe "primitive" is the proper word, but less elegant. Most of what they have is intentionally grown psicrystal."

Armsmaster immediately turned to the silvanshee, opening his mouth.

"I will explain later. Suffice to say, they are a race of, in your terminology, natural Masters who have followed that with their own technical specialties."

The mouth was closed.

"So, in other words, we have the only vaguest idea of what happened, we have no idea who did it, we aren't even sure if it's linked to the retriever, the closest thing to a lead we have is likely going to take it as a reason for more control..." I groaned. "Any other news from anyone in this room? A new Endbringer, maybe? Has Sleeper decided to move to the US? Outbreak of a zombie plague that also happens to be sapient and with the personality of an S9 member? Really, I wouldn't be surprised."
"Please, Addy, don't," Clockblocker muttered. "You're just tempting the world to give us a serial killer who triggers with the power of Slender Man."

"Who?"

"Believe me, Vista, you don't want to know. Couldn't sleep for a week," Aegis replied.

Piggot began to rub her head. "Based on the fact we consulted one to fix the system, I believe it's pointless to not call in a kyton. Maybe we can at least figure out what these things are supposed to do, perhaps help hone in on the other."

"And Hebert, please-" she said as we began to leave. "Please don't come in my office for, say, a week? You appear to herald doom."

Well, I was a Fury, I guessed.

"No, I'm okay. It's just the way things are."

I honestly wasn't sure if I was more relieved or alarmed by my potential new teammate's...nonchalance.

"...You're sure?" Vista replied?

"Positive," he said, shrugging. "We have aliens, right? I'd imagine a few of the more amoral researchers would prefer test data on a neophyte parahuman, and not care about consent. Especially if baatezu nixed the idea of research implants to begin with."

Or...his calm? I wasn't exactly a social butterfly, but...I really didn't think it was typical to be that expressionless after discovering you were quietly implanted with alien technology.

Still, it was...convenient, this way. None of what I would do, namely bouncing off the walls in a panic. Maybe not even doing the smart thing, and leaving the Brockton Bay Wards sans extra member.

"...Alien implantations. Are part of a daily routine," Dennis repeated, nonplussed.

"Well, no, but statistically likely at some point. I don't know why me yet, but it's still inevitable for at least a few capes."

If kind of weird.

"So, do you eat here? Part of my power downside is a higher metabolism to assist with mass growth, which means I'm hungry more frequently than normal."

Rather weird.

"Uh...huh.", Dean said, quietly scribbling something down on a note. I instinctively set a Medusa on him-Trying to tell Carlos that this calmness isn't an act.

Okay, perhaps the most weird person I had ever met. But seemed nice enough. And...likely related to his trigger, I realized.

"Okay…" I said, choosing my next words very carefully. "I...think all we have is the food court. And deliveries from Fugly Bob's."
"Quick?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"You like it?"

"I mean, it's okay but-"

"Do you work out frequently?"

"All the time, but um-"

"About how many hours?"

"I, um, around three a day, er, I think-"

Thankfully Dean caught on to my increasingly uncertain tone. "I think the average burger only has about 4000 calories, and Taylor here is a bit of a workaholic, so I think she's an outlier."

John Lalonde, aka Browbeat, paused. "Okay then."

As he turned back to Carlos, I mouthed thank you at my teammate.

"Still, it does seem...weird, if a Ward candidate was the one the researcher chose."

Intelligence gathering, if it has anything to do with the retriever, I forced myself to avoid saying (or more properly, repeating what I heard from Colin after Dragon discovered the signals). He wasn't an official Brockton Bay Ward yet.

"Yeah. W...e do think that's a bit strange," Dennis said, cautiously.

John, for his part, seemed oblivious to the sudden word swap. "But it's possible. An anomaly, but it's possible."

I felt Tybalt give me a light tug.

"Okay," Carlos said, nodding. "You probably ought to talk it over with your parents."

John opened his mouth, then winced. "Right. Haven't had a chance. Should probably do it."

And with that, he left.

Tybalt tugged again, this time clearing his throat.

"Yeah?" I whispered.

"Pardon my rudeness, but...I'd advise you to avoid mentioning the word 'crazy' around him."

I caught on. "Way ahead of you."

"Wondrous. I have experience from former employers. Being dirt-poor and homeless does that."

I really did not understand a lot of Earth Aleph supernatural fiction we got over the dimensional wall.

Leaving aside the fact a lot of it was crap (I remember Victoria sending me a PDF wherein the
male protagonist, the supposed fantasy of the viewpoint character, was a fallen angel and acted like it - and still was presented as a misunderstood victim of empyreal politics), there was a fundamental disconnect in how paranormal powers were internally viewed versus what I actually knew about parahumans.

Namely, the fact that said powers were inherently a "curse" or "burden", or insert other negative term here. In reality, while I could see capes coming around to that conclusion given the mechanics of trigger events (or potential for harm, in Amy's case), the thing was that opinion was a very reasonable one because of the downsides in getting parahuman powers. The things I had forced myself to sit through as part of Victoria and Amy's harebrained review-and-mock hobby on Parahumans Online never adequately explained why any of the "tortured" protagonists would find the powers they had, with no apparent downside at all, were things that upset them in any way.

For example, magic, which I got through dealing with a force that was barely sapient and not at all interested in using me (at least from what I could tell) was already something I was wondering how I had managed without.

Case in point, fixing any wear and tear in the forming product of the collaboration between Armsmaster and the kytons by thinking at the bent and damaged areas very hard.

"Seems the third transceiver has just burned out. Could you-"

"Saw that already," I muttered as I focused on the charred wire. Which was rapidly becoming uncharred.

"Ah, good." And with that, the Datasmith went back to his monitor.

"You know," my boss said, his voice an annoyed grumble, "you haven't adequately explained why magic results in everything suddenly becoming damaged at the brush of dust particles."

"Energy overload, I reckon," Interlocutor Hutriel replied. "Reason why magic and higher artifice - er, that would be mundane tech - don't really play well together without proper supervision. There's just too much energy for a lot of mundane materials to contain; at least when you're buildin' it." An upper arm pointed at a photo of the Falconer's Lament. "That thing took months to build, and we've had literally centuries of experience and I don't know how much infrastructure, just because of the artificial grav-"

"Ahem." An overlooking barbazu looked pointedly at Tybalt.

"Right. That's still a trade secret." Hugh cleared his own throat and went back to his own work. "Suffice to say, it's damned hard to automate the process, meanin' a lot of it's still done by hand. With love, other people say. With more potential for mistakes, if you ask me."

"Still," he continued, smirking. "It teaches you the value of patience and takin' things slow."

"Too bad I apparently haven't learned," I muttered. "How long have we been working on this thing again?"

"About three hours," Tybalt and Cordy said simultaneously. "And now the motherboard's sparking." The latter said. "I'll be right there."

"And sadly, I have not been an assistant to a true sorcerous engineer in quite some time." Tybalt made that apologetic grin of his while I tested the transceiver for remaining damage. "I honestly don't know how long it works with the latest churning in the piston of progress. Particularly," he said, his tone getting a bit darker, "if it includes certain aspects baatezu are infamous for."
Huh?

Cordy coughed.

"...But I'm sure that doing that particular scummy trick is counterproductive to the current situation," he quickly finished. Too quickly.

Armsmaster wheeled out from under the squat radio tower. "What does he mean by that?"

Hugh looked at the barbazu, who winced for a second before shrugging.

"Some of my cousins are known for sellin' the tech, but not the instruction manual or the fuel, meanin' a person who buys from 'em ends up havin' to go back. Repeatedly."

...Wow. That was kind of a dick move. Pragmatic, but dickish.

I felt a surge of smugness radiate from Tybalt.

"Rest assured, kytons hold themselves to a much higher standard," the Datasmith muttered, engrossed in his own coding work. "And the amount of magic-induced wear and tear isn't actually that great, until you start working with timespace. Such as finding a radio signal from over a day ago."

The barbazu groaned.

"Hey, we never agreed to keeping secrets that are _stupid_ to keep."

---

"And there it is!"

I was shocked out of dozing off by Hugh's victorious cry. "There she is, should be nicer than molasses on scones."

And indeed, the squat cone of various scavenged computer bits topped with a radar dish had taken shape. Kind of made it look like a guy in a poncho and sombrero, interpreted through the lens of fifties science fiction (wow, I was getting bored, tired, or both).

"Behold!" Cordy said, doing a flourish with Saph in her hand. "An augur! And the first Earth Bet temporal trace device!"

The Datasmith merely groaned. My boss slowly got off the floor, stretching his back. "Before we begin; this thing can detect radio signals that occurred a day ago. How much range does it have?"

"This model? It's based on something that can detect transmissions extending to the past month, but given how we used inferior materials - no offense - and I put in safeties against the entropic wear effect given we probably might use it again, this probably can only extend back a week or so," the Datasmith said.

"Entropic wear?"

"To use something that doesn't require a doctorate in thaumatech engineering to understand, you push time, it pushes back. That would be the reason why time thaumatech is so prone to breaking. There's a lot more we could do back home, but..." the Datasmith shrugged.

Armsmaster nodded. "The implants?"
"Way ahead of you, boss," I said as Tybalt dropped the bag of metal and glass devices into his hand.

"Thank you," he said, inspecting the devices. "... Interesting. Not what I would have used, but an interesting aspect to computer technology."

"Pardon?"

"The devices. The glass have circuit patterns cut into them. This would normally be pointless, but if magic has the potential to make most of the silicate resistant to conducting electricity, it's a convenient way to cut cheap and disposable circuits without specialized material."

That got the Datasmith interested. "Really?"

"Yes. I don't know the specifics of your technology, but this one seems more advanced in that aspect at least. Of course," he said, turning it over, "it squanders that in some other ways. This spherical bit - I can tell you right here and right now, it's extraneous. I don't know if it has a purpose or not, but I can't see any purpose to them that can't be covered by more circuits if it's a computer, or feeding off Browbeat's bioelectricity if it's a battery."

Now all the kytons were leaning in. "You can see that just by looking?", asked a mystified Cordy.

"Tinker, remember? While I think your race has more conscious knowledge of the mechanics, I'm quite capable of analyzing things under my specialty, and seeing design flaws." He walked over to what for lack of a better term I decided to internally call the temporal locator. "Speaking of, would the entropic wear effect involve energetic waves, by any chance?"

"Yes, but I don't reckon."

"Do you know how they originate?"

"Yes, but."

"Have you thought about inserting a filter that focuses the waves only on the most protected areas?"

The seconds passed in silence before the Datasmith hummed to himself. "I'm not sure how... but that's something that didn't cross my mind. It just... wasn't done before."

"I'll take a look at it if I have time and sufficient reward."

Both Tybalt and me winced. Not that the kytons seemed to notice enough to be offended.

"Well, that there is going to be a pretty little sum," Hugh said, more to himself than anything. "This lil' planet looks nicer by the day. Heh, must enrage all the other lil' planets who haven't bloomed yet."

There was a dry chuckle from the other kytons and the barbazu overseer.

"So then... we start this thing?" Cordy asked awkwardly.

"Let's see where it leads."

"Well, you are fifteen."
And of course, when it actually led somewhere, I was hurried somewhere else. Inevitable as it was frustrating.

"I know. I know," I mumbled. "It's just that...I saw the problem, I feel like I should at least know what it is."

Tybalt tilted his head. "And then what?"

"...Okay, so I kind of want to see what kind of threat thinks it's a great plan to attack and implant a cape in Brockton. Browbeat's a member now, I want to figure out what happened to him and make sure it won't happen-

"Your adopted heritage is showing."

Now it was my roll to disbelieve. "I...don't think politicians lead by exam-"

"Kings, ideally, do. And Azrai applied himself to that ideal, flaws aside."

"...Still, is that wrong? I just want to help a friend," I replied.

I heard the door creak open.

"Protip: If the all-too-literal alien abductors are lairing somewhere, it's probably best to leave them to the adults. Child safety with anal probes and all that."

"Hello Clock," I said automatically. "And as a rejoinder to the whole 'wear costumes' thing, the people who might hear our real names are in the room on the other side of this wall."

"...If we're doing the spy thing, Addie, do you mind if I get a martini, shaken, not-"

"I'm not Piggot's secretary, so I'm not the person you should ask. I don't think Q goes out in the field, either, much less as our field commander."

"Not in recent films," I heard Gallant say. "They decided that the new Q was a Tinker with a focus on hidden gadgets, and they realized he'd be able to make a lot of them for himself in the field. Bond's still not a cape, though."

I turned to face them. "How does that work?"

"...I dunno," both of them said in unison. "Got to keep morale up about the normals' effectiveness in the face of the parahuman," Gallant continued. "But I suppose if you had a Tinker buddy and sheer force of guile…" He shrugged.

"Never underestimate a man with a sword who knows how to use it," Tybalt replied. "Thing about non-mages is that mages generally didn't have time to learn battlefield tactics whilst studying magic, or inspiring the men."

"...I honestly don't know if I should be offended by that."

"Your inborn talent at magic makes you a rare, possibly unique exception for your particular discipline," Tybalt corrected. "But, point is, the majority of mages don't have the opportunity to become practiced at large-scale war, not directly. Too focused on knowledge to become practiced at violence, at least not to the degree of a career soldier. Great at intelligence gathering and logistics though."

"Leaving that aside...I've been doing okay with the ground-level stuff. I mean..." I sighed. "Look, I
know it's dangerous, but the idea of being stuck, not knowing exactly what the threat is in my home-

"Hey, Adrasteia!" For a moment, I wondered if Clockblocker had stopped time for me, given how quickly he was next to me. "I don't know if you've heard of this, but there's this great new method for reducing stress and paranoia; it's called 'Asking the Raid Force When They Get Back."

I sniggered. "Thanks. Doesn't mean that's a good way to train patience. I mean, what if they need my Dinar-"

"Don't worry, the Protectorate already has the backup." Gallant now. "Look, I can tell you're worried, but this group included Armsmaster? Do you really think he's the kind of person to charge in half-cocked?"

"True, but they know they're coming, and-

"Taylor, it's okay. Everything's going to be fine. I mean, these guys are a completely unknown force that have only been hinted at and we only discovered the existence of a second ago-"

"Sir," a very stern Tybalt said.

"...about four months and you still can't tell the leadup to a joke?"

"Objection withdrawn," he muttered, already blushing.

"...so as I was saying, it will be just like first contact, only with aggressive negotiations!"

Or Chimaera, I internally added. Not the analogy I probably needed right now.

"Which ties into my point," I said, putting that morbid aside out of my mind. "I mean, think of the diplomatic boon that Glory Girl or Gallant could prove to be, right Gallant?"

No response.

"Oh come on, we need a lighter atmosphere...for...Gallant?" Clockblocker's joking tone suddenly evaporated.

My teammate had vanished.

"...Was Gallant in a rush or something?"

"No, I mean, he sensed you were in a rut, so he and I came up here to dig you out - Gallant! G-Man!"

"Tybalt, did you see any…"

Now I trailed off as I suddenly saw my familiar's expression.

His glazed-over, empty expression.

"Tybalt!"

Slowly, sense returned to the violet eyes.

"So pretty...."
"Tybalt, snap out of it!"

"The pattern...wha...?" Now he was back to normal, and quite confused. "Why are you shaking me?"

"Okay, okay, good." By now I was back to back with my other teammate, spear at the ready. "You were hit by some kind of, I don't know, Master effect and then-"

"Um Addie? Don't look now, but..." I felt Clockblocker tap my shoulder. "According to the wall clock, it's ten minutes later."

I followed the pointing hand.

Holy shit.

"...Protectorate should still be in the next room. Briefing length."

"Never thought I'd be glad for how slow they can be."

And with that, we charged into the room.

The room could almost be described as a surrealist art gallery. Between the completely normal capes were spaced a bunch of kytons and baatezu, all surrounding the temporal locator, which now had an odd mobius strip of rainbow, scillantilating energy above it, gently rotating.

What made the comparison more apt was the fact that the aforementioned strip was the only thing moving. At all.

Well, except the Wards that had already arrived.

"Taylor!? Dennis!? Ohthankgod," Vista breathed, rushing up from where Miss Militia had been frozen, eternally standing at attention. "We thought you were blasted centuries in the future I'm so glad you're okay-"

"Whoa, whoa!" I said, holding up a talon. "How long were we gone? We just noticed we were missing time thirty seconds ago-"

"Around fifteen minutes ago, if my watch is at all reliable right now," Kid Win muttered, working on something next to the locator. "Dean showed up first, about three minutes before us by his estimation."

Our formerly missing teammate swept in, emotion beams with colors I associated with him calming people down at the ready. "I'm as clueless as you are-one minute, I was talking to you, the next flash of this weird fractal pattern everywhere, then this. Nobody else remembers that though, Chris is looking into that."

I nodded. "Okay, okay, got it. Think it has anything to do with-"

"Trying to see that, right now. Unfortunately I just started."

I nodded. "So, new cape, you think?"

"If so, I feel cheated already," Dennis muttered.

Tybalt cleared his throat. "Pardon me for interrupting, but by any chance did you see the clocks as
you made your way to this room? Did they show different times?"
"...We didn't, but…"

All eyes went to the briefing room's own clock.
"...Hey guys, I don't know about you, but that appears to be the proper time before it...froze."
"It was thirty minutes later when Win and I came to."
"Thought so."

A misty form of an hourglass materialized in front of Tybalt.

"I've only heard of this effect with temporal thaumatech from my vulpinal fellows, but apparently, it's possible that a glitch when using a device such as the locator right here can shunt people sideways, outside of conventional reality and into the border of the Temporal Energy Plane for a period."

A tube extended from the top half of the phantom hourglass towards the bottom.

"How it was explained to myself is that we are still connected to normal time and traveling forward, but we are 'beside' the normal passage of time and will rejoin later on."

To show his point, a bunch of sand fell from the top of the hourglass to the bottom, a bit getting caught in the spare tube. The grains were caught on the lip for a second, and much more slowly than the ones in the proper hole between the bulbs, but eventually tumbled into the bottom bulb.

"I...don't know why said fellows said that indications of time in different areas would look different, however."

Win nodded. "So...this is a glitch? We just wait for a while and everything will go back to normal?"

"From what I heard, quite; if the latest time in the anomaly is thirty minutes, that should be when we rejoin. Thing is though, I remember them saying it was very rare. It's more likely that our ages would be affected-"

"Hold on, hold on…" Clockblocker's brow furrowed. "...Yep, still aroused by linoleum, I'm in the normal range of seventeen. Oof!"

My wing retracted. "Before you worry, that was a joke. I hope."

The silvanshee still looked immensely weirded out for a second before shaking his head. "...which isn't likely at all, and it would more likely to affect only those closest to the malfunctioning locater, unless…"

The hourglass vanished as a look of sudden dread came to Tybalt's face.

I could already see where this was going.

"Deliberate sabotage?"

"More akin to commandeering the artificial anomaly, but yes."

"Crap."
All the Wards drew together.

"Don't separate." Clockblocker began. "We just have to wait it out in here, then hit the alarm once we're out of Timey-Wimey Land-"

"AAAAAAIIIIEEE!"

A second later, I realized I was on a perch, my uncovered Medusas hissing.

"...Or, we could find whoever else got caught in here and save their lives. That works."

And with that, we fanned out by the entrance to the room.

"Clockblocker, Adrasteia, you take lead," Dean muttered. "He's the Striker of our group, and you can tank with those wings. Vista and Win, you have the middle row, I take the back and rain beams on everyone, Tybalt can scout."

"On it," my familiar said, dissolving into mist.

"Okay," Dennis said, getting ready to kick open the door. "On the count of three. One...Two…"

The air split open.

"...Three…?"

The blue fluid in the syringe spearpoint vanished into his back.

"Ambush! AMBUSH!"

I wheeled around, spear extending-

A ghostlike face with pure-white orbs for eyes grinned viciously and widely-

There was the sound of electrical sparking, and the world went white with pain.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Behold, escalation!

...And players should be really glad I don't DM. My monsters cheat.
Interlude 5: The Magician's Herald

Chapter Notes

And of course, because I feed on pain, let's focus on someone else!

Also, this fork of the fic is up-to-date, hooray! Now you need only wait for my actual writing speed!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The stare in silence had a sound all it's own. The Warden had that effect on the room.

Many of her subordinates would commit unsanctioned vigilantism to learn exactly how she did that, but the thing about the Warden (along with her insistence on remaining nameless, nobody sane asked twice, largely due to the loud stare) was that she honestly didn't know herself; the old githzerai simply disapproved hard enough, and suddenly a berk's timestream was visible to him.

"You hesitated."

"Yes ma'am," the Justicar said, trying to remain stiff despite everything in his body, those instincts he inherited from his tiger-headed mother telling him this woman is a predator stronger than you, there is no shame in retreat. "I panicked."

"Why."

"There was an innocent, ma'am." The factotum inhaled. "I...had not prepared my spells properly for that possibility."

"And."

"I did not bring the proper first aid, ma'am," he replied, stiffly. "I made a value judgement and put an innocent life ahead of Law."

"The factol would be proud," the Warden said, her tone making it clear exactly what she thought of that pride. "Sadly, the Bailiff, for your..ethics, is safely back in Arborea, and will likely arrive at the conference with the files. Ten years of work, lost to our homegrown knights of the cross trade. For a situation you caused."

"In fairness ma'am, I didn't realize he would stoop to bargaining with mind flayers. I thought the Bailiff was more akin to the legitimate Harmonium, ma'am," the factotum continuing more because it was expected than because it was a defense of his actions.

"The Union!?" the Warden suddenly bellowed, her stare turning into actual loudness. "The Ortho Union is not debased!? Have you paid any attention to the briefings, soldier!?"

"Yes ma'am. The Union is a relic of the time all three of the Enforcers of Sigil lost their way, ma'am," the factotum continued, automatically. "They are a symptom of all disorder within Law, the embodiments of all that is our personal shame."

"Yes. So tell me; why in the name of all that is just in the planes did you leave an illithid, of all
things, alive to warn him in the first place?"

...Telling the truth would lead to less pain in the long term.

"I...considered parleying with it for intelligence to be more productive in the long term. It was simply fair to leave it be, ma'am."

The stare returned. Even colder this time.

"And because you thought slavery was not a large enough crime to be worth distracting your pursuit, you allowed this entire sordid catastrophe to unfold. Your continuing existence in the Red Death is nearly as much of a shame as the Union."

"Not as pertinent to my mission, no."

"Followed by, very recently, refusing to plug an intelligence leak that drew a reporter to the center of Acheron, of all places."

"I wished to pursue the Baliff as quickly as possible, ma'am."

"Even more recently, you decided to instead blow a hole in a base instead of infiltration? Couldn't stand the idea of Ragel getting credit instead?"

"...You wish me to tender my resignation, then?", the Justicar said, swallowing repeatedly.

"I see your heritage isn't completely degraded. You are dismissed, and I expect you to have removed your equipment from the Outpost by the end of the week." She leaned back. "You are dismissed, Mr. Lukic."

"Understood, ma'am." And with that, the soon-to-be ex-factotum quietly rose, and walked away, attempting at dignity.

Right up until he was sure the Warden was out of earshot.

That's when an unfortunate statue exploded.

Stupid!

So, completely, stupid!

An animalistic scream of frustration came from the man as he sank into the rubble, ignoring the dabus glaring at him in disapproval.

How could he have been so addle-coved?!

He knew perfectly well the Baliff was the head of an intelligence network before he bought his way into Union membership. Why wouldn't he have contact among Baator-bound aberrations, especially mind flayers. What kind of barmy was he!?

Oh yes, that's right; a glory-seeking, fame-hogging idiot. He couldn't just be happy with being a Mercykiller, oh no, he had to be the loved Mercykiller, the respected Mercykiller. For example, bringing in a member of the Union in front of photographers, and a Sigilian one at that. Or getting that prize for least damage caused in the course of pursuit. All hail Alphonse Lukic, seeker of the guilty, protector of the innocent.

And now the planar crime syndicate knew about their agents. Knew exactly where to find those
brave Guvners who put their lives on the line to stop their errant brethren. And they already proved their willingness to associate with kin to the worst of the exemplar races. At least the suffering caused by kalites would end someday, that was the human-born daemons’ mission in life. At least tanar’ri would allow some resistance to arise, if only for the pleasure of crushing all order again, so there would be hope in their world. But baatezu? No freedom, no hope, no end. A strange position for a Mercykiller to take, yes, but the man had long learned that laws were meant to create real freedom rather than anarchy; his mother's own mastery of them was the only reason she was able to save him from that prison.

But no. Because he was so stupid, now the Union had the upper hand, now the cancer was growing once more. All because he just had to allow that leak, now his people were in danger. Now the Union knew where their sworn enemies were, knew where…exactly…to strike...

……Except that would go double for the Union too, wouldn't it. More than that...he had proof of their relationship with the mind flayers. Yes, a tadpole could be faked…but the sworn enemies of illithids probably could tell it was real.

Of course, githyanki were normally banned from the Clerk's Ward for a reason. If they got their hands on the intelligence and records kept there, who knows what their creches could do with that knowledge? The birth of another Vlaakith, maybe? He doubted giving the conquering pirates legal reason to attack the stores would not put thousands of people at risk. That it wouldn't be a crime worthy of the gibbets, at the very least; maybe even anger the Lady.

And the tens of thousands the Union has destroyed?, the voice of his long-dead father replied. The hundreds their ambition will continue to hurt? You aren't a Mercykiller anymore, Al. You don't need to worry about the law in the face of the right.

...Slowly, the man pulled out his planar sextant.

Now, where would a likely creche be…

As the spikes on the intruder's glove retracted, still sparking, years of training immediately took over. First, Tybalt could naturally see in the dark, so the first thing was to ensure he could leverage that over the attackers.

It was only after he was tearing out the meeting room's fusebox that he realized that it may not affect time-anomalous areas, but that turned out to be a non-issue, the lights flickering off. After a quick note to the Protectorate was scratched into the wall besides the box (just in case the inevitable occurred), the agathion returned to mist form and fled into the vents.

Next step; observation. If he was right, this particular duct led to...ah. Wondrous.

["...ying cat?"]

It took a second to remember the strange dual-layering of Celestial and an unfamiliar tongue was simply Tybalts own gift of tongues working. How the planes managed to retrofit everything into this mangled flesh golem of the local language was something of a marvel.

["Yeah, flying cat! A flying cat made of mist!"]

The silvanshee's ear twitched. Sibilant, definitely the hook one associated with hyphens.

["...Sure that isn't the modrons' implants again?"]
Vaguely similar to Elvish, given the deep "r" sound.

["You know what, you're right! Hah! Ain't fooling me again, modrons! I'm on to ya!"
]

Huh. Apostrophes. Lots of apostrophes. So, dialect of Elvish that mixed with Abyssal at one point, and-

Oh.

...Moradin's rotgut, oh gods no.

Before he could fully think about how stupid the next course of action might be, he jetted over to the gate, so fast he needed his claws to slow down.

Please don't be drow.

Please don't be drow.

Please don't be-

Not drow. Too short.

Thank Pelor.

Quickly ducking his head back in the duct, Tybalt let out his breath.

But...if the cloaked humanoids currently binding the unconscious Wards in glass fixtures weren't drow, but spoke a similar language…

Who were they?

...Why couldn't Underdark races be on the side of the angels, for once? First thing upon rendezvous with home was to fill this accursed gap in his knowledge…

---

**First death**

The bar under the containment tank turned white with heat.

"What...what are you doing!?!"

The man at the steam control simply gave a sad smile, and disengaged another safety.

"Stop! That solution is unstable-"

"I know."

Clink. Another safety gone. The tank began to shudder with the force of the internal bubbling, acrid smoke spurting out wherever the cracks had grown visible.

"Al-Alphonse! I order you to stop!"

"Sorry, sir. That would conflict with your other orders; the creature must be destroyed, correct?"

The next safety had to be destroyed to turn off. A little acid sprayed here, and the blue flicker of electricity soon began to illuminate the room.
"Not-not with the castle, too! You'll kill her!"

"She died a long time ago, Doctor," the man said, fusing the valves into their closed position. "It's time we all stopped pretending that things weren't this way." He laughed, bitterly. "Stopped pretending we were better than we are."

"No, no, no, all I need is a little more time, a little more-"

"Resources, Victor?" The man stood up, resolute. "Like Aubrecker? Like the hybridized lycanthropes? Like Adam himself?"

"Alphonse, please!" The natural philosopher's voice had become even more shrill, even more panicked. "You yourself said-"

"I was wrong, Victor." The man turned around. "You were wrong too, but I was being even more myopic than you. Even more selfish."

"S...Selfish!?" The fear had become a snarl of rage. "You impinge my Work too-"

"There is no glory in a hamster on his wheel, Victor." The man sat down, carefully setting his tail aside; surely the Powers could begrudge his last moments being comfortable. "There is no progress, only vainglory, and a sad old man pretending to wisdom he doesn't have."

The philosopher advanced, pulling out a scalpel. "No wisdom!? Who took you in, outlander!? Who found you, lost and alone in that valley, gawking at the stars!? Who designed that device you use to hide your inhuman features, who-"

"Has been nothing but kind to me, I know, Victor." He leaned back. "And I am betraying that kindness for the greater good, I know. I've had experience." And looked at the ceiling. "But before you call out my hypocrisy-did you know Adam has a soul?"

The scalpel clattered to the ground. "W-What?"

"You succeeded, sir. I've actually touched it. The thing is, though...I don't think you willed it into being. It came from somewhere else, somewhere very close by when he opened his eyes for the first time."

"I...I don't-"

"In my travels, Doctor, I once walked with a woman who was born without a soul, through no fault of her own. Sweet woman, kind woman, but very...shallow. Uncreative. Quite vexing for her, honestly, to repeat the same actions, the same experiments constantly and yet never...learn...anything."

"...What...do you mean...to...?"

"I mean, Doctor, that I've figured out why you seem to regenerate; under examination, I couldn't help but notice you and the creature's life forces are akin to Ouroboros."

The tank began to open, a metal flower blooming.

"It's only a theory, but I'm pretty sure you and I are going to the same place if I am correct. So I'll check for you once I'm there."

The flower petals fanned out.
There was a terrible ghastly noise.

For once, just once, Tybalt wished whatever tin of a hiding place he forced himself to stow away in would at least have room for his tail.

Barring that, it could, at least, have some ergonomic considerations. For example, not being directly above the quite rocky ground, with someone who apparently thought the speed limits were more speed suggestions at the wheel. He swore; a tooth would get loose at this rate.

Thankfully, there was enough of a gap to see through...vaguely. Night, and more recently depth, posed no obstacle, but the issue remained that he doubted this particular hole in the underside of this particular van was much larger than his pupil. So far, all he had gotten was that the entrance to these intruders' hold was still in the city. Nothing worth having for navigation.

And so it continued, for about half an hour; the only thing worth mentioning in the entire ride was the sudden feeling of nausea before he began to detect subtle movements in the rocks the van was going over. Returning to normal time, he supposed. Wondrous.

Eventually, thankfully, things started to slow down. Returning to mist form again, the silvanshee extruded himself from the block long before the van actually stopped; he had no intention of ever getting close to being found, and it was easy enough to catch up.

So, the cavern vault. Could be natural, could be artificial; geography and Underdark engineering wasn't his forte, not hardly. But it looked uncut enough, which meant lots of hiding places.

All he needed to do was-

A truly enormous amount of pain shot through the gaseous body of the silvanshee. Burying his face in the wall to muffle any stray cries, the mist began to congeal into nerves, then bones, then all the way up to skin. It only took three seconds or so, but given how every cell in his mist body suddenly felt its separation from its other cells, it took a quick glance at the position of the parking(in-progress) car to confirm that it wasn't actually that long.

Damnation. Got careless with how long he was keeping that form up. The required sleep cycle before he'd regain control of that ability would take too long, too.

The underhanded way it was, then.

Darting to another alcove, the silvanshee quietly began to take the unfamiliar environment in.

Hm. Lots of glass, a lot of it bulbs built into primitive-looking (compared to the information technology of this world) consoles mounted into the walls. Lots of glowing blue patches on the wall, too, looked like a deliberate fungal growth. That bit over there looked like a loading dock for foragers. Excellent, there was probably enough material for a bag. He also doubted whatever lab they possessed wouldn't have useful chemicals in there...

In the midst of his planning he almost didn't notice when the current young mistress and compatriots were wheeled out on crystalline...stretchers? Looked more like clam-shell plastic casing on wheels…

Couldn't well free them if he didn't know where they were, and following would waste time. After a quick inhale, he discovered no particular scent either. So, how to track-

A bit of dust fell from the ceiling. Inspiration.
Flying up to the ceiling, Tybalt quickly scratched out a tiny bit of material from a point directly above them.

And then his left flank. Wincing, he drew out a bead of blood, which he then mixed with the cavern dirt. And dropped it, directly on what appeared to be Mr. Stans-ahem, Gallant's container.

Direct hit. Unsurprisingly, the kidnappers looked up in annoyance at the now cait sith-less source of the dust, shrugged, and wiped it off. Completely not noticing the fact that a bit of it was red and wet. Three cheers for complacency.

So, now that the clamshell was marked. Time to get to work.

Second life

The volcano was erupting. Lava ate away at the black rock of the mountain, replacing it even as it dissolves. Fire illuminated the black void, making it bright as day despite the lack of even any stars in the black sky.

By the gods, he was bored if he was actively noticing this particular feature now.

Thankfully, the next stretch in his route was a large, relatively flat plain of semi-melted stone. Suicide for an ordinary cavalryman, but most calvarymen didn't ride in Gehenna, let alone on a keshi.

"Keshi. Tsk tsk."

The nightmare snorted in annoyance, before her hooves separated into hardy three-toed claws, ideal for balance. A quick nudge, and the predatory horse quickly picked up pace into a bouncing canter, streaking across the dried lava rock and the flow beneath it, knocking away much of it into the yellow flow as she did. Apart from the occasional leap over a flow, little of the ride was noticeable; just the same volcanic planetoid, with it's all-too-literal Hellishness, the occasional daemonic construction, daemons-

"Whoa."

There was a sense of whiplash as the planar horse grappled the earth and skid to a halt, more great cat than ungulate. Much to his annoyance, the rider's helm shifted, exposing greyish, wrinkled skin to the elements, and moreover, the itching volcanic dust. No matter. A little bit of the contents in his pouch tossed over his shoulder, and…

"Greetings. May I ask you fine gentlemen the way to the embassy?" he said, turning Keshi and himself to face them.

"Lost again, second-chancer?", the leader, a sangudaemon with the head of a locust shot back, blood-formed wings already buzzing in anticipation. "Oh, it's simple- simply put your head between your knees and expose a tasty bit."

"Oh come now," the rider began, sighing. "I've heard that line, oh, six times in the past Sigilian quarter? I might as well start calling you serial patricides if you resort to that tired old jest."

A different member of the hunters, a lacridaemon, sneered. "At least we didn't have to rely on divine charity to escape our ordained fates."

"You must be new here," the rider began, putting as much condescension as he was capable in that
one line. "Scourging is parole, nothing more. A way to enforce the will of the Bright Powers where their jurisdiction does not extend, to bring it to a level you can understand, kalite."

The hunters visibly bristled. None of the mortal-born daemons liked being reminded of what they originally were. Good, that meant less change they would notice that wasn't salt he sowed over his back.

To ensure; "Well then," the rider began, Keshi steeling herself as he hoisted his lance, "Shall we see what you could have been, pointless?"

Apparently these daemons never developed a thick skin. The sangudaemon roared a command, and all five charged.

They never saw the grayish-black powder of crystallized negative energy until it was too late

As the explosion of darkness evaporated, the rider could see the two weaker daemons were dissolving into soul-stuff already. Before the sangudaemon recovered, a silver bullet from his musket was put right between his mandibles. From the neigh-roar and bird cry screams, it seemed that his mount had the suspiradaemon covered.

He was about to dismount and face the venedaemon when he heard its own warbling cry: "Parley! I call a truce!"

Waving away the dissolving sangudaemon's soul-stuff, the rider narrowed his slitted eyes at the humanoid insect-squid. "Bit soon for you to start your sudden but inevitable betrayal, isn't it?"

"Look, okay, I really don't care for hellbred-hunting to begin with," the venedaemon began, its normally high-pitched tone made outright shrill by nervousness. "I just heard you might have been a mage in life, so I was thinking 'hey, maybe I could stabilize you, pick your brains for lore-'"

"I don't care," the rider bluntly replied, loading another bullet. "Now, I ask again; do you have directions to the embassy of the Nine Hells?"

"East, about twenty klicks," the sorcerer fiend replied, obviously sweating now. "Come on, you're a paladin, don't you have a code against killing defenseless-

"My particular iteration," the rider began, hoisting the gun, "has an anti-fool clause in it; fiends are assumed to be lying until proof is presented."

"...I have a map," the venedaemon responded, pulling it out. "Go on, check it with a compass, it's not some-gah!"

Pausing briefly to spit out the venedaemon's tentacles, Keshi handed the map to her owner. A quick landmark search showed the truth of the daemon's words.

"Very well,"

"Thank you!" the venedaemon shouted with relief. "Thank you, I won't forget this, if you ever decide to stop lying to yourself and join the sane side-

"I can do this with a clear conscience."

"Wait, what-"

The daemon's words were suddenly silenced as the canister fired.
A second later, a net of light extended across the venedaemon's body binding it to the ground. Along with its mouth.

"I have learned what leaving witnesses may tempt me to do," the rider said, turning away. "Speak of the Knight in Grey when you return to your masters, but I cannot risk betrayal of my comrades."

The muffled curses of the sorcerer fiend trailed off into the distance, as the rider cantered on.

Not again.

Not after what I decided to do.

So, the lab. Looked...nostalgic, almost. Reminded him of the Schloss and its scholarly master.

Of course, it also reminded him of the darkness behind those walls, but the lord was...kind enough, when he could be. Sadly, Tybalt doubted these pale men would be any kinder to intruders than his old friend was.

So, a great deal of glass. A tad more of that blue glow, too, now revealed to be some kind of wet, woody lichen. Apparently was food too, given the blue emanating from what he assumed was a larder. Which was directly next to the laboratory.

Yet more wistfulness for that chapter in his lives.

Slowly, Tybalt shook his head. He was getting on in years, if he could find fond memories of...that place.

Memories that should not be positive aside, this place certainly looked more advanced than that old castle. The good natural philosopher certainly was never a fan of all the blinking computers, though that may have been because the computers of his day took up entire rooms to perform multiplication. Of course, it looked like the owners weren't a fan of mice, which was where the cait sith's knowledge of user interfaces began and ended (a fact which Clockblocker suddenly smirked for the rest of the day upon discovering. Hm).

So, there was nothing to go on but the screensaver, a fairly well-animated manta ray with a scorpion's tail in space, with a towered...city...on it's...

Tybalt's eyebrows shot up. Why would an Underdark species be obsessed with the True Spelljammer, of all things? Wasn't it that most of them hate space travel on the basis of there being nowhere to hide from the many suns? Mind flayers excepted, but even they did everything to protect themselves from exposure.

More than that, he knew devils. He knew they would have detected, and quietly destroyed the interlopers hads they arrived via spelljammer, either the normal or newfangled mundane ones. Assuming they weren't convenient scarecrows to assume further control. Either way, there was no good reason why the primordial starship would be a symbol of this particular expedition.

Not unless they were looking into different symbolism. Glory? ...No, if that were the case, a divine symbol would have sufficed. Conquest? Maybe, but after the baatezu arrived, anyone vaguely sane would write this world off and flee.

...but maybe it wasn't quite conquest of the planet, now? Hm, perhaps he should-

"Waah!"
For a second, Tybalt's fur arched before he realized that it was the scream of an infant. Rather horrific hauntings aside, infants who cried like that generally were harmless. If possibly eerie.

"Waaa...hah-hah!"

However, what was it doing in the lab?

Muttering to himself in Celestial about poor parents, Tybalt traced the sound. A little north, turn to the right and-

Guard.

Okay then, down into the alcove, and-

"Waaa."

"Shush, sweetie. You can wait a few hours, then we can have a bit of fun with the subjects together."

"Wa."

"Yes. Until then, I'll see if we can't find a rattle."

That was the guard's child? Funny, that didn't seem-

The patrol came into view.

However Tybalt managed to place a paw in front of his treacherous mouth in time, he would probably never know.

The guard's baby was kept in a cage. A thick little cage, not unlike that of a bird. Dangled at the end of a pole. That wasn't the horrible bit.

The horrible bit was the condition of the in-no, the foetus.

How the child managed to survive outside the womb was nothing less than a miracle, however obscene. The silvanshee wasn't sure if the thing sticking out of it's chest was an umbilical cord or yet another deformity brought about by extreme premature birth. The already pseudo-cataracted eyes of the pale men were so pronounced in the foetus that they looked almost insectile on a even more disproportionately large head.

...That was what the Spelljammer symbolized, wasn't it? Conquest over this deplorable condition at birth.

As the patrol rounded a corridor, the agathion resolved to find a solution for this race. Evil tendencies or not, there were just some things nobody deserved.

Second death

Hm. So he actually did see the sunrise of the Upper Planes again. One last time.

If only it were under better circumstances.

"Take them! Rip them! Scar our names on the very fabric of the universe with their bones!"
The Harbinger's bellowing echoed across the burning land, roared even louder than the sickly greenish-gold flames. The more academic part of the man's mind speculated that perhaps the flames served as speakers (would make sense, given their purpose), but the sane part was more in agreement with the warrior part in that it was probably better to focus on killing the mixed platoon of kalites and their various creations.

One, a translucent-skinned, emaciated humanoid with a lamprey-like mouth (an urdefhan, he recalled) rushed forwards, screaming before suddenly vanishing in a purplish swirl of negative energy, along with the unfortunate artillerymen who had been shooting at him. Possibly that was the intent before the charge, it was difficult to tell with daemonic creations. A few seconds later, the scream of metal on metal joined the battlefield as a squad of genthodemons (A/N: proper name for them, Angelform) flew dropped from one of the steam-powered spelljammers, steel plates woven in their skin that buckled and ground against each other.

The man forced himself to look away, pointedly ignoring the screams of pain and malicious joy. The mission could not be compromised.

"...Continue the advance," he muttered to the captain.

"Roger," the archon muttered, before signaling his men.

Keshi's hoof separated again, as the nightmare begin to stalk instead of walk; a cautious predator seeking dangerous game. Not at all comfortable for her rider, given the fact that he was now almost falling into her mane, but necessary. It gave her full use of her nose, after all.

The next few minutes was a tense slog through the burning underbrush, the Hadesian ash assaulting the hellbred's prematurely aged skin and nose. What made the itching worse was the complete lack of allergy medication; if he was suffering like this, in somewhere that was rapidly becoming his native environs, he shuddered to imagine what his celestial friends might go through. Hence why they were infinitely less discomforted, and why he was already planning particular ways that idiotic, undersupplied apothecary might be subjected to karma.

Not that he would be the one to enforce them. There would no capacity for him to do so if this plan worked. Hellbreds had a spoken-for soul, after all.

Skin issues aside, the man was actually relieved he was the guide into the daemon-held territory. After all, he wasn't required to then be the lookout as well; he was calloused enough given the significant portion of this life he spent in the daemons' orbit, observing their deeds after the fact. He did not need to watch and hear them commit them as well.

Eventually, Keshi began to flange, nickering uncertainly. The man held up his hand, before taking in the surrounding environments. Fire...outcropping...bush...upturned earth-

There.

A quick "hold" sign and dismount later, the man threw a bit of meat to the worked ground.

_Fwoomp._

A tower of dirt arose out of the landscape, something brownish and shining flashing within as it grabbed hold and shook.

"Fall back!"

The cohort fled into the bushes, the susurrus to activate their _rings of invisibility_ echoing briefly.
The dust began to fall away, revealing the flat, mantis-like head of an ankheg, not dissimilar from the mundane cockroach-like predator except for the sharp patterns of white running down its back. "Lesser Hadesian Earth Eater Ankheg," the man automatically whispered to the archon packed against him as it gnawed on the meat. "Often used as self-setting living traps by daemons. Good for capturing enemies."

Sure enough, a squad of urdefhan skydived from the fleet of steamjammers, their natural abilities allowing them to descend without parachutes. The living daemonic weapons quickly drew rhokas and rifles, rising to their feet with dark smiles on their toothy faces...which quickly fell away upon seeing what the ankheg was actually eating.

The largest urdefhan muttered something in his sibilant, silky tongue and whistled into the air. Shortly thereafter, three great bats, starved-looking and with torn wings, flew down to pick up the search squadron, one of whom gave what the man assumed to be a very rude gesture to the ankheg as they took off to look for actual unfortunates.

The cohort decloaked. "Remain vigilant," the captain began. "I suspect that, given the subrace the Harbinger is a part of, that is far from her least ingenious-

"*-cracckk-* "It appears I have guests."

The silver-stocked pistol flew to the man's hand as he and every other soldier turned to the source of the voice.

In front of them, one of the sickly unholy flames had just suddenly turned stable and large from its earlier flickering, growing to the size of a human. Inside of it, the flickering shape of a woman made out of metal took form, blades threaded through chains that looked to have been hammered into her wrists.

"Make no mistake, while I respect your will to win the battle by any means necessary, you are far beyond the reach of superficial hope. Bytopia's garrison will fall, and from there…"

The Harbinger continued for a while in this track, not remarking on any of the cohort. Or even the member whose race's existence was a point of humiliation for all the Lower Planes. Frowning, one of the soldiers threw a rock at her face.

"...know that you s*zzzt-crack* of a new era decided by sanity…"

"It's a recording. Set probably to play wherever there's a false alarm." the captain muttered, lowering his own musket. "She did this to at least demoralize any escapees, men, she doesn't-"

"Wait," the man said, holding up a finger. "Too imprecise for cruciadaemons, especially ascended ones."

"...and glorious oblivion."

The flame vanished.

The man frowned. "Wait…"

"As for you, Knight in Grey…"

Even the man himself jumped at that, given how close her image reformed.

"Or should I say, Justicar Lukic…"
The man's brow furrowed. "Observe."

"I wonder; do you realize the kind of person you'll be remembered as?" The metal woman smirked. "The vicious judge, so obsessed with his avenging his humiliation he provided the spark for the Great Sigilian Fire? Or the paladin in name only, who sold his honor for a chance at assassination? Choose wisely, scion of the Deluded..."

The flame and the recording vanished. The man's vision quickly flipped down.

The captain turned to him, a look of understanding in the archon's eyes. "You...that's who you were, wasn't it?"

The man looked away from the pitying gaze of the celestial in the cohort. "...I don't deny it."

"...Look, I'll go see if we can get a writ of rebirth, give you more time-"

"Don't bother," the man said, looking up. "I've chosen my path. An act of chaos doesn't matter in the long term. Not to others."

"I don't think the gods are that unforgiving, I'm sure if we-"

"Continue dallying?" the man began, flipping back on to Keshi. "The daemons will be given more time to despoil Bytopia, more time to fuse more land into Gehenna and Hades. My welfare, and that of my name in this life and the next, is inconsequential. We break the offense, we save millions of souls from devouring and suffering under kalite and baatezu rule. Compared to my infamy and perdition? I will douse myself in oil for the cleansing flames."

The archon captain blinked.

And broke into a smile.

"I forgot how much I enjoy people from outside of Celestia. Move!"

Completely unknowing of the fact he would never be offered cleansing flames from that moment onward, the man rode on.

Apart from the one guard (at first glance; the silvanshee resolved to stay away from any suspiciously organic-looking, sticky-seeming objects), the lab seemed clear of any unavoidable security. Just cameras with obvious blind spots. Not any good ones to observe the lab from, but that wasn't particularly needed. Lots of mediocre ones.

First thing to note was the relative cleanliness. Apparently the materials meant this lab needed frequent washing; a bit of it still looked wet, in fact. Not a warning sign in sight, though, which was rather strange when one added the possibility of slipping to the definite existence of fragile equipment.

Next to note was the bizarre array of specimens that Tybalt was sure would be disturbing to other people. After his own experiences and the sudden shock of the guard's ward, the misshapen organic material in the jars was nothing particularly alarming. The only thing of note was the fact that the eyes in the jars followed him; whether out of reflex or intelligent curiosity, he didn't know. Probably couldn't tell on him though, so he politely bowed to them.

At the back of the room, however, was something that would probably be of interest to the Tinkers, however; a large, blinking pillar of computer monitors and attached vials. About half of the screens
were inactive, showing only the *Spelljammer* in its endless cruise...but the others, the others were worth noting.

First, all of the monitors, from a quick count, corresponded to a vial that was filled with a bluish, translucent fluid with an organic sample contained within, and one blue light. On the screens were various people going about their lives; there, a detective examined the blackened wreck of a building. Here, a translucent-skinned demihuman talked with a rather colorful mix of people in a luxurious room. In front of him, a rather thuggish individual with a tattoo of a wolf's head imposed over a familiar black cross (the name of which escaped him at the moment) antagonized a pair of barbazus (good for him, if suicidal and possibly resulting in diplomatic headaches in the long term). In the lower corner of each, an undulating bar graph with unreadable data flashed.

Implanted subjects, he supposed. How they managed to simultaneously *scry* all of them was beyond the biology major cait sith. But this kind of multi-faceted ingenuity settled it; tanar'ri were known for packing as many things they could into one device already (all the better to keep an eye, and grip, on their stuff), but the elegance was normally beyond them. Stressing the word *normally*, in the same manner as "most demons were not princes with practically infinite resources in their domains and an entire ethos based around crafting new and arcane technologies."

Combined with the desire of these people to remain unseen by baatezu, that settled it. These pale men were almost certainly part of Haagenti's vanguard. Likely arrived with the retriever, if not before. Made sense that he would patron, and thus benefit from, a race with a vested interest in biological research.

All he needed. Time to find-

"Hhreee…"

Why, oh why, did he get overconfident like this, the table was likely a mimic-

"Hhhheeehhhh…"

Wait...that wasn't a normal breath. A wheeze, actually.

A quick glance from his new hiding place confirmed it. The guard had forgotten to close a door deeper into the lab at some point in his last round.

Guardian manufactory, he supposed?

"Hhreeee…"

...Better to err on the side of long-term caution.

Careful to avoid the camera gaze, the silvanshee flattened himself against the wall, using his air cushion to slither from his spot, to the doorsill, and peeked around the door-

"Hhheeehhhh…"

An involuntary hiss escaped him

Tybalt Menon considered it his curse in all of his lives to have a superior memory. A double-sided curse, certainly, but there was things that reincarnation was supposed to free one from the burdens of, one his ability to recall his pasts stubbornly resisted. Ramue apparently believed this was the reason for his "eccentricities", as the agathions called them when they were polite. "Symptoms of lycanthropy" when they weren't supposed it made sense - accident of existence had rendered him
something different, psychologically. Endemic secrecy about everything, mainly; he doubted if his peer realized that he even had a bias in what familiar signals he followed. And his general mean-spirited nature towards diabolic life.

Much like lycanthropy, the curse of strong memories was one of those things that had its benefits. Being able to understand when something was just plain evil, justifications or no, for one.

This...abomination wasn't the worst he had seen. He had worked for worse at one time, even if he had been soul-deep in denial at the time.

But the conditions...the rusty wire...the worn glass...the stained table...

This was something the pale men did as a matter of course. All for the sake of themselves, and their own welfare.

Deplorable births or not, there were just some things that were inexcusable.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, entirely sure that the test subjects wouldn't have been capable of hearing him even if he was louder.

The voice of his father echoed in his head. Hundreds of people, son. They will keep on hurting hundreds of people if you let them continue.

...Now, could he carry any chemicals with him on the way back to the cells?

Perhaps advise his mistress on matters of arson?

[The Great Mimir Guide to Everything In the Planes: Hellbred: Race, planar. Occasionally, a person who has committed crimes that would send them to the Lower Planes, the worlds of wicked souls and selfishness, sees the error of their ways almost too late, and their attempts at redemption fail to completely nix their former actions; enough to be of note, but not enough to convince the judges of the dead they aren't just trying to chicken out of karma. In this case, the gods of Good may decide that they deserve a stay of hellfire and invoke the Scourging, which transforms the soul of the possibly ex-villain into a pseudo-fiend with a natural grasp of paladin-hood, and the ability to use Evil-infused creatures and equipment without fear of corruption. The purpose of the hellbred is to see if the person who became them is truly committed to redemption in the place where the gods of mercy and peace have the least sway; the battlefields of the Blood War.

Despite the name, all Lower Planes have their own hellbred. Unsurprisingly, the inhabitants of each Lower Plane regard each and every one of them with no small degree of contempt, since they are either cowards, turncoats against sanity, or likely both in their eyes, and unwelcome angelic interference in their business.]

Chapter End Notes

Quick note: "Daemon" refers to "the genus of Neutral Evil fiends", and generally refers
to kalites. It would refer to yugoloths, too, except yugoloths succumbed to the Rule of Three as well, and became the third fiendish race to be hunted to nigh-extinction by their soul-born (in D&D, the souls of people in the Outer Planes eventually become sapient inhabitants of that plane, such as the transition from Alphonse to Tybalt) creations.

Kalites are Pathfinder daemons, essentially; living embodiments of the way they died, and tormented by the memories of the worst moments in their living lives. As part of their direct link to death, they also have the ability to evolve and grow more powerful via devouring souls, hence why they're a bit more aggressive than their forebears. Such as actually attacking Upper Planes when they feel confident enough, looking for unspoiled souls.
Aspirant 3.7

Chapter Notes

The drought is over, the action has begun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"G' up."

If my eyes were open, I would have winced.

"Get up."

How could something be so quiet and yet rattle my skull at the same time.

"I said, get. Up."

And that's when the water hit. Cold. Painful.

Everything else was, including the sight of the stone floor as my eyes wrenched themselves open, but the water was particularly bad.

Apparently, the voice noticed this. "Good. You aren't in a coma. More potential, then."

Potential? Coma? Wha..?

Suddenly, my brain rebooted.

As much as I suddenly wanted to fly away, in reality I couldn't even scream. I didn't have nearly enough control over my body to make any sound other than an unintelligible moan.

I did, however have my ears back enough to hear footsteps, moving away. Apparently the voice just wanted to ensure I was conscious.

Slowly, I became fully aware of my wings again, and I felt the Medusas hiss. Couldn't tell you if I scented anything or not, though; not enough signal-to-noise. But my wings were still functioning, at least. Functioning enough to serve as extra arms.

Even with both right wing and what I assumed were my hands, turning over was, at the moment, something I doubted even Alexandria could do easily. The abyss of general agony that was my body at the moment could have been easily a sign I was now the world's largest amoeba given the lack of a sense for any other limbs or features. Eventually though, I sensed I was on my back, facing more slate grey.

The first thing I noticed was my lack of glasses, given the slight, blueish blur covering everything. The next was a rather dingy looking bunk with an even dingier pillow, nothing but metal and a blanket.

The third was the fact that I wasn't wearing armor. Or my normal underclothes. It was more of a medical gown, but far less well-maintained. More of it was coming apart than not, and with rust-
colored patches that I suspected weren't naturally part of the white.

And then I noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

Blur? No, looked too patterned. I turned to look at it-

Mesh.

The wire mesh of a secure birdcage. Or a solitary confinement cell.

And beyond that, illuminated in blue, was the endless grey and brown of natural earth.

I didn't feel dazed anymore. Not because I had fully recovered.

I didn't know how long it was before I heard footsteps again. Couldn't have been too long, but the blue glow didn't change in any way I could see, so no way to tell from that.

Didn't matter. The pain was gone now.

The footsteps grew closer, an indistinct shadow coming from an alcove.

"...why would we want her fed before your first activity," I heard a strange, reedy voice mutter. "Waste of good cytillesh, in my view. You aren't capable of enlightenment anyway, so I don't see why you get to eat light, I mean in all honesty…"

The shadow gained distinction.

"...you should learn to be more grateful, you weasly little punk…"

A different voice said that. More deep.

"Hey, here's a thought, Thoregg;" said a softer voice. "Maybe you should, I don't know, try out being a dad-"

"Shaddup. I brought him and his even more worthless sis into the world, he can stand on his own ivory tower-"

"Where I may angle you out of the latest ditch you've drunken yourself into Dad? Yes, I suppose it would be more agreeable with your atavistic ideals of patriarchy, in violation of our very reason for being-"

"Um, idiots?" the third voice said. "Ever hear of something called 'prisoner earshot'?"

"Oh, go make love to that eyesore of an aklys," the deep voice whined. "I can say whatever the hell I want in front of meat, winged bi-Oof!"

The shadow stumbled.

"Case in point," the reedy voice muttered.

I began to plan. Probably unoriginal, but...

"In any case…" the soft voice muttered.

The footsteps' owner appeared.
"Hello there, miss."

A glare, as it turned out, was an excellent way to take in the full effect of the living ghost that had just rounded the corner.

Hunched over, carrying something in a backpack that glowed the same blue as the cavern lighting through the flap, was a pale, whitish-blue skinned figure, small and lithe. A shock of bone-white hair cascaded around his face, the only indication of gender being an equally white goatee that hung off his chin, wet and tangled. Apart from the pack, there was very little on him that seemed more modern; mostly leathery armor, bound with straps, and with a pair of tie-on sandals.

Clipped to his belt was what looked like a strange cross between a trident, a scythe, and a fishing hook, with a pair of gems inset on either side of the blade. I doubted if that was simply a matter of aesthetics, though; I learned too much from Cordy.

"...I said, hello there, miss."

I remained silent. Even the Medusas caught on.

"...Think she's mute or just stubborn?" said the reedy voice.

"Either works for me. Meat needs to learn to shut its pie hole, I like screamers in my bedroom alone." The deep voice - Thoregg - chuckled,

"...While I would not blame you for not speaking given my uncle, one is rather expected to speak when spoken to, burnie dear," the soft voice said.

I said nothing, only glared more. Not giving you the gratification.

"...Stubborn," the reedy voice muttered. "She's one of those subjects. Of course the pseudo-diabolical would be one of the unhelpful ones. Why wouldn't she be?"

The figure looked up, finally looking me in the eye.

His cemented the ghostlike impression. Those same cataracts I remembered from the ambush were present on him as well, except now that I looked at them again, I realized that it was less cataract and more lacking visible iris and sclera altogether. Almost like someone had replaced this being's eyes with perfect pearls.

Also, I suddenly realized, only Thoregg's voice came from the figure

"Now, dear, I know you're probably scared, a little angry." began the soft voice.

"No, I'm not," I said, finally speaking up. "I'm waiting."

"Waiting? Bit lower than your station suggests, eh, princess?" Thoregg said, a smirk coming to his face.

"Well, she eats at a, ahem, franchise burger chain," the reedy voice said. "I doubt she is more than one of the inbreds who supposedly provide moral support to that European island."

"Leaving that aside," began the soft voice. "I can assure you, derro have only your needs for the Magnum Opus in mind. So please, we would not mind a little verbal appreciation from one of you once in a while."

"You're called derro then?" I said, uncurling from my fetal position on the bed. "And I'd appreciate
it better if you bothered explaining."

"Nothing that concerns you, Burnlander," the reedy voice said. "Not quite yet."

"In any case, as I was saying," the soft voice said, "as a token of our gratitude, we offer you the Glow of Enlightenment."

The figure - or the derro, I guessed - took off the backpack, quickly reaching in.

What came out was a stick of glowing blue, wrapped in plastic.

"What my wannabe cleric of a colleague means is that this is your first cytillesh ration. Eat it."

I swore, Thoregg was deliberately aiming for me when he threw it. I took a look at the "cytillesh", debating for a second whether I wanted to eat or annoy my captor more.

Not provoking my captor won out. Muttering a dark "thanks" I hoped was devoid of any actual gratitude, I unwrapped the strange food, pausing only to examine it for a second.

Under the wrap, the cytillesh stick was surprisingly moist, given its relative rigidity. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the woody, hollow substance was almost the exact shade of blue as both Thoregg and the ambient light. Multipurpose plant, I guessed? But not worth thinking about right then and there anyway; trusting in my poison immunity, I began to nibble on the stick.

"Much more fitting to your highness than that idiot's beef patties, eh?" the reedy voice replied, a note of pure, concentrated disdain obvious.

It tasted like a particularly wet stick seasoned with raw asparagus, but I kept my opinion to myself; fighting back wasn't advisable with bullies. "It's okay," I muttered.

"...Okay?" the soft voice replied, suddenly irate. "That fungus is the savior and lifegiver of the derro, the gift of the deep fey to their truest children, and to you it's...okay!? Why I ought to go in there and-"

"No you won't," Thoregg said, a dark smirk on his face. "I'm the warden, I call what we do with the prisoners, and I say getting a rise out of Nurse Jingoist over here earns her serenity the chance to gnaw on her brain mold in peace. Isn't that right, nurse?"

"...That would be right, yes," the soft voice said, sullenly.

"Brain mold?"

"Ah, yes, the vulgar name," the reedy voice sniffed. "An appellation made by the willfully ignorant, those who fear its enlightenment and purification."

I spat it out. "It's a hallucinogen!?"

"And a nootropic, and an anti-aging drug, and an antagonist for short-term memory," the nurse's voice rattled off, automatically. "Not that you can experience any of that, sadly. Your...divine bloodline resists other paths of truth."

I debated throwing it back, but again, I didn't want to get Thoregg on her side if I pissed him off. I pretended to nibble at it a little more. "...Thanks," I muttered.

"Oh please. It's the least we can do for...your serenity." Thoregg's smirk broke into a smile, revealing discolored teeth. "After all, you're going to be...very...helpful to us. Very...soon."
My glower became a little more so. "Is that before or after the Protectorate feeds you to Behemoth? Kidnapping a Ward out of HQ is the kind of thing that provokes retaliation, you know."

"I'm quite sure your savants will do their best," the nurse said in an amused tone. "If they can find us first."

I smirked. "You do realize what these snakes do, right? So I know who and what you are already; I've been smelling you. And we already found the source of what you did to Browbeat."

"If your limbs are at all accurate, then you should also know we don't have to care," the reedy voice said. "The signal they're going to find is a repeater, nothing more."

My expression turned to shock. "W-what?"

"You should know well enough we're not stupid, queenie-to-be," Thoregg began. "Scientific genius translates to tactical one well enough."

"W-well, you can't hide forever!" I began, trying to get my lip quivering. "You...you'll never find it! And the capes are gonna find your boss, before....before...."

"It's our destiny, serenity," the nurse began, sounding more and more aggravated. "The sun we were promised, so will it be."

"And if your rejoinders are truly this poor, our inevitable dominance of the Overburn will be a favor to your kind as well," the reedy voice muttered

Okay, okay, next line. "But...they have to! My boyfriend's in there, the uh, Time Lord, he wouldn't leave me be."

"Oh, really?" Thoregg's smile grew a little wider. "The white-suited guy? What did we do to him, again?"

"Toxified cytillesh extract," the nurse mentioned. "Can't even be properly described as conscious right now."

"Oh...oh poor, sweet Wally!" I said, laying down on my bunk with a hand to my eyes. "Oh why did it have to be you, always the most mature and wise of us. All out hope lies in Bruce...Armsmaster now!"

"Well that's a shame." Thoregg chuckled. "Come along, maggots. We got some scalpels to sharpen."

And with that, he hoisted the cytillesh bag, and began to walk off, snickering all the while to my whimpering.

As soon as he was out of sight, the whimpering stopped.

So, this stick had an opiate element I could isolate easily enough. All I needed was the supplies.

Thank you, Wards Movie Night.

Truth is, my plans had an element of wishful thinking. I had no idea if Tybalt was still free, or if the derro had chased down his mist form and put him in a stopper/cage somewhere. Or, I realized with a lurch, hadn't just killed him.
Still didn't mean I couldn't work at getting myself free, at least. I concentrated back on the exact feelings I had towards my captors; another few tears of my acid came out and quickly joined its fellows at the corner of the cage. I hadn't done this except with cuffs in my training regiment before (stupid), but the principle was similar enough to creating a nice hole in the mesh.

Of course, hiding the hole until it was large enough for me to get out was...not something I could plan for. I didn't see anything that could really help the hole evade the guards’ attention, not anything that would be unnoticed. So, the only thing to do was to keep these bars attached as long as possible and hope nobody pushed on them.

It also helped squelch my thought process when my thoughts turned to what the derro were apparently planning.

Of course, when you're focused on two things at once, such as watching out for the guard and the activity you are keeping an eye out for the guard in the first place, one tends to not notice the thing on the ceiling.

"Ms. Taylor."

"...Guh." Well, there went my damsel in distress act, and acid-soluble bars-

"I have the key."

Oh. "Tybalt?"

"Yes."

I sighed in relief. "Thought you'd be in mist-mode."

"I ran out. Enough to get me here, though. Sneaky enough without it."

"Good, good. Okay, I can't reach through the bars, but I think you...can..."

Tybalt floated down into view.

With a complete lack of expression on his face.

And, I just realized, he had been speaking in a monotone.

"Don't open the circuit," he muttered before I had the chance. "I don't want to broadcast my emotions."

"O...Okay. I guess." I decided. "Er, could you-"

"On it," he muttered before putting the key ring around his tail in his mouth, shortly before turning it.

A loud clunk, and I was already opening the gate.

"...Okay, we need to find a weapon, especially a spell doll if these guys have any witches among them," I thought out loud. "Next, a cauldron or chemist's table and some cytillesh-that's the blue glowy stuff they eat-so I can make an antidote for the other Wards."

"Incendiaries, too," Tybalt murmured, almost off-hand.

"...Er, while I can appreciate that, I'd prefer to not set anything at all on fire around this place, we
I caught the implication. I slowly turned to my familiar. "...What did you see?"

"Enough."

That was not a monotone. That was a hiss.

Next stop on the plan; intelligence.

"Urrrgh..."

Slowly, the aftereffects of my spell wore off, and Thoregg gradually became aware of the impromptu bindings, namely the prison gown I had torn into an impromptu rope-his own clothes were a bit small for me, but they were serviceable enough to protect my vulnerable flesh.

"...Heh. So, wannabe erinyes hews to the stereotype. Brains and bondage." He gave one of those smirks of his. Honestly couldn't tell if he was just derision or actual bemusement on his part. In any case irritating.

"Yeah, don't care. Where are those other two, or were you chatting on some kind of intercom?"

"Snoozing right now. Leaving me in peace, thank gods," he spat. "Those two, in case princess ain't noticed, never shut up. Really shouldn't have honed my ghost sounds."

"Okay then, now tell me-where did you keep my friends?"

"Heh. Yeah, tell the escaping prisoner where her team is kept, truly only the greatest scientific mind would see a problem in that oh and while I'm thinking of OW!"

I jumped back. "Tybalt!"

"So, you would be the individual responsible for the centerpiece of the lab?" I...didn't think Tybalt's pupils could be that narrowly slitted.

"Hey, hey, I'm a chemist! You want Midris for surgery, not me!" Thoregg shouted through the shoulder pressed on his cheek, blood shining. "Shit, princess, where did you get this thing!?"

I quietly motioned at Tybalt to leave. To his credit, he did.

"Sorry. This is the first time..." I shook my head. "Never mind. Back to the first question. Where are the other Wards, and why did you take us?"

"The pints? Yeah, sorry, but there's nothing special. We just caught you in the net we threw out for that healer of yours."

The who? "We...don't have a healer."

The derro took his wounded forehead out of his arm, looking skeptical. "The other princess?"
Oh. "Panacea isn't a Ward. The only other girls we have are Vista and Shadow Stalker."

It took a second for Thoregg to catch on. "Knew our magister was an idiot," he muttered. "Okay, okay, I have a promise that I'm going to be stashed away safely, right?"

Well that was sudden. "..Yes?"

"Right, they're being held in the northeast quadrant, you probably can't read Undercommon so just note our maps fact the south since that's where the exit is."

"...And the lab? Cure for cytillesh opiate?"

"Northwest. We're lazy, so we don't like walking too far for experiments. And you want to counter hallucinations with people who haven't built a tolerance for the stuff."

A couple sin-scents. Nothing except for prisoner abuse there and something about ignoring suffering. No lies.

He smirked again. "Oh yeah, and if you see a male derro, 'bout half-a-meter taller than I am with a ridiculous headpiece that it's hard to believe he sees out of, please feed him that stupid hat for me, will you? I'm a man, I really don't tolerate being fried because of stupid mistakes. Or anyone else unfortunate enough to work for him"

I decided I didn't particularly like Thoregg as a person even when he wasn't leering at the prisoners. "A promise is a promise."

I really shouldn't have enjoyed kicking him in that smug face as much as I did, or tying the gag so tightly. But so it goes.

The more alarming issue was waiting outside. "The hell was that, Tybalt!?"

The cat looked up, eyes steely and cold. "I lost my temper. You would too."

"And that's reason to go bad cop/lunatic cop on his face? You're not like this," A Medusa hissed at him. "What's...gotten into..."

The sin-scent suddenly activated.

Wants to make sure these people never hurt anyone else, ever again.

"Tybalt, as your master, I am ordering to tell me what did you see?"

He glowered, crossing his forepaws. "You don't want to know."

The note of finality was clear.

"...Fine. The antidote, next."

I hoped the note of relenting was convincing enough.

I had kept the cytillesh stick, so the baseline and symbolic material to be negated was not the issue. What was the issue was getting everything else. Up to including a good cauldron, or at least a vial. Which meant the lab.
"There's a guard there," Tybalt muttered as I flattened myself into what I could only guess was the steam pipes, wincing as my wings popped and regenerated; it was way too small for them to fit through unbroken. "Carries a prematurely born infant around with him on his patrol, but in likelihood has a remote alarm with him."

"Thanks for the tip," I muttered, trying to worm through the tangle that I swore could not be safe. Or built in the few months the derro inhabited Earth, but then again there was such a thing as literal magic. "Guess that's what they wanted Amy for, if it's frequent. Genetic repairs."

"I suppose that would be the reason they were studying parahumans as well," my familiar grunted as he crouched under his own tangle, careful not to touch. "The variations in the er, corona pollentella is probably a gold mine for aberrant neurophysiology unto itself, not to mention any physical effects from certain power classifications."

Of course, that's why they decided to drag us in as well. Might as well get extra on-site test subjects while they were already abducting someone. Something I would do, if I ever decided to go mad wizard/scientist. Even the less physical problems could give them insight into the Shadow World and how it interacted with the mortal one. There was Clockblocker's time-stop, useful if you already had artificial time manipulation, Gallant's beams and how they might serve as pacification devices if harnessed, my sin-scent, and…

Hold on…

"Why did they take Win?" I wondered aloud. "And none of the more physical capes. Browbeat they already had data on, but Aegis and Stalker? Can't see why they didn't want to look into directly physical abilities if they're trying to fix their own biological problems."

"Win is a Tinker, these are researchers."

"Yes, but Tinker's usually need to be able to think clearly to make gadgets, and I doubt Win would actually make anything if he isn't dosed on drugs or otherwise...threat…"

Wait. They could remove masks.

Ahem.

"Still doesn't explain why they didn't take either of the more physical capes."

"Perhaps it was chance." Tybalt stretched, having negotiated his pipes. "Temporal manipulation is inexact at the best of times."

"Too precise mistake, if you ask me," I muttered, straightening a wing. "Almost as if-"

...Of course.

"Almost as if they were afraid of the two breaking out."

Tybalt looked back, obviously interested.

"I mean, it makes sense, right? Stalker can become a ghost on command, and Aegis probably would take gallons of cytillesh before he's out of it given that biology of his, plus his strength."

"And you?" Tybalt furrowed his brow. "Mistress, it's well-known you're a witch, and you have myself to assist you in any escapes. Why did they not capture me?"
"The fact you can turn intangible isn't so well-known. They probably thought you were a trick of the eye if you vanished suddenly, and it's quite possible they just didn't pick your existence up. They thought Vista was Panacea, after all."

I smirked. "Nor is the fact I can cry acid that public either."

"Ah."

Somehow, I managed to move the steam covering out of the way without it clattering to the ground in the least stealthy way possible. If only slipping out of it was in any way easy for someone who was apparently half my size, on average.

Tybalt, having wisely decided to go out before I did, poked his head around the door. "Lab's clear. Guard is not here yet." He squinted as I finally negotiated my wing tip, a Medusa hissing in protest as the rest of the wing smacked into it. "Appears his baby is here though. I'd still say keep out of sight, infants get loud when upset or scared, and I doubt even these...people put their children down for long."

"All right then." I shook myself a little, cooling off what I was sure were scalding temperatures to most people. "You be the one to scout it out, you know this place better than I do, and you're smaller. If something's too heavy but looks useful, tell me. I'll get it."

"Understood." And with that, the silvanshee took off, and committed to lookout.

Which also gave me time to figure out the next few steps. With the caveat that Tybalt needed to be watched closely in case he lost his temper again at a critical point.

So, the Wards. Vista and the bugbears had honed her abilities to vaguely Lovecraftian heights of twisted geometry. Would be obviously useful in getting out of these caverns. So she was a priority.

Next on useful capes would be Clockblocker, since he was a guaranteed knockout for any guards-

"Waa."

Thought train disrupted.

Sounded like the aforementioned baby. Curious as to why Tybalt thought they were abducting Panacea, I took a peek around the corner and-

How the hell was that thing still alive!??

Honestly, it wasn't the fact that I could see a significant portion of its (his? Her? I honestly wondered if this guy was born before it developed sexual dimorphism) internal anatomy that was so bad; it was the fact that, from first glance, I could see the blood flowing through what veins I could make out, dark and...bluish? Hard to tell.

I mean, I didn't know derro development, but that couldn't have been normal. Or the fact the baby looked completely unconcerned with its condition.

"Waaa."

Voice sounded normal, at least. Not a wheeze or whisper, as one would expect out of that thing.

Shrugging, I started back to my post-
"Waaaah!

That was an alert cry. Scared cry.

Instinctively, I looked back, conscious thought too slow to remind me this guy was a threat-

Huh. Oddly calm rat. Must not be too scared of the derro, though the infant was certainly scared of-

The rat spasmed and jerked. Almost like a puppet on strings.

Then slowly got up on its back paws before glancing over itself. Then clapping.

The hell?

Quickly, I focused on the idea of Master abilities being a sin, and let a Medusa taste the air.

*Uses body switch to experience pain and sensation without consequence.*

... The baby was a *parahuman*?

Well, not *parahuman*, certainly, but-what? Could this some kind of ability derro evolved naturally or was the kid some sort of experiment? Both?

Though, I guessed it was possible for an infant to trigger-especially one born in that condition-but that scent was something I would have expected from a toddler, at youngest.

Maybe the engorged head contained a more developed brain than those of homo sapiens.

...And maybe, I just realized, that was why the guard brought an infant child with him. That ability seemed like an extremely useful thing to disable someone instantly. Maybe even gain them as an extra body, if the baby was mature enough to understand the concept of helping daddy with his job. Kind of brilliant, actually. Had to remember that one in case the Wards ever got a Master.

Best be extra careful around him, I guess.

What my nerves were trying to convince me was several hours later, Tybalt came back, holding a distorted-looking spell doll in his tail. Kind of like one of those cheesy depictions of aliens that became popular around the 1980s, engorged head with big, black eyes.

"Looked mass produced. There's also a cauldron with an attached set of reagents to it, but it's far too large for me."

"Got it." Which meant the kid had to go to sleep for a while.

I quietly leaned back, where I winced at the latest game the infant had invented; banging rat head on a wall.

...Hang on, if the kid and rat were mind-switched, which one do I-

Wait, I had unlimited ammo with the curse of slumber, the limit was how many times I could put it on one person.

A couple minutes of quietly charging my evil eye via the quietest cackle I could manage later, both
rat and baby slumped over, peacefully snoring.

"This way," Tybalt muttered, apparently not bothering to ask why I knocked out a rodent. "The cauldron contains the reagents and measuring set contained in a detachable case on the bottom; you only need make sure the bottom doesn't come upon while you're running out."

"Okay, okay, just don't run fast."

_Trying to hide something in here._

It took me a second to realize the Medusas were still hissing.

Not very much to catch on to what was going on-

"Er...awkward question, but-"

"Ugh. Can't hide things from those snakes, can I?" Tybalt spun around, looking at me directly. "Look, mistress; I know you're worried about me, but I am honestly trying to protect-"

"Did _nothing_ of what happened over the last couple weeks make an impact!?" I quietly hissed. "Secrets never work!"

Shortly before calming down. I rubbed my forehead "Ugh, this place is setting me on edge. Sorry for snapping at you-"

"You're right, actually."

I jerked up.

The expression of deadly calm on Tybalt had evaporated, replaced by one of guilt. "I'm sorry, it's just that-there's nothing to be gained. It's not to keep you innocent, you've seen a bit too much for that pointless endeavor. It's more to control this rage, ignore the source of it."

He pointed his tail at a slightly ajar, stone-looking door painted with what appeared to be cytillesh as a makeshift emergency light. "But no point in hiding it from you, you deserve to know what we're up against. I warn you, however; nothing we have can take that memory."

I peeked in the door.

And immediately wished I hadn't.

_Sweet merciful fuck._

"I know them," I murmured, resting against a steam pipe. "I know them."

"From what I saw of your memories, those would be the surviving members of the parahuman drug runners, yes?" Tybalt sat over in a cooler spot. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry for what occurred. Even the average _kalite_ does not deserve...that."

"Their hearts were beating," I continued to murmur, still not fully registering. "I could see their hearts, and they were beating..."

I blinked, shaking my head. "I could have saved them. If I secured them properly, if I got them to the car before Chimaera came along, if I looked..."
I didn't have the monarch pin, but rubbing my fingers against each other seemed to work well enough to calm me down. "It's just...why *would* they?"

"I'm a hobbyist at the natural philosophy of biology, so I don't claim to know," Tybalt replied, shrugging. "But it does resemble a demented idea of a functioning cross section of biology, for the sake of examinations and experiment."

"But why were they *separate*...?"

I will admit, I had smelled some terrible things as the friendly neighborhood CSI aide. One serial killer, who was actually not the most disturbing sin-scent I had picked up, as his motives were rage and not sadism or sexual dominance. *But this?* This was the first time I had actually *seen* such horrible things rather than sniff the residue.

And the thing about residue was that I could cut off the info before I actually got into the nitty-gritty of something horrible. It wasn't too hard to clamp the Medusas' mouths shut even without the helmet.

Not here. Here is where I couldn't help but not only look at that room, but smell it.

Among many other scents, all of them detached and almost without sadism, there was not a hint of actual murder, despite everything

How could people-any people, alien or otherwise-be so cold?

If what I heard about Bonesaw was right, at least she didn't seem to really understand the concept of right and wrong. *This?* This was simple callousness, the desire to see the ultimate vivisection and study it over time.

And they planned *that* for us, I was sure of it.

Holy shit…

Slowly, I felt my wits return to me. First thought was slight recrimination I exposed the *chemicals* in the reagents to *heat*, but that couldn't be helped. Besides potions didn't really depend on precise science to be made the way you wanted them. Just internal magic logic.

The next thought was wondering what the hell I was doing here.

These people were *dangerous*. Not perhaps on the level of the aforementioned Slaughterhouse 9, but a significant portion of people in the Birdcage weren't. Dangerous, entrenched, and psychotic. I, on other hand, was a Ward for not even six months, without her weapons and small, ungainly armor.

For the first time, I began to think about escape, to help the Protectorate get here with a lot more resources and reinforcements. Probably was the smarter option, less lethal for all of us.

...Except that would take longer.

And I doubted Thoregg was the only guard. They'd notice, and then possibly decide to evacuate. Once that happened, who would be both soulless and in their right mind to take useless hostages with them?

Slowly, I started to weave through the steam pipes again, careful to not damage the reagents. My friends came first.
Apparently, I was the lucky one. As in, I suspected whatever mechanism of the Azrai neurons caused me to completely ignore the dangerous effects of toxins was the only reason I wasn't in the sorry state Vista was in.

"Spinn-ing...spinn-ing…"

What did they do to her?

"Not just a toxin," I thought, aloud. quietly brewing the new potion I would need in a row of unused cells. "First subject for experiments."

"Thought Ms. Vista was lying when she said she couldn't heal them, or she got caught trying to escape," Tybalt guessed. "Curative?"

"Way ahead of you."

The time to brew wasn't actually that long; around fifteen minutes, if I remembered the time used with packaged and pre-prepped ingredients from Cordy's lessons. Felt like it took three times as long, and might even have, given how I was constantly checking for guards, despite Tybalt's sentry duties.

Eventually though, the distinctive red began to float to the surface. Quickly spooning it into a vial, I stamped out the scrap fire, and began to sneak back to Vista's cell.

"All hail...all hail Mr Squid…clever Mr. Squid..."

"Missy?"

Thankfully, whatever the derro were doing didn't seem to have completely divorced her from reality. My teammate jolted upwards, blearily.

"T...Taylor? Your face is...weird…"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I muttered, sizzling through the cage. "Something in the food."

"Cytillesh...right?"

"Yeah, that. Hallucinogen, nothing you see is real. Everything's going to be okay..."

"You gotta get out...this chair…"

"Ssh, ssh, it's okay. It's going to be all right, just as soon as I...there."

And with that, I bent the bars out of the way. Before long, I was trying to knead the dual dose of anti-cytillesh and curative down her throat.

Slowly, a more healthy pall came back to Vista's skin, and her eyes refocused, turning awake and alert.

Then she tackled me.

I was almost too shocked to register the quiet, scared whimpering of my teammate.

And in that moment, I understood perfectly what had set off my familiar.
I returned the hug, just as strongly, while Tybalt attempted to worm in and help.

Slowly, the shuddering stopped, and Vista looked up, with glistening eyes.

"Talk about it later?"

She nodded.

"Good. We just need to find the other Wards, and then we'll get out of here. Okay?"

"Kay."

"Great."

And hopefully, I thought, we could kill a few of these bastards on the way out.

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap this took a long time to get out.

Both because of college, and the subject matter. Handling being prisoners tastefully is hard.
Aspirant 3.8

Chapter Summary

Behold the curse of long chapters; delivering on buildup created over who-knows-how-long-it-takes-me-to-write!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I was right, as it turned out. Vista essentially put the rest of the escape on easy mode once she calmed down. No more steam pipes, thank all that is holy and just in the world.

Next on the agenda was Clockblocker.

"Add...ie?"

He, thankfully, just seemed drugged. The redhead attempted to laugh as the antidote did its work, his attention coming back to the real world.

"Heh...all hail Nurse Taylor...valedictorian at the Ratched University of Patient Comfort...ow, my head..."

"Sorry," I muttered. "You spasmed."

"Yeah...glad to see you and Vista escaped though. I think I'm allergic to this rag." My teammate chuckled before groaning and clutching his head.

"You'll have to endure hives for a little while yet. The armory hasn't been a priority of mine yet, and this junk I'm wearing is the closest thing I have to protection right now-"

"Though not modesty-"

"And we don't know where our stuff is being held, if it hasn't been destroyed." I sniffed. "Good to see you're still fine, Dennis."

"Hey, what can I say. I'm the plucky comic relief, I make jokes so the kids...at home...What's wrong with Vista?"

Of course, calm was not okay. My other teammate...was still staring. A broken soldier's stare.

I looked down. "She...was not fine. She was the first in the docket for...experiments."

"Oh." Clockblocker blinked. "Oh."

"I know." I sighed "Tybalt, can you handle this?"

The silvanshee inhaled. "As much as it pains me to admit it, ...we don't have time to comfort her. It is miraculous our escape hasn't been noticed yet, and rescue of the Wards is a higher priority at the moment. We have to keep moving."
Even *watching* Clockblocker listen to that was painful. A worried scowl formed on his face the moment I stepped back for Tybalt, and had only deepened as the cat sith finished his explanation.

"...Aye," Dennis said, tone quiet.

I let go of a breath I just realized I had been holding. "For what it's worth...I'm sorry."

Gallant and Kid Win were more of the same. Relief, then noticing Vista's state, then shock, then grudging acceptance of time constraints.

Of course, it was on the way to Win that we discovered something else about the derro; pets.

"What the hell is that thing?"

Some kind of alien belonging to aliens, I did not respond. But still, this was perhaps the strangest looking extraterrestrial I had seen yet.

It looked almost like a person-sized hybrid of insect, armadillo, and lizard with what appeared to be a hairless pug head with mandibles as well as a mouth. Two great antennae covered in feather-like material flicked around, warily, as two deep yellow eyes scanned the area.

"Guard dog?" Gallant whispered. "Escaped experiment?"

"Dunno. Doesn't appear to hear very well," I whispered back. "Looks alert about something. Hope he's not hungry."

"Not an issue."

The fact that Tybalt wasn't whispering immediately got my attention.

"Er-"

"Unless I'm mistaken, we aren't wearing ferrous metals, correct?"

I blinked. "Um, no-"

"Then we have absolutely nothing to fear." The silvanshee shrugged. "That's a rust monster, an eater of metals though...rapid oxidation, obviously. Our hosts must have brought it along for disabling modern weapons; guns can't help if someone's been ambushed by them or the local weapon store was raided by them. Since we have nothing and are not threats, we are currently regarded as irrelevant."

I and everyone else relaxed. Not the most effective deterrent, but good for close quarters and ruining logistics (and Tinkertech), at least. "Not hostile?"

" Barely even aggressive. The real problem is that they don't understand the concept of the fact that an owner may have things they do not wish a pet rust monster to eat. To own them, you need a muzzle that prevents them from rusting your own items." He squinted. "Which this one doesn't have."

My respect for the derro lowered a little.

The alien looked around a bit, making an odd trilling sound. Eventually, it lowered its antenna, raising the trilling sound a tad before walking off, a strange structure on the end of its tail flickering with more "feathers".
Shortly before another, this one a slightly darker shade of brown, trotted behind it. Mate, I guessed. I idly wondered if the two had slipped the leash, and if they would find their way out.

In a modern city.

With modern tech.

From the expression of my familiar, he was wondering the same thing.

"...How quickly do they breed?" Clockblocker asked.

"Once a year, three pups to a litter on average. But if they have a chance, they gorge and can go into estrus early."

Without another word, I darted out, quickly charging a slumber hex.

The darker rust monster didn't know what hit it. The lighter one wheeled around, growling, but a couple of blasts from Gallant confused it enough for me to launch another hex at it. It didn't work this time (not long enough of a charge, I guessed), but Clockblocker was excellent backup.

"Okay. So, now that Armsmaster's worst nightmare is incapacitated...what do we do with them?"

"Rust monsters won't abandon their mates if they have a choice," Tybalt muttered, flying over. "If we tie this dam, the other will stay mostly put, only venturing out for metals to feed her until she's free."

I picked up a stray rock. "Or healed?"

He caught on. "NO! No. If you just knot their antennae, they're so disoriented that they think they're badly sick and won't move until their fans shed enough to unknot."

Oh. Feeling somewhat relieved, I put the rock down. Still didn't stop the rather strange looks.

"...I was just going to hurt her paw. Nothing serious, just painful."

"Riiitggghht..." Clockblocker muttered, reaching for the antennae.

I winced. "Sorry. I was just trying to be practical."

After that little escapade, freeing Kid Win didn't seem all that notable. Again, Missy Mode was easy mode.

Next on the agenda; equipment. Win needed to be more than an escort, and everyone needed proper armor.

"Okay, so the armory's likely the most heavily guarded place on principle, and very definitely the most guarded place if they've finally noticed we're gone," I pontificated as I pointed to the map. "And of course, I don't think anybody here can read this, so there's no guarantee that the red area is in fact, the armory. Could be the control center, for all I know of derro color symbolism."

"So...you want me to...?"

That didn't mean that Vista wasn't the object of some attempts to help. I didn't think Gallant had moved more than three inches away from her during the entire run to the map posting, and now
that we were in a spaced out circle, he was actively hovering behind her, as if waiting to pounce with a hug at the first sign of timidity.

"Hey, if you don't want to-"

Speaking of.

"No...no, I'm okay. I'm stronger than that."

Vista drew a shuddering breath, steeling herself.

Then looked up, determined and resolute.

"I'm stronger than them."

I really hoped that wasn't a bad sign for her future mental health.

"Thank you, and yes I do."

She nodded grimly as I explained my plan, to all members involved. Dean and I would be the vanguard, then Clockblocker would come in to mop up the guards we hadn't gotten yet. Then Vista would let Win through when it was safe.

Everyone nodded their assent.

"Let's do this."

"Well that was...anticlimactic. Good news, but honestly, they left the armory unguarded? Come on."

I had to agree with Clockblocker there. Some bloodthirsty part of me was even slightly disappointed there wasn't someone to unsheath our power at. Slightly.

I suppose there could have been a hidden camera and silent alarm but from Win's inspection, it didn't even look like there were any good places to hide cameras. And really, what would be the point of a silent alarm in here, the center of the base?

I was beginning to suspect the successful capture operation was kind of a fluke. Charitably, they could be critically understaffed given the stealthy nature of their operations, but that didn't excuse lack of camera coverage.

After a rather awkward silence, Tybalt coughed. "So...to our armaments, then?"

"They took apart my skateboard? Oh, fuck you derro!"

"Shush, Chris," I hissed automatically. "Don't want to waste this opportunity."

"I know, it's just-they're space travelers. They have artificial gravity manipulation." Win growled a bit as he examined the hollow frame. "I didn't see the Falconer's Lament spinning, or having been built for spinning."

"You're a Tinker," I replied absentmindedly, fishing out my spear from my own locker. "You probably intuitively get stuff decades ahead of their projects. Worth at least examination."
"But why is the hoverboard gone? There's likely something just as interesting in the armory of laser guns...and more to take apart..."

"Hey, if we're playing misery poker, I counter that with the fact they apparently burned my underwear," Clockblocker muttered back. "This is going to chafe."

I had to chuckle a little at that, more minor hysterics than anything. Some part of me had been convinced the derro were about to walk out of the thin air with rust monsters in tow, and thanks to the way my mind worked, they did. Several times, in fact. At this point, I had just stopped visibly readying myself, I didn't want to be written off when the attackers lost the second word of menacing shadows.

A brief click, and my wing guard slid into place. I groaned in relief; the others were all getting their own costumes at the time, and as it turned out, putting armor on when you were jumping at shadows was pretty damned tough. A quick check in the skort, and yep, monarch pin was never removed. Great, great.

Now to help everyone else.

____________________

Of course, I did not expect was our next peril to be so...mundane.

"I swear, derro must not live in three dimensions normally. Who makes stairs that don't lead to upper levels? Or hallways with dead ends?"

"Ugh," I muttered, stepping back from what appeared to be a garbage shoot. "Win, does one of those lasers mark stone in any way?"

He nodded. "Yep. I'll try to keep them small...assuming there's any patrols in this place." His brow furrowed. "I mean it's all...copacetic, I think you call it...for us, but honestly, it's getting kinda creepy."

"Wish it happened a bit earlier," Vista muttered ruefully.

I could feel the wincing. Tybalt coughed awkwardly. "It could be that there was a crisis somewhere else, and all hands are attending to it."

"And yet one was still down here," I replied, rubbing my head. "Thoregg said he hated the boss, but I don't think-"

"Did you hear that?"

Oh shit. I reached for the spear-

"No, not patrols, just..." Tybalt's perked ear twitched. "Kind of a booming sound?"

Gallant's head had tilted a bit too. "Yeah...now that I think of it, there's kind of a rumbling too-"

The ground shook. A distorted echo like a very out of tune gong reverberated throughout the area. A moment of utter silence, like the verbal equivalent of deer in headlights.

Tybalt's ears twitched again. "Now...voices. Male...I think it's Dauntless!"

If I wasn't so busy collapsing with relief, I'm pretty sure I would have celebrated a little. You could feel the tension break a little.
"Whelp, there's your crisis," Clockblocker said, shrugging. "Let's see if we can't make it a little more aggravated. Lead the way."

Rounding the final alcove before the battle sounds, I had to suppress a whistle of amazement.

If it wasn't for the context, it might well have been a cave-in.

The formerly neat and tidy walls had completely fallen apart, the broken pieces of glowing blue shining haphazardly in all directions. A cloud of dust and the same blue swirled in the air. More importantly, both provided incredible cover, a natural bunker to hide in and observe the fight from.

Internally, I remembered how I thought the blue was likely cytillesh. Had to note the hallucinogenic qualities to our bosses.

Speaking of vague, flickering shapes, the derro's stealth cloaks apparently were not good with actual combat. Something Armsmaster was relishing, if I made the shapes out well enough.

The Brockton Bay Protectorate was out in full force, and by the looks of it might actually have been having fun. Those syringe-tipped spears of our captors flew in every direction, shattering on the ground to reveal what looked like liquid cytillesh and other poisons. Sparks from electrified gloves flashed and struck the larger, more solid outlines of Protectorate members, but it might have been special effects for all they cared.

As some of the shapes came out of the dust cloud, just how outmatched the derro were became increasingly obvious. Assault, on the occasions he stood still long enough to see fully, was easily turning the derro advance into what looked like an organic game of dominos, spears being regularly turned on the blue-skinned alien behind the actual attacker. From Battery's and Dauntless' appearance, someone had gotten the memo Tybalt told me he left about the derros' taser gloves; my guess was that the leathery suits of body armor all had were shock-proof. The three or so derro with camera-like devices I assumed were ray guns of some sort or another were quickly sniped by an unseen Miss Militia.

Quite simply, the only thing on the derros' side was relative numbers, about four to a Protectorate member on average. "To a Protectorate member" being the operative clause; the PRT had shown up in full force too, and by the looks of it hadn't even really dipped into their lethal weapons from all the foam around. Taking them alive for interrogation, I did not need to guess.

Didn't mean we couldn't even the odds even further. As Clockblocker finished his own assessment and retreated back to the undamaged hall, I nodded at the Wards. "Vista? Gallant? Win?"

"Ready."

"On it."

"All ears."

"Okay. The rest of us...I don't think we're in the right shape for melee, so..." I shrugged. "That includes you, Tybalt."

Both non-ranged members nodded.

"Okay. Win, you and me snipe the ones at the edge, don't risk our bosses due to bad aim. Even so, keep it nonlethal, in case we still hit someone we weren't aiming at. Gallant, you tire out the derro, Vista, you help make sure we shoot straight, I don't want to push your powers just yet."
"I can manage-"

"I'm not saying you're not capable, I'm saying you're tired out from, well, everything today. With the trouble you have with living beings, I really don't want you to tax yourself after...certain events," I finished, lamely.

The quiet glare told me all I needed to know about what Vista thought of my pity.

Thankfully, Gallant was a lot better at this. "You don't have to prove anything, Missy. The fact you're standing here now, chomping at the bit, proves that you weren't hurt at all (white lie)."

Trying to hide my wince, I rechecked the Medusa ports. Thankfully, Vista didn't seem to notice. "I...understand," she muttered, still looking frustrated.

"Copacetic. Now then," I said, creeping over to a good cover spot, followed quickly by the other three Wards. "One...two..."

Space began to twist.

The last of the derro fell over, an odd combination of events having led her to be simultaneously laser-burned and asleep at the same time.

Miss Militia glanced back, a look of absolute relief and joy coming over her face. I think I saw her tear up a little. "Thanks," she muttered, and I don't think even she was sure whether it was for our safety or our help.

Armsmaster came up behind her, helmeted gaze scanning the room. "Are Clockblocker and Tybalt with you?"

"Both present," Tybalt said as he levitated out of the alcove, followed closely by Clockblocker.

Armsmaster let out a breath. "First, thank you for the support fire, though you should warn us next time. Did you encounter anyone when escaping?"

"Just one guard, Thoregg, and possibly the two he was talking to on that intercom," I rattled off.

"Also, there would be a mated pair of rust monsters," Tybalt continued. "I would advise your Tinkers stay to the back in the lower level to avoid ruining their equipment."

"Rust monsters?"

"Long story," Clockblocker replied, shrugging. "Suffice to say, they're big bugs that could cause the end of society as we know it if they escape. Unless you want Armsmaster or Dauntless to be angry for the rest of the year, I'd advise to keep away from them until they're in, I dunno, stone jail. Currently they aren't sure which direction is down, but I'd still foam them to be really safe."

Miss Militia stepped up. "Understood. Assault, Battery, Velocity? Did you catch that?"

"Affirmative."

"Loud and clear."

"Giant bugs are worse than in Starship Troopers, got it."

"Okay. Armsmaster?"
He nodded. "Dauntless, you and I stay back until we get the go-ahead."

"Will do."

Miss Militia turned to face us again. "And you…" She smiled, more in relief than anything. "You've been exemplary. You all have. I'm proud."

And with that, the anti-rust monster squadron departed as the PRT began it's standard rescue procedure. Felt interesting, being on the receiving end.

After the towel was draped around me, a content-looking Armsmaster (must have been really happy to see us okay, if he didn't mind being the rear guard) walked up. "Adrasteia, do you feel ready for a debrief or do you and the other Wards need medical attention?"

I looked up. "We're fine. The sooner, the better."

"Okay, firstly, I caught what you said about Vista. Did they try any experiments on you?"

"No, thank shadow."

Goblins were apparently rubbing off despite my best efforts. Armsmaster was silent for a beat, but didn't pursue the question in the five-minute interview.

By the end though, what little I could see of his face was scrunched in confusion. "Pardon my discretion?"

"Mm-hm?"

"It appears to me that what you saw of the…derro makes them out to be…idiots."

"I concur with that statement."

My wings tensed. That wasn't Tybalt.

Armsmaster's hand shot to his Halberd. "Hostile contact! Identify yourself!"

The silky, soft voice laughed, a loud, clipped chitter like its source was deliberately enunciating every individual syllable in it.

"Identity? A redundant atavism of the imperfect form. I can alter any degree of self to any particular whim of mine, so the question of 'who am I' becomes irrelevant, even before one gets into the nuances of my nature."

Already I didn't like this guy. I reached for my spear as the PRT agents quietly reached for their own weapons.

Dauntless' arc lance buzzed as he looked around. "If you're done taunting us, you could tell us your name."

"Ahem. My manners. Forgive me, I forget them on occasion when I feel the need to correct someone. As for my name…I have several, in fact. But perhaps it is better to show you."

The air close to the center of the ceiling rippled and split.

I don't think anyone could have expected what was up there. A mass of tentacles, bone-white and black-tipped, attached a humanoid to the top of the cavern. A forest of smaller, insectoid limbs
gripped a derro wearing a strange, ornamental helmet to the humanoid's chest, blank eyes scanning wildly in terror. More human limbs, an almost obscenely normal skin tone on each (one pink, one caramel) gripped a large, black rifle that looked almost grown rather than built.

Absolutely nobody would have guessed I would have recognized the humanoid.

"Thoregg?"

"Ah yes, that is a recent alias of mine," the 'derro guard' sniffed, cataracted eyes developing a shade of brown that resembled my own even as he spoke. "But that was something I gave myself a few hours ago. As your teammate called me 'Mr. Squid' a while ago as well. But that is neither here nor there."

Silently, he made a gesture at the doorway the other Protectorate members had gone through. A thin shimmer rippled over it.

"Myself, I just wish to thank you for both proving the theory I had about defeating Ms. Hebert's abilities, and for your participation in last-minute employee evaluation combined with prototype testing."

With that, he unceremoniously released the derro he was holding. As the alien fell, the being I knew as Thoregg fired a blinding white shot directly into his former hostage's back.

The hostage stopped in mid-air. The apparent shapeshifter held the gun to his face, a microphone ejecting from a compartment on its arm rest.

"If you survive and they retreat, you are forgiven, and I allow your brain-rotted race to remain my advance guard. If not...well, the rest of me will know, won't I?"

With that, the shapeshifter's form glowed purple, and vanished.

And then the derro twisted.

Where there had once been a short, pale humanoid, there was something that looked like it had come out of a murophobe's nightmares.

I counted at least three tails on that thing, all shivering pale flesh that squirmed like headless snakes. They, at least, looked normal, if giant. Everything else, though... everything else was deformed or cancerous in some way. Twitching ears swelled with tumors that pulsed with sickly light, patches of reddish-green pus separating white, thin fur, eyes bloodshot and black. All mixed together and jumbled, with redundant features jutting out at odd corners. It was like the idea of a diseased rodent designed by a shoggoth who had never seen Earth life and had only a vague description of what a rodent looked like.

In a small mercy though, it hardly resembled the original derro at all. I would only have trouble sleeping for the rest of the week, should I survive.

Thankfully, the mutant wasn't that fast; the seven legs were not all facing the ground perfectly, giving it an uneven, lopsided, and awkward gait. Unfortunately, what it did have was strength and mobility; the diseased sections were dissolving the foam, and once the derro-rat had loosened enough, it tore its way free. I had already tried to knock it out, but apparently whatever the shapeshifter had done to it gave it a much stronger will or the inability to sleep. Whatever else the gun did had apparently rendered it immune to pain; the jolts of electricity from Dauntless or Armsmaster hacking away weren't even visibly acknowledged.
"Any idea on how to stop this thing? Or at least calm him?" Gallant yelled over the exploding canisters. "Cause I'm having a hard time with that!"

"Trying!" Clockblocker shouted back, trying to weave through the agents at the moving mutant. "Vista!"

"I will, as soon as it holds still!" Adding to the surreal nature was the constant twisting distances of her weaker warps. Too many people, too much mutant, too weakened.

I had other spells, but surprise, surprise, they ran out pretty quickly. All I had was a bit of darkness, and somehow I didn't think that would help in a full-scale battle.

What I did have, however, was a flying cat with the ability to deliver some taser-like cantrips.

"Tybalt! Again!"

Another fly-by swipe, another touch of fatigue and the derro-rat slowed down again, a little more of a gain on it for Clockblocker. Just a few more times, maybe even the field blocking the rest of the Protectorate from coming out would dissolve if I kept it up-

The mutant crouched, exposing its buboes and infected tissues-

Pus.

A tide of slippery, disgusting, flesh-dissolving pus.

Not much flesh dissolved before the excreted tide of detritus lost its potency, but fuck, that hurt.

As my vision cleared, I saw exactly what the derro-rat had hoped to accomplish; a reflexively time-frozen Clockblocker. And an unconscious and bleeding Gallant.

"Shit, shit, shit!" I flew over to my teammate, discovering that perhaps darkness wasn't completely useless. Lifting him up over my shoulder and hiding in my dark zone, I whistled at Vista and my two bosses. "Gallant's down, I have to take him now!"

Armsmaster's head jerked over from the outcropping he had washed to. " Damn. Knew you should have been evacuated-Thoregg told us he would forgive this derro if we retreated, right?"

I caught on. "Wait, are you saying we're leaving-"

"I checked that field already, it stops egress from either way. Doesn't stop radio though, they know and are okay with the idea," Dauntless cut in. "Besides, I think I know why that mutant thing wasn't really responding to pain."

He pointed at the uncurling derro-rat, already with its buboes refreshing…

And the blood drawn clotting extremely fast. Parahumanly fast.

"Oh come on."

"I'm calling in a larger force, one equipped for Blaster threats" Armsmaster continued. "This 'prototype' only needs to be tracked if it follows us, perhaps treated by Panacea later. Evacuate at once."

"Sir, yes sir," I replied, motioning for Vista to help carry my incapacitated teammates out. "Tybalt, if we need to slow that thing down, open the emotion channel."
A weak hack. "As...you wish, Miss."

I took a second glance. And suddenly remembered why I was cautious about both of our spells. I honestly was worried he wouldn't have lived if this was how he looked after that first aid of his.

"Redact that order, you escape first. Boss, is Panacea outside?"

"Affirmative."

"Good. You get to her ahead of us, you need it more."

Tybalt nodded, wincing before flying ahead.

"Okay."

"PRT, cover fire!"

In truth, actually escaping from the derro-rat wasn't all that hard. Seemed that Armsmaster was right about it just wanting us to leave, apart from roaring at us, it didn't pursue through the blasted passage.

Didn't feel like we won though. I think that thought was going through everyone's heads, given how quiet things became as we lost sight of the monster.

I felt...disappointed actually. Dammit, you were supposed to feel a sense of accomplishment when breaking out of jail. Not a sense of feeling used, combined with realizing you didn't know the first thing about the person who used you.

At least nobody got killed, by the headcount. Knowing that made this just a bittersweet moment, rather than a glum one.

___________________________________________________________________________

The sunlight did a lot to cheer me up though. As did New Wave

"Oh my God we were so worried did they hurt you oh my god I'm so glad you're safe-"

"Too tight."

Victoria managed to pause long enough to loosen, actually allowing me to notice her sister mending Gallant.

Stalker was present as well, presumably as backup in case anything went wrong (or at least that was the smart plan). She was also the first to spoil this reunion with the obvious. "Where's the other capes?"

"Currently hiding in a sealed cavern, waiting for reinforcements" Tybalt replied, flatly. "The aberration that burned us is guarding the passage, along with a force wall."

Victoria stopped. "What!? ...I did not need that right now."

"Told them I should have come," Stalker muttered, already hoisting her crossbow.

"I respect your enthusiasm, Miss, but honestly, there's little you can do to help," Tybalt peeled himself up from Panacea's stretcher. "It regenerates, and I doubt if it isn't immune to most of your arsenal. Hence the reinforcements."
Victoria detached, from her embrace. "...So we're just supposed to wait!"

"Welcome to soldiering, Miss Dallon," Tybalt said, exhaustion obvious. "On occasion, you do everything right, and even then fate sees fit to spoil a victory. Or in our case," he said as a bitter expression came to it, "A hidden adversary and his...prototype."

Victoria growled. "And we're leaving heroes down there with the prototype."

"We aren't," he shot back, sounding more aggrieved. "We're calling reinforcements who are equipped to handle a pseudonatural victim of betrayal."

Stalker stopped in her tracks, phasing back into her normal form. "...Victim? Wait, are you saying-"

"Yes, victim," he replied, exasperation obvious even with a sealed channel. "Apparently the guard who assisted us..."

Not wanting to listen to the forming argument, I flew over to Gallant, still unconscious but healed, Amy having gone over to other, less injured patients. Clockblocker was still frozen on a bed.

The person I really wanted to talk to was currently watching over both. "Returning for duty, demi-boss," I began, trying desperately to convince myself there was an upside to all of this in black comedy.

"Armsmaster told me about what happened." Aegis sighed, leaning back. "Everything's gone wrong, again. God just hates the PRT and all associated today, and yesterday."

"I can only imagine," I replied, sitting down. "At least you weren't a pawn for the actual villain."

"Hey, that wasn't your fault, you-"

"I knew my Medusas could be fooled," I interrupted. No point in consolation I didn't deserve. "Remember how I warned you about how that baatezu ambassador had that cologne?"

"Yes, but-"

"Why didn't I figure out that other aliens could disguise their scents." I sighed, looking down. "I mean, I really don't scent baatezu that much either; Yamada says that's probably because of years of 'cultural conditioning to view soldiers as doing the dirty work nobody else has to', and 'identification with their aggressive viewpoint'," I recited from memory. "Could be whatever Thoregg actually is, he's a soldier too, and I didn't smell him because he does awful things...and I respect him for doing awful things."

Now I felt like banging my head against the wall. "I mean, what kind of use are these things, if I can't tell lies! That's, I dunno, my entire role on the team! While I'm on it, what does that say about me? You know what my first idea for dealing with-"

My rant was cut off by a sudden hand on my shoulder. "Taylor. Please look at me."

I ignored him.

"As Wards team leader, I am ordering you to look at me."

Haltingly, I turned around, facing Carlos directly, eyes quite deliberately showing no signs of accusation.

"Let out your Medusas."
I caught on. "You know, that's not going to work if you're at all-

"I'm not. Let them out."

Grunting, I let the snakes finally breathe a little, sensations of finally escaping from the sweat under my helmet shuddering through me as well.

"You. Did. Great. You were an awesome leader, and I would have done the exact same thing, if not worse, in your situation. You saved the Wards, helped stop an alien infiltration and some of the most monstrous people to ever walk in Brockton Bay, and as a team leader, I can say I am proud of you. What happened was nobody's fault except Thoregg's, so as a friend, I am asking you to stop blaming yourself."

Not a single scent.

There was a moment where my body froze to truly process this.

Wordlessly, I gave my leader a small embrace. "...Thanks."

"Ahem."

That had to be what, twice a good moment for me was interrupted by an unseen figure today. "What?"

"I hate being rude, but once this morale exercise is done, I have a memo for Adrasteia."

I faced the PRT man. "Can this wait? It's kind of a bad time-

The almost boxy, short man cleared his throat again, louder. "The bureaucracy demanded this would be sent you, on as short a notice as possible. I cannot leave until I have performed my designated function."

I facepalmed. "Fine, fine, just put it on my hand."

"As you wish," he said, removing a page from his pad. "Have a productive day."

With that, he handed the note over, walking off extremely stiffly.

Weird. And irritating. After a quick glance at an equally confused Aegis, I read the note.

*Allow this to be a token of respect to your young domain, sister. You need no longer fear derro.*

-M

_P.S. At the earliest opportunity, please ask the younger Mistress Dallon to take you to Garril. You will find his advice to be most enlightening. He will not greet others apart from you, your familiar, goblins, or Mistress Dallon, however, so do not take anyone else._

The _hell?_

"Aegis, do you see-"

"Yeah...I think." He squinted, leaning further. "But I don't-

"Miss Militia!?" Aegis and I tackled each other reaching for the radio, which was picked up by its owner, having dashed over from a different stretcher and ambulance.

"Speaking!"

I heard Assault come over the radio too, humming. "Um...sir, you know the giant freakish rat thing from Innsmouth?"

"Has it broken through the barrier, I will dive back in if-"

"No, it's that it was very loud, than very quiet for a second, and...well, I'll let Mind Gun Lady explain better than I ever could."

"We checked," Miss Militia began, disbelief evident in her voice. "It's dead."

Chapter End Notes

Ain't I a stinker.

Seriously though, you know how writing a story results in an entirely different one from the outline? I did not know I was going to have that ending when I started this.
Aspirant 3.9

Chapter Notes

Warning; This is going to be the last true chapter, plus probably the interlude, you’re going to see for a little while. I need something else to occupy my mind other than this monster as the long time I took to write shows, so I’m going to start another fic. Any interested betas should PM me, I’ll explain what I’m looking for. I’ll put the subject matter on the Author’s Note at the bottom of this chapter, since I’m going to include my reasoning for it (and yes, this is a blatant attempt to make you read the whole thing, links below this be damned).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No sign of anything?”

“No even a fingerprint.” The forensic investigator glared at the bagged note, as if intimidating it would force it to reveal unseen clues. “All I can tell you is that whoever made this has bad handwriting, but it could just be the unsub was in a hurry and didn’t bother with finesse. Graphology isn’t a police tool for various reasons, and even if it was, our guy used print for everything except the signature. We havebupkis.”

“Damn.” Officer Bennett groaned, dragging his hand across his face before turning back to me. “Sorry, but we lowly mortal detectives are just as stumped at the note as you are. We’re looking for the messenger and examining the crime scene, but given how our Inspector wannabe made an already unknown spaceman’s anatomy even more weird, plus how the former guy was able to sneak into a PRT zone and find a single person in the middle of a bunch of ambulances? Don’t count on anything.”

Huh, Nex had a fan club. I had to tell the doppleganger that when I saw him next. “Worth a shot. Thing’s nearly scentless to me.”

“Nearly?”

“I mean I can scent the obvious manipulative ploy here, but there’s not much more than the harmless static I get when someone’s preparing to ask a question.” I leaned back against a wall, sighing. “Apparently either I or the Medusas think of killing a monster that threatened the capes and expecting some amount of thanks for it is not a sin. Certainly not enough of one to start visualizing what happened.”

“And this is why witnesses are not nearly as good evidence as people think,” the CSI cut in. “We all have our biases, such as positively interpreting the motives of people who save your ass.”

I had to chuckle a little at that. Bennett just shrugged.

“I’d say they’re probably be a break in the case, but what’s the use?” He looked meaningfully at a Medusa. “Honestly, the only way we’re catching this guy at the moment is if we catch him doing something else and he decides to speak up.”
“And that’s where we come in.”

I jerked around.

In the doorway, looking as serious as possible, were two barbazus flanking a male erinyes, dressed in a medal-embossed uniform. The largest honor, a shield with the silhouette of a fortress on it, was displayed prominently over his heart.

“I’m Andel Krais. Officer of the Hunt, Second Class. You are aware of the recent treaty between the Expedition and the United States regarding the enforcement of interplanar crimes, correct?”

“Yes, it was all on the news, but-”

“I am here to inform you that treaty has been invoked.”

One of the barbazus loped up, swiping the bagged note directly from the CSI’s table.

The other officer’s eyes widened. “Hey, that’s police-!”

“You will be allowed full access to any unclassified information and that which is kept private to the police,” Krais began, apparently reciting it from memory. “Any inquiries or complaints will be addressed if formerly lodged, the native officers will be consulted before any formal decision-”

“Wait, what!?” Bennett stepped forward, waving his hands. “What does any of this have to do with our case?”

The uniformed baatezu groaned. “You apparently weren’t paying as much attention as you thought,” he began, irritation obvious. “This concerns an extraplanar race. It’s our case.”

“Look, I know it’s a pain, but-”

“Pain!? Mr. Mayor, are you familiar with the concept of jurisdiction at all?”

One of the many benefits of being a cape was the guarantee that, if you didn’t overdo it, you could file a complaint with the highest authority figure you could find, and at least expect a speedy response. When several older capes, among them the leader of the Protectorate, were on your side in an extraterritoriality dispute (although I suspected Armsmaster was more angry at the idea of one of his jobs being taken over if police had problems), you could even get an appointment.

Over videophone, but still, I don’t think a more normal Taylor would be in a talk with Roy Christner directly… in that I was sitting directly outside the whole discussion, to speak only when asked about what exactly happened.

“I am, but I’m not the person who made that treaty,” he said, in that consoling, friendly tone politicians use when they’re trying to minimize damage to their credibility. “I don’t have a great deal of input into what they can and can’t do.”

“They’re interfering in your city!” Hannah, in full costume, threw up her hands. “You have to have some input!”
The baatezu representative, a horned, human-like falxugon, held up a manicured finger. “Madam, he really doesn’t. As evinced in clause 4, section 2 of the treaty, the native government has, and I quote-”

“I have read that clause, and I can inform you that you are in violation.” The director leaned forward, growling. “Unless I am mistaken, that same treaty states that you must, and I quote, ‘ask permission of the Parahuman Response Team in any case where members of the entities known as the Protectorate or any subordinate organization thereof-’.”

“Which this did not involve, records state Ms. Hebert went to the BBPD first, and legally speaking it was their own responsibility-”

“That is an incredible loophole...”

On my shoulder, a bandaged Tybalt grunted in annoyance. “I know what she’s trying to do, and I can guarantee miss, It will not work,” he whispered in my ear. “Baatezu are masters of the deal that avoids any stringent obligations on their part.”

“Really? Seems like this guy is trying to cover his ass,” I whispered back.

“I do not know any more polite way to say that, so yes, that is precisely what the Lord Mayor is doing. But this is a calculation on Sir...Iduduamna, I think? Iduduamna’s part. Watch.”

The falxugon listened intently, tapping his fingers anxiously. He looked like he would enjoy being absolutely anywhere else, looking from the mayor to the two representatives of the government’s dealings with superheroes anxiously, like a mouse being cornered.

...With the exception of any sweat at all on Sir Idududre..Idadua....screw it, that name deserved a shortening for the sake of my sanity, Ida’s body at all. Or really any sign he was actually nervous beyond a television actor being obvious for the folks at home. Quietly, being careful not to be seen, I let a Medusa slip its muzzle for a second.

Dear shadow this guy was a manipulative ponce. I would say he was the ideal con man, but I think real con men knew when to stop, so they didn’t lose track of their own life story. For Ida, I don’t think he had a life outside lying. There was so much stink here that it was actually hard to pick out individual actions,

The most recent one, however, was pretending to concede.

Crap.

“He’s going to suggest a compromise that isn’t really hard for the Expedition to pull off, isn’t he?”

“And he knows the only person who would catch on is us, since we are the ones watching his physical language. We also have a conflict of interest, in that he is representing the motive to remove our own involvement in finding the writer. We could easily be lying” He grimaced. “And of course, you are a teenager and I am an extraterrestrial who Sir Iduaduadma will likely point out, despises baatezu on principle. There’s little we can do to effect these events, and in fact we may result in our emissary gaining the Lord Mayor’s sympathy for his suggested plan.”

“So...nothing?”
“No. We remain silent.”

Damnit. Well, I had to take these punches as they came. Maybe I could study the treaty, figure out some way to at least get my own input and view of the proceedings-

“Pardon an ol’ doctor for interrupting…”

All attendees to the impromptu conference suddenly turned to face the source of that familiar, rustic tone.

Interlocutor Hugh had somehow come up the door, armature adjusted so he could lean in.

“I, bein’ the effective boss for the kytons around here, was just wonderin’…is this based on general matters or security? We need to be prepared, given how we’re part of the ol’ Expedition too, and we’re probably the one’s analyzin’ what ya bring in…”

Ida looked taken aback, genuinely confused. “Er...both? It can easily be both.”

“Ah. So I was guessin’. Be seein’ you once all this be done…”

I could have sworn that general, easy-going smile usually on his face had a bit of a smirk creep into it as he left.

The rest of the negotiation continued as Tybalt predicted; a lot of hemming and hawing from Ida as his points about the treaty were refuted, occasionally turning to me to describe exactly how the baatezu had barged in, the context behind the note, and so on. Eventually, he “relented,” scare quotes entirely appropriate, and suggested a new deal; the Protectorate and the police would be given specialized terminals that would provide unmoderated access to the digital archives of the *Falconer’s Lament*, along with the ability to insert a representative into any investigation the Expedition initiated, which they would inform the human police of in advance.

It took me a couple minutes before I noticed the loophole in that.

“They have the most secret of their records in dead-tree form, don’t they.”

“You learn quite fast,” Tybalt whispered back, obviously pleased. “Paper and other physical mediums are easier to enchant to be unreadable, and it’s harder to hack by way of social engineering; you can gain access to the papers, but custodians may notice when they’re gone and it still doesn’t break the cipher spell.”

It was only after leaving the meeting that a potential loophole occurred to me. “What if you take a picture of the papers and don’t disturb them?”

“Hm? Oh, then they are still enchanted and unreadable,” he said, ruefully. “The spell is on the information, not the records themselves.”

Huh. Had to get Cordy to teach that trick.

After the Mayor signed off, my demi-boss, and the one-man alien delegation left, the next order of
“You are cursed,” Piggot started, nose being crushed into two dimensions by her massaging. “That is the only possible explanation. You invoked divine ire somewhere along the line, and now everything and everyone around you suffers for it.”

It was at this point that I officially comprehended what kind of job the director had. And I pitted her. I had enough chaos in my life, but a lot of it seemed to favor me. She had to deal with the fallout, all of it. Internally, I made a note to find some way of apologizing...and discovering if Piggot actually would be offended by an apology.

“In all truthfulness, that would not be a surprise, my liege.”

Thanks for the vote of confidence, Tybalt. “Should I expect discipline, ma’am?”

“No, no, it’s the baatezu to blame here,” she replied, rubbing her nose. “I really don’t have anything to say about trying to cover for your own weaknesses.”

“...Thanks?” I said, confused. That was...awfully nice of her. A little bit too nice for the director, but I could roll with it. “And the memo?”

“What do you think?” she deadpanned. “Walking into the lair of a nearly complete unknown with an unknown party backing it, and the only other people allowed are a pacifist and aliens who worship you and anyone else mutated by a mad Tinker as gods?” She looked up. “I desperately hope I don’t have to call an inspection of the training facility.”

“I thought as such.” I would have said I was disappointed, but really, solving this particular mystery was an exercise in stupid-

“What is why I’m sending you with hidden backup.”

...Huh?

“Er, run that by me-”

“I said that if someone wants a meeting, we shall arrange it. Get this issue off our backs, at least.”

...What.

“...We are doing what?”

“Avoiding spurious accusations, for one,” Tybalt replied, evenly. “We really do not want to ruin the director’s life over a misplaced fear.”

“Mis-misplaced fear!? She’s been Mastered!” I said, pointing to the general direction of her office, an expression not helped by the fact it wasn’t a particularly large janitor’s closet he and I were in.

“Correction, you believe she has been Mastered. That does not mean she is, and given how your state seems to treat PRT agents suspected of being Mastered, I would give her the benefit of the
"And we walk into a trap for the sake of due process?" I gaped at the silvanshee. "Tybalt, I like the fact you have a conscience, but there's a time and place for that, and the PRT being compromised is neither time nor place."

"First, that strain of logic is exactly the kind baatezu use to lure people into their web of schemes," he began, actually narrowing his eyes a little in frustration and anger. "Second, we have had one instance of Piggot being relatively loose with the leash, and you *instantly* assume she is under some enchantment? Forgive me for my skepticism, but you *do* understand how this sounds to an outside perspective?"

"Look, I...okay, look," I said, realizing he had a point there. "I'm going to leave why you seem to hate baatezu out of this, I'm not part of that world. I don't like bigots in general, but everything Cordy tells me says they're militaristic, and you, Mr. Altruism-Is-My-Natural-State, may find that repulsive on a truly instinctual level and can't help it."

"You don't know the half of it."

"But," I began, "You have to understand...Piggot's a bigot herself, one maybe born out of her earlier career combined with the fact she sees the worst of parahumans every day. And now she has proof of an unknown parahuman or at least *awnsheglien*, aka Diet Parahuman, and she wants me to meet a different parahuman, with only a parahuman hybrid and aliens she doesn't trust? This is...really out of character for her."

Tybalt mulled this over. "...Cynical as it is, it's understandable. I myself was a little flummoxed to her attitude. Which is *why,*" he began, starting to pace, "I did some of my own research. It is remarkable what kinship with the PRT apprentice's familiars can help one find."

He glanced over. "Did you know she was at the siege of Ellisberg?"

It took me a second to connect the dots. "Wait, you're saying that *Nilbog-*"

"Is part of the reason she distrusts parahumans, yes. That Waste-led soul is at least partially the reason for her own knee-jerk reaction to the empowered. But that is not the whole of it."

He slowed his pacing. "Were you also aware that, despite a demographically mixed team and Nilbog's infamous competence, over ninety percent of the casualties were the unempowered?"

I caught on. "...The capes *ran.*"

"Precisely. It is parahuman cowardice that truly angers the director. I have no doubt the loss of her countrymen due to the actions of the gifted, combined with the fleshwarped horror of the tyrant of Ellisberg, has bled into all aspects of her opinion on parahumans, but it is abandoning the mundane and the strong refusing the defend the weak that riles her—hence why she both tolerates heroes enough to serve as a liaison, and why she sends the Wards on full patrol missions."

"That still doesn't support why-"

"What I am getting at is that this may be simply an oddball decision in her case due to her biases."

I looked intently at my familiar. "And your support for this position is...?"
“For one, she may be, to use the colloquial expression, playing chicken with a parahuman, seeing if the enigmatic M is as cowardly as she believes parahumans to be,” he said, returning to his quick pacing. “It could be that she is as desperate for some degree of information with the situation as we are, given how she distrusts the Expedition and how they have recently demonstrated a rather extreme grasp of control over something directly pertinent to her. Finally, she could have a lot more faith in her snipers than you give her credit for, and she trusts you and Panacea would be able to escape. Or may just not care overmuch, given her prejudice.”

He stopped. “The point is, caution is all well and good, but we should be careful of that avoiding becoming paranoia instead. Paranoia is quite possibly the most counterproductive emotion in the cosmos, and will get us nowhere except higher blood pressure and lack of sleep. So I would advise us to hold back-for the moment.”

I mulled it over. On the one hand, I knew the horror stories; Piggot herself had beaten in the idea from Day One that it was never too early to invoke the Master/Stranger protocols.

On the other...my familiar was a lot more world-wise than I was, and I didn’t really have faith in my own ability to pay attention to politics after Krais snuck that treaty on us. Who was I to say that, should there be a false positive, Piggot wouldn’t just go back to her old life, none the worse? Would she always have that spectre of doubt over her, for no good reason?

That, and after learning a little of her past...I kind of felt bad for her. She was just doing what she thought was right, forcing who she viewed as untrustworthy jerks to keep to their jobs of saving lives, defending the innocent, and actually being heroes. Yeah, she was biased as all hell, and likely didn’t have the best idea, but...she was human.

That last feeling was what did the trick—it didn’t feel right, a pseudo-parahuman shoveling more crap on her.

I sighed, reluctantly. “I still don’t like following orders I don’t trust.”

“I understand. Such is the absurdity of life.” Tybalt floated over to face me directly. “But I don’t blame you for your feelings, given the most pressing issue.”

“The obvious trap,” I continued, eager to get my mind off that revelation. “If we go, we walk into a completely unknown situation with only Panacea, aliens we can’t trust, and snipers out of their depth for backup.”

“And if we do not, it is a certainty we do not receive whatever knowledge was promised, and find ourselves either censured for insubordination, or we both face censure and alert whatever malefactor in control of the director to the plan going awry, who will then take measures to undo whatever leads we have.” He sighed. “I despise these kinds of conundrum.”

I rubbed my head, feeling the slight tinge of acidic tear. “With the best plan involving walking into a trap. I don’t want to know what a panicked Master would do for a cover up.”

“...Feeling like we are being forced to be stupid by circumstance is not copacetic at all, is it?”

“Especially not when we helped the prime suspect for the Master ‘test his minions’,” I finished. “Time to see if other people can follow Panacea through her portal.”
“You’ve been ordered to what?”

Amy, at least, was still sane enough to realize how insane everything was.

“Follow the instructions of a note, given to me by a PRT agent who doesn’t exist, with only you, a few aliens who worship us, and snipers for backup,” I said, dully. “Apparently I was so great at being a prison escapee I was typecast.”

“...And Piggot’s okay with this?”

“She’s the one that ordered it!” I threw up my arms and wings to truly get in the effect of the exasperation I was trying to convey, with the Medusas helping out. “I mean, I’m going to do my job without complaint (omission), but seriously, this isn’t a smart move at all!”

My brow knitted in confusion as the sin-scent passed by. I didn’t see anyone-

It took me a second to remember why I normally muzzled my Medusas. I quickly shoved them back into my helmet before any more sudden wafting made me screw up this conversation.

Thankfully, Amy was forgiving of minor, implied embarrassments. She put down her clipboard, fully putting her attention on me and not her latest list of patients. “Um, did you alert Master/Stranger-”

“Parahuman enchantment makes this world lose all sanity, doesn’t it?” Tybalt glided in, looking somewhat frustrated. “She considered it. I advised against it. She listened to advice.”

“This world,” Amy began, drawling sarcastically, “Is a bit experienced with evil Masters, yes. Has anyone told you about Heartbreaker, by any-”

“Please do not mention that satyr,” Tybalt said, wincing. “I do not wish to consider him until he is very dead.”

Huh, you learn new slang every day. Had to ask him if “satyr” meant “bastard who uses enchantment to seduce and control women” or “bastard in general” though. But the specific gradation of utter bastards was not a priority. “Suffice to say I’m here not just to ask you to come with, but to see if those portals of yours have room for two.”

Comprehension dawned on Amy’s face. Followed shortly by trepidation. “The Shadow World...really isn’t an escape route. I’ve been working on it, but I can tell you; there are things in that place.” She shivered. “Things I can only avoid because I can look like them. I’ve learned how to use that to port around and treat people, but...let’s just say I’ve never tried with Vic, because I’m not sure if her aura can affect them.”

“...I know this seems random, but how is she doing?” I asked. “She was recovering, as far as I know, but-”

“Why?” The healer’s brow deepened.

I chewed on the inside of my mouth for a second. “...Because I was just thinking of dragging her along for extra backup,” I admitted. “I’m okay with the possible reprimand if we have an extra
parahuman fighter if the mysterious Garril on the note—"

“Garril!?"

Amy’s expression had changed immediately. She still looked disbelieving, but rather than confused, she appeared hopeful and cautiously optimistic.

“...Yes?"

“Well, why didn’t you say that?” The change from “worried” to “overjoyed” was staggering. Not the least because I didn’t expect Amy to be capable of looking that happy.

Tybalt was a little more on the ball. “...Would Garril happen to be the individual you met who wished to remain anonymous after you gained Chimaera’s power?” he asked, a strange tone creeping in.

“Yes! Yes he is!” Now actively exited. This was not normal joy, this was schoolgirl squealing glee. At least she seemed happy, but-

“Er, I don’t know who he or she is, but if they work for M-”

“No, no he’s nice! He’s really nice! He’s an…awn…"

It appeared Amy suddenly realized she was revealing information not released to the public mid-bounce. In the middle of a hospital. At least one nurse was now staring at the sudden nova of happiness also known as Panacea.

“Ahem. Look, I can get why you’re scared, but I’m telling you, there’s nothing to be scared of. He’s a good guy, although he’s a bit secretive, because—” She squinted at a wall clock. “Oh God look at the time sorry I’ll explain later I’ll take you there at 9:30 gotta go—”

And with that, Amy sped off into a patient room.

“...Well. That happened,” I said, staring at the door. “...You think he’s her boyfriend, Tybalt?”

He didn’t answer. “Tybalt?”

“Oh? Sorry, I was just thinking it over.” The silvanshee’s same odd tone continued to creep in. “...I don’t particularly enjoy what I theorize.”

My mind leapt to the worst and most obvious conclusion. “You think he’s a...satyr, you called him?”

“What? No, no, that was not the effect of a charm spell, thank all that is holy in the world. Charmed are generally incapable of explaining why they like their enchanter so much, and Ms. Dallon only stopped because of time and privacy constraints.” His brow furrowed. “I believe she genuinely enjoys his company and is emboldened by the chance to introduce her friends to each other. It’s just that...” he trailed off.

I motioned silently.

“It’s just that I hope that her attitude is indeed born of romantic affection, and she is simply
excitable about her lover. Otherwise…” He inhaled. “I believe that Amy hasn’t been seeing Dr. Yamada. Or anyone else capable of lending a shoulder.”

He suddenly turned towards me, narrowing his eyes.

“...I never asked,” I admitted.

“If you will excuse my sense of superiority here; this is a place where agathions are superior to humans,” he said, strutting back to his normal place at my side. “We actually find out these things.”

What was I supposed to say to that?

Actually, I already knew the answer; nothing at all.

“...Let’s go,” I said, awkwardly.

As Tybalt and I walked out, silently, I started to plan on how to help Amy. First, I would have to ask around, find out her major issues…

(“Made you all natural politicians”, Nex’s voice echoed from my memory. I tried to believe that was a good thing.)

Much to my own frustration, the person I had originally pegged as the only other voice of sanity was now all on board acquiescing to all implied demands. Which meant goblins, which meant unwanted sycophants.

Which meant the two people on our boat who knew how to drive an outboard motorboat (or one-and-a-half, since my one item of experience several years ago was starting the engine) had their knowledge of it “unbecoming” given how “the masters should not chauffeur the servants.”

Instead, I made a discovery; apparently, outboard motors were never invented on Aebrynis.

“...How does the air bladder mix the fuel?”

“No, no, it sucks the fuel into the tank-”

“But the tank has fuel already-”

“Not suction, though.” Amy started to massage her nose. “Look, if you’re not going to let either of us start it, can you not interrupt the instructions, please?”

“...Would that be an affirmation of ability to do so or-”

“Sorry, may, now will you please let me finish?”

On the other side of the boat, I took a guilty pleasure in the fact my friend volunteered before I had a chance. Not that I would have been any better at it, I guessed.
“Be glad we are familiar with internal combustion,” Kozd Hears-All muttered from his own seat, the only hobgoblin on this voyage due to said boat’s size. “I have had to explain that to comrades from primitive areas, and given the natural curiosity of my smaller brethren? I made a habit of arriving an hour earlier to keep things vaguely resembling non-delayed scheduling.”

“Well, at least we can go over what you know,” I began, turning to the self-proclaimed minion. “Amy mentioned Garril has a cape name, Seadrake, at least before your guys aggressively volunteered.”

He shrugged. “It can disrupt efficiency, but that’s the way things are. The blooded of the Great Master lead, the Kindred implement. Simple as that.”

Tybalt opened his mouth for a second, then apparently thought better of it, simply parking a paw next to his mouth and looking perturbed.

“...Seadrake, if you will?”

“Oh yes, heard of him. Anecdotally, you will understand, but still; I am given to understand he’s a privateer and collector.”

Okay, I guessed the latter was a subset of the former, but; “Privateer? Who does he work for, generally?”

“No one, actually,” he said, leaning back. “Last I heard, he was guarding a strait from pirates and mindless sea beasts in return for a regular tithe from passing vessels.”

The term protection racket immediately sprang to mind. I suppressed a grimace. “...I also heard he can’t shapeshift like Amy can. She said he was pretty sensitive about that.”

“I do know that story. The bards say he’s made his peace with it, though; he was still the stronger in the end, even if the Great Master’s crucible burned away his old life as part of his ascension. Not unlike you, Mistress.”

Kozd’s eyes unfocused, as he concentrated on the story rather than me; while I didn’t like him as an author anymore, C.S. Lewis described a particular state and voice a storyteller would use when spinning a yarn, and that’s pretty much the only way Kozd’s expression could be described right now. Not quite grandiose, but definitely taking the Saga of His Personal Life And Rumors He Has Heard with a professional seriousness.

“He was a merchant, so they say. Mostly his business consisted of freight, but he was not above a paying passenger. Eventually, the latter eventually led him to transport an awnsheghlien, which the records call the Iron Hided One, across the waters he plied, though he did not know of the One’s divinity at the time. At some point in the journey, the zephyrs resumed their vendetta and a great windy storm came upon Garril’s ship. While Garril’s crew had weathered storms before, and this was not even a particularly ruthless storm, it did blow the Iron Hided’s disguise away, and in a panic he set on the crew. Garril possessed strength of the mind, however, and in a mighty and cunning blow, ambushed the One with a harpoon. So did Garril prove himself in the eyes of the Great Master and gain the divinity of the unworthy.”

I briefly wondered how a being who, by all “blood memory dreams”, had died as a function of creating said “divinity” could judge anyone, but neither time nor place. Besides, this was an interesting insight into a foreign culture.
“In time, Garril obtained the same appearance as the Iron Hided, but rather than his ascended form being a walking lizard, it seemed as if the merchant was simply undergoing transfiguration after transfiguration. He grew fins. He found he could spit the ink of octopi. His legs became a great, thrashing tail. In time, the divinity drove him mad with despair, and he threw himself to the waves. There, though, he did not find the tears of Nesirie, goddess of morning and the sea—no, he found the greatest gift of a far older god.”

“...His awnshegh abilities have something to with salt water,” I guessed.

“Praise be to the Hand’s wisdom! Yes, the Seadrake draws power from the ocean, and it is upon the awakening of that ability did Garril’s ascension complete. He is a sea-dragon now; a vast and awesome serpent, strong in mind and body. And he has remained in his straits to this day.”

It took a second for Kozd to remember which planet he was on. “Well, not this day, but he is a divine sea-dragon now.”

Huh. I guessed Azrai must have been something of a herpetophile, if there were two snake-based awnsheghlien and one of those got power from a “walking lizard.” A more impish part of me wondered if the “vast and awesome” bit was the reason Amy liked him so much, but I quickly told my inner Dennis to shut up. Panacea was many things, but “shallow” was not one of them.

Speaking of whom, any further discussion was immediately cut off by the very loud success of Amy finally teaching the goblins how to operate the motor.

And with that, three boats (two carrying sniper backup) went out to meet a sea dragon.

As if I wasn’t nervous enough, it appeared Seadrake liked his home isolated and creepy.

It wasn’t an obvious place, which I suppose made sense; in fact, the entrance facing away from Brockton Bay altogether, built into an outcrop of rock. I guessed it wouldn’t be unseen to any ships coming in...but given Leviathan, I doubt he needed to care. I would choose somewhere else that could be equally hidden and private for that very reason, but I digress. Maybe his leg-tail really didn’t lend itself to land exploration.

But once you did notice it, it was hard to not notice how creepy the cove was up close. The outcrop it was on looked out of place, as though someone had actually built it there, in the middle of the sea. To put it bluntly, it looked almost like the movie set of a cove in the middle of the sea, straight from a pirate movie. Too generic, to put it bluntly. Maybe Seadrake had a terrakinesis power Kozd didn’t know, perhaps shaping of coral. Mine were certainly varied enough compared to normal parahumans. It still put me even more on edge, especially given the middle of the sea bit.

The snipers had long since motored off to somewhat stealthy positions, Amy having whispered something to the three respective sniper/spotter teams (why she didn’t use telepathy was beyond me). The goblins, who had picked up the mechanics of the boat surprisingly fast (though we did stall a couple times) slowly puttered towards the strangely mouth-like opening. Tybalt had dug himself in to the boat’s wood, raw dread obvious on his face and over what leaked through the closed emotion circuit. Kozd seemed abnormally interested in adjusting his body armor, and
catching quick glances at the surrounding area.

In fact, the only one who didn’t seem nervous at all was, fittingly, Amy. If anything, she seemed a bit impatient, perching on the front of the boat and drumming her fingers against the prow excitedly.

I prayed Seadrake was in fact, just her boyfriend. And this wasn’t a symptom of more mundane mind control. By the story, he already seemed significantly older than her, that didn’t sound like a herald of good things.

Eventually, she motioned to stop, just at the edge of the cove. She turned to face us. “First; I’m going to have to say once again; please don’t freak out. He’s nice but...”

She shrugged. “It’s better if he shows you.”

With that, she turned back to the cove. A second, then; Garril? You in there?

A few more seconds.

“Amy? It be nearly twenty-two hundred by the moon. Why ye calling on me at this hour?”

Huh. He sounded...normal. Deep, but within human ranges. Truth was, I was expecting more of a croak or rumble to go with his rumored appearance.

“You wanted to meet Taylor?”

Huh. Must have used telepathy to guarantee he heard her.

A few more seconds.

“Ye told her about me looks?”

Amy licked her lips a little nervously. “Not...quite. I thought it would be...rude…”

A very long pause. A deep sigh echoed from the chamber. A deep sigh that could have easily been a hissing snake.

A very loud splash followed. The splash of something very large.

A couple seconds later, the water exploded.

“Holy-!”

“Shadow’s mercy!”

“Hsss!”

As the rain of seawater came down from the column of green, I had another insight to foreign cultures; “sea-dragon” was not a figure of speech.

“Yeah. Bit of a shocker, eh?” A shark-like set of teeth, the suggestion of at least one more layer behind the monster’s two, twisted into a bitter, all too human grin.
I desperately wanted to say something in response. What happened was that I squeaked.

Seadrake’s head had to be as big as the boat, at least. Dark scales rippled and glimmered in the relatively dim light of the lamp, a fractal mesh of borderline reptilian armor. A giant fin, twitching so that it almost looked like a shadowy, organic sail in the light ran from the top of his head to under the waves, and to, presumably, his tail. I couldn’t see all of his head in the light, but enough to see his face as he leaned down, and the general shape. I couldn’t tell what was more disturbing; his teeth, the crimson-colored nictitating membranes, or the distended jaw.

What was most disturbing was the overall shape of his head. Apparently, whatever mechanics of the Azrai neurons that allowed them to modify biology worked off what was already there. Quite simply; apart from the snout his jaw gave him? His head was shaped like a human skull.

Thankfully, his eyes, however huge and bloodshot, were human enough. I could focus on the eyes instead of the everything else.

“I be takin’ that as a yes, then?”

Vocal chords. His vocal cords must not have grown with him. Or something.

I tried to say something again.

“Oi. This be why I warn people about me looks.” He turned his gaze ruefully to Amy.

“...I thought it’d be...invasive,” she sheepishly replied.

Where did he get the metabolic fuel for that growth? I started to wonder if he tried to drown himself just because he looked weird-

Tybalt snapped out of his own paralysis. “Miss Taylor? Are you feeling well?”

I tried to murmur the most intelligent thing I could at the moment.

“Y-you’re….big.”

Seadrake blinked.

“...I ken the young lass’ thoughts capsized.”

Heh. Nautical version of a derail. Ha-ha-haaa…

...My week was having worse effects on me than I thought, if I was having this reaction. I cleared my throat, and rubbed the butterfly pin pin.

Trying to cover for my brief hysterics, I awkwardly curtseyed. “I am...er, Dame Taylor Hebert, Kin to Sha-”

“Be at ease, miss. I never cared for the whole damn dance of sayin’ hello to people.” He gave a quick bow of his head, showing the boat in seawater. “Garlien Suliere, also known as the Seadrake.”

“A truly magnificent display of magnanimity, oh great one,” Kozd began. “Far more kind than-”
“Oh, knock it off,” he said, a bit harshly. “Here’s somethin’ the stories don’t say about me; I ain’t a god, I’m a privateer who doesn’t need a crew. I’ll be happy to take what service I can, but please, stop the boot-lickin’.”

Kozd and the other goblins looked a little taken aback. “...Yes gre-yes, captain.”

Seadrake made a noise I guessed was supposed to be a groan for mutants as large as the average tanker. “Now, we were greetin’ each other?”

“...Taylor Hebert, aka Adrasteia.” I replied, warily.

He apparently caught on to said wariness. “Let’s not try to con Eloéle here; I ken you’re only here because of a note.”

Okay, cutting the bull. I could at least respect this guy’s honesty. “Forgive me if I’m a bit sceptical of what the hell is going on. All I have is Amy’s good word-”

“Hey! Stop talking to him like that!”

“...and my sense of caution has been honed to kind of an edge, particularly given how your guy snuck the note to me.” I finished. “It looks like a threat, in other words.”

The awnsheghlien bobbed his head. “Aye. That be Horos’ doing; he’s not a friendly sort, that modron, even for a machine. Especially for a machine,” he self-corrected.

Sin-scent was in the key of hiding suspicion about content written by someone else. That wasn’t what stood out.

“Wait, mach-”

“Modrons, inhabitants of the plane of Mechanus,” Tybalt cut in. “Artificially intelligent clockwork drones whose primary concern is maintaining their own affairs. I’m Ms. Hebert’s familiar, by the by; well met.”

“Oh, ye got a cat sith! Very good fortune,” Seadrake said, not even really looking at Tybalt. Prick. “Back to the old course, Horos be a rogue one, disconnected from the group mind or somethin’ they share. Really never set right with him, but he can’t go back in without dyin’, so here we are.”

Wow. I...felt kind of bad for him. I couldn’t imagine how lonely he would get. No wonder he seemed kind of strange and blunt; probably never could adapt to not having the ability to simply think what you needed to your co-workers.

Back on topic though. “Alien or not, that still looked an awful lot like a threat to me. So, give me one reason why I shouldn’t turn back around and get a PRT team to serve as your permanent house guests.”

“I know what the baatezu want, and how ye can stop em.”

No scent. Okay, good opener. But- “How do I know you didn’t come over with them, and are just trying to diffuse a potential risk before they really get into entrenching themselves.”
“Well, that be a longer story; one I really think needs solid ground to stand on.” He motioned to the cove. “Come on in, I’ll show ye my collection.”

“Um, did you not get the caution part? I’m not going for that, thank you—”

“If you be talking about keeping me in those escorts’ sights, it’s pointless,” he continued, bluntly.

Oh, crap. The goblins winced, Amy paled, and my wings tensed for imminent flight.

“Oh come now, I was guarding Arele for decades! I know what the water disturbance of multiple boats feel like. I guessed, and really, I’m more glad you ain’t a total moron who obeys the Mortal Incarnation of Haelyn’s every whim. Besides,” he said, suddenly very loudly, “I heal faster underwater, where I can still capsize them!”

...And this was why working from unknowns was never fun. Occasionally, you met someone who thought your best general preparation was cute.

Though really, you had to respect the snipers’ nerves. I would have shot as soon as he left the water.

“...Set a course,” I muttered to the goblins, slumping into the boat.

“Okay, there be no real hazards on the way in, but I’d tell you not to stay directly behind me, tail causes a nasty wake. So, Ms. Dallon, how goes life on the mainland?”

Seadrake, it seemed, either couldn’t see in the dark or expected company regularly. Someone had set up a fairly good lighting system, though I didn’t hear any generators for the lights. More magic, I guessed. Didn’t know what kind of effects running a power source with a link to an alien dimension would have, but given the dimness of the arranged spotlights, I suspected there wasn’t exactly a flood of electrons being drawn from the Shadow World.

Speaking of spotlights, the entire cavern was more like a museum of various naval salvage than a home. One wall was taken up almost entirely of neatly stacked shipping containers, facing inward. Each of the open boxes had a different assortment of items, grouped by category; one series of three had bits of engine and other engineering parts, two near the top had what looked like navigation computers, another four had waterlogged consumer goods. How many ships all the items came from, I didn’t want to hazard a guess.

The wall opposing it was more of a showroom; separated by what had to be over a hundred ship wheels (most of which were wood) were rows upon rows of sea-rotted items, arranged neatly on stone shelves. Shelves shaped out of the stone. That probably meant this wasn’t a natural cove after all; more reason to not piss off Seadrake, either he could collapse the ceiling on us or was friends with someone who could.

More than that, where did he get all this stuff? A bit had to be from Aebrynis, but unless there was some kind of dimensional secret smuggler group, I didn’t see how he could get all this junk here. Either that, or any awnsheghlien allies weren’t necessarily as ambivalent about goblins as he was.

Come to think of it, did any goblins arrive before the Baatorian Expedition?
In any case, the final wall was devoted to a small beach with minor amenities on it. Lots of pillows, arranged into what looked to be a bed crossed with a couch. A table was set a little to the side, with a couple of steel chairs and an unlit candle. As much as needed to avoid overexerting the power source, whatever it was.

Said beach also had no dock. No problem for me or Tybalt, but from the expressions on the goblins’ faces, a few of them realized they should have brought boots rather than foot wrapping. Amy didn’t seem to care, though she did have to wring out the hem of her cloak. Probably was used to it, if her excitement coming here was any indication. Or she flew too, now that I thought about it...though that wasn’t likely given how much she liked being a snake, or how far away this cove was.

“Look to be about time we be switchin’ to voice now.”

Not that it deterred her from telepathy, apparently. From the expressions on her and Seadrake’s faces, there was something in there that troubled both. Frustrating, not being able to at least listen to the out-of-context conversation.

“True enough. Let’s get to the...heavier matters,” Amy replied, gingerly speaking on the “heavier” bit. Had to ask her about that later. Not time or place here, and besides, sin-scenting her wasn’t what she needed from a more involved friend. Might push her away if she noticed.

“So…” Seadrake turned to me. “I’d swear to Eloele that you be wonderin’ who sent ya that note, lass?”

“Call me Adrasteia, and whoever Eloele is, I think she might be a little offended by invoking the patently obvious,” I replied, briskly.

“If you knew who the goddess of thieves be, you’d ken the joke.” He bobbed his head in what I assumed was his version of shrugging his soldiers. “But I digress.”

“I ken your brain-box have more than one tool in it, so I’ll confirm what you already guessed; the inker you’re anglin’ for is an old friend o’ mine, and an elder cousin to both of us.”

“Another awnshegh?” I guessed. Really think that realization should have been more shocking, but given how I just discovered an exiled robot was a minion of his...

“Well, it’s a semantic thing if ye ask Horos, but literally nobody else cares, including said elder cousin himself.” He bobbed his head again. “Lad calls himself the Magian, don’t ken his birth name. One of the Lost, if you believe him; first awnsheglien to exist, actually knew Grandpa himself.”

I rose an eyebrow. “...And how old is he?”

“That’s the thing; I don’t think even he knows.” Seadrake looked off into space. “I do know he was stuck in the Shadow World for subjective years, and time tends to go funny in the places berks get stuck in.” He shook his head, swishing the water about. “It not be fun.”

Amy shivered. “I can vouch for that.”

I suddenly understood the practical reason Amy didn’t really use her new power. “...Leaving aside
the question of your friend’s sanity,” I interjected, “What does he want with me? He wrote something about a token of respect, but you don’t just vow to extract an entire sapient species because of courtesy.”

“Ye aren’t far off. Ol’ Mag’s dealt with derro before, and he says the best place for them is in an asylum. Having met them, I tend to agree with me mate. Cytillesh is nasty stuff. But it’s not only that.”

“Lass?,” he suddenly said to Panacea. “Do ye know the name Haagenti?”

“Ah, Waste,” Tybalt muttered, mimicking my own expression.

“No?” she replied. “Is he the big bad evil guy behind them or-”

“He is a great prince among the tanar’ri,” Kozd suddenly interjected. “A brilliant and twisted alchemist and scientist, he who whispers of his infinite knowledge, and for whom but a taste-”

“We know, thanks,” I replied. “To put it simply Amy, some kind of robot-”

“Retriever.”

“Retriever with his coat of arms on it was poking around the Shadow World when Dragon was initially exploring it. We think it was trying to hack her own database from there, likely in preparation for its creator sending a force to pursue his racial enemies on Earth. We didn’t want to alert the baatezu or cause panic, so Piggot ordered us to keep mum.” I sighed. “We’re sorry.”

Amy’s face paled. “...There’s an alien prince coming here!?"

Seadrake cleared his throat. “Eh…I hate to be the sudden squall, but, in a sense, he already be here.”

...What?

I slowly turned to face the sea-dragon directly. “...Would he happen to be a Change-sorry, shapeshifter with an affinity for tentacles? And derro?”

“Straight to the heart. Mag kenned that workin’ anonymously when his Aspect is firin’ flares just isn’t a seaworthy idea.”

A couple seconds.

“....Oh.”

I think the sound Amy made was what you tuned dog whistles to. I also assumed the small ripping noise was her briefly losing control over her form. Are you- “Are you serious?”

Before anyone could answer, a healer somewhere between terrified and enraged flew into the middle of the conversation space. “Did I hear that right? There’s a fucking warlord who is a member of a species engaged in a century-long war you knew about!? And now he’s already here!?”

Tybalt cleared his throat. “Technically, an Aspect-”
“No, no, she doesn’t let me protect Vic, and idiot though she apparently is, Taylor isn’t a hypocrite.” Amy quickly turned back to me, a small scale patch growing over a narrowed eye.
“You’re a stickler for orders, I get that. But New Wave isn’t a bunch of civilians. We can be trusted with this kind of intel, and in fact, actually telling me could have, I don’t know, prevented this whole fiasco in the first place?”

Okay, that just wasn’t fair. “We had no idea what Haagenti’s powers are apart from the fact he’s a professional weapons designer-”

“Like that makes it better-”

“Which means you probably couldn’t help to begin with-”

“At least we would know what we were facing-”

“Which is my point, you still wouldn’t-”

“Lasses, please! Can we delay the recriminations until after everything’s explained, aye?”

“Can we not?” Now Amy’s fury was focused on Seadrake. “We don’t hide in caves, unlike some people-”

“Oi, and here we go-”

“I’m not bringing that up, I’m saying that it would be nice if someone told us-”

“Will my lords PLEASE STOP TALKING!”

And we did.

Apparently the source of Kozd Hears-All’s nickname was not harmed by his own voice at maximum volume.

“I mean, it didn’t seem you were getting anywhere. I apologize if I seemed untoward-”

“You’re fine,” I interrupted. “More than fine.”

I mouthed thank you at the hobgoblin before turning back to the two others involved in the conversation. “As it may, I don’t know exactly what you two talk about when you meet with each other, but as it is, I’m sorry about not telling you, but I honestly don’t see how it would have helped. This probably sounds like a really poor apology, because it is, but right now, I just want to know what the hell is going on. Can we please discuss this a little later?”

The scales were reabsorbed back into Amy’s normal skin, but the glare remained. “…On the boat back, and I’ll be quiet for now.”

“Deal.” And with that, my fellow cape stepped out of the way.

Seadrake, for his part, looked rather taken aback by Kozd’s outburst. Maybe even a little...impressed?
“What was she yelling at you for?” I asked in a moment of hypocritical curiosity.

“Eh? Oh, the lass wants me to sign up for her own crew-she says I’d probably fit right into New Wave.” A slight sardonic grin broke over his face. “I say I don’t think the Bay has that much water (omission).”

“Ah. I...can imagine,” I said, very carefully avoiding the implied issue picked up by the Medusas.

“But, back to the main bearin’-like I said, it’s Haagento’s Aspect that’s out and about. The demon himself is still coolin’ his heels in the Abyss, small comfort that is.”

“An Aspect is an old magical trick for very powerful beings,” Tybalt cut in. “Some of the most powerful creatures in the planes can’t easily leave their native ones-a foreign environment would disrupt their own massive store of mystical energy and cause severe health problems without preparing the foreign plane, so they splice off a bit of it to create a lesser mental clone. Think of one as a living sketch of oneself-one that’s not quite as powerful or as learned as the original, but with the same personality and powers, and perfectly loyal to the whole until death or reabsorption.”

“...And if the Aspect dies before reabsorption?” I wondered.

“Then the magic infused into it is lost, but it carries much less of a risk, because beings capable of making Aspects usually have a lot of spare magic lying around to begin with.”

“Ah. So I guess Haagento knows enough to send an Aspect here but doesn’t want to risk himself or his own race yet?”

“And that be why Mag told you to talk to me.” Seadrake dipped over to his collection, and placed a strange-looking polyhedron on the beach. Nine sides. “Recognize the markings on this, la-Adresteia?”

“...The ship beacon,” I said, remembering the day the Lament first landed. “Or...a stone model?”

“Guess again,” he said, turning it over. On its backside was placed a fractal knot of patterns and runes, all arranged in a tight spiral. “This be the low-tech, high-magic version of that lighthouse-it can’t lead a star-sailor, but it can certainly open a link to somewhere already keyed to it.”

I began to feel a pit at the bottom of my stomach. “...keyed to army barracks?”

“Nope, the baatezu be too subtle for that. Any army they garrison is made with the approval of the poor berks already livin’ there. No, this be keyed to a monster zoo-another cousin has seen one.”

It took a second for that to sink in. “..monster...zoo?”

“Aye, and not any fleshwarper’s work, either-there be a lot of angry wildlife in the planes, much of it be sapient. And much of those look like tanar’ri.” Seadrake looked up. “Ye ken where me point is?”

“...False flag,” I murmured.

“Yep. An Aspect of a soddin’ prince gives a nice cover story. Thing is, when the prince is Haagento, things...get uncertain. You know his favorite nickname, the one he goes by when he’s tryin’ to work behind the scenes?”
“The Whispers...Within, I think you called him?”

Tybalt nodded.

“Well, he didn’t get that by being a screamin’ berserk. He’s nowhere close to the patience of most baatezu nobles, but he isn’t someone who does things without thinkin’ them over. I doubt if his mental clone’s any different’

I rolled the idea around in my head. “...So why did he show himself?”

“My kenning (half-truth)? He wants the baatezu to build up—it’s an old game of theirs. They make any clients of theirs wet themselves, and then offer to clean up. With a great deal of extra mates on deck.”

And with that, I suddenly understood the mindset of baatezu a lot more.

I also vowed to keep the Dissian Dinar at home from now on.

Still; “What’s he got to gain from the Expedition knowing he’s here?”

“The thing is, they may not know it’s him.”

Eh? “Sorry, but I don’t think—”

“Thing about tanar’ri? If you’re an infinitely varied species, a lot of ya have similar traits. Haagenti’s gamblin’ on the idea they mistake him for a subspecies, and they probably will. They don’t ken that a prince is goin’ to be interested in a just-discovered backwater planet, parahumans or no parahumans. He isn’t omniscient; the only reason he’d know is if he’d already had knowledge of the planet.”

Huh, that was actually rather...clever…

Wait.

“If they don’t know...how did you know?”

If Seadrake’s head had normal color, I’m pretty sure it would have drained out of his face. “Eh...well…”

He looked at Amy. “Remember how I’d say I know things you’d get mad at me for, and that the reason I didn’t tell you is because they be sensitive?”

Panacea’s expression turned blank. “...What is it.”

“Well...Adrasteia, ye know how you had musical help with that goblin speech?”

The answer was already obvious. “...One of yours?”

“Real name Jersha, we call her Jeru. Also the Siren.”

I no longer had the capacity to be shocked by these revelations. Particularly given it wasn’t that
shocking.

Amy did, however, which is why she was the one to speak next. “Start explaining. Now.”

**Mini-Interlude: The Proclaimer, Anointed**

There were several things that, if one knew Emily Piggot well, would strike one as odd over the recent months. First, one would notice the temperature of her office was constantly cranked up when she wasn’t keeping a scheduled appointment. This was not so strange in winter, but Piggot would keep the thermostat at the highest possible setting as long as she could, and brought out humidifiers to make it even more hot. The fact that she did all this discreetly would not be so strange, because this was still Emily Piggot, and a parahuman might catch on to some thread they might be able to pull.

That same paranoia would be why the hypothetical person would grow increasingly alarmed that, despite having been clued into a certain functionally mute awnshegh infiltrator, she had not signed the needed paperwork to call in Internal Affairs or even inform her superiors. Yes, she had informed her own branch of the PRT of said infiltrator, but no sightings or even searches for recently hired dark-haired mutes with distinctive text-to-speech devices were ever made.

The final, and perhaps most alarming bit, was her...well, not sleepwalking, as she would seem perfectly awake in her little home. She’d even talk normally, act normally-she’d certainly be very cross with any sudden visitors for disturbing her privacy at this hour (unless you had brought news of a crisis, in which case she’d be all business). But she wouldn’t really recall these episodes, only hazy, dreamlike activity. She certainly wouldn’t recall being cross with a dark-haired mute with a distinctive text-to-speech device for disturbing her privacy at this hour when there was no crisis to manage (no, introducing Adrasteia to her cousin and teammate was not a crisis, no matter how important his information was!).

But nobody was that close to Piggot. Her paranoia about parahumans had led to obsession with her job to the exclusion of, well, Piggot; the closest thing the Director had to friends was the guards posted outside her door even before the Expedition business had really driven her up a wall with managing crises. A truly effective leader, in her mind, made nothing whatsoever personal—something her highest superior in the PRT approved of. Which meant no close friends that might bias her decisions.

So of course, nobody would be in a position to notice any of this. They would not notice the small coating of frost that would occasionally coat her own personal computer’s keyboard, or the fact that whenever this happened, a .txt file hidden in the deeper reaches of said computer’s directory grew a little larger.

It wasn’t nearly complete yet, but if someone knew her starting dream, when she started with this behaviors, it wouldn’t take a Thinker power to guess what the completed file would look like from the starting line;

*As Was Once Before, So Shall Be Again*...
The beta hiring ad was for a crossover between Gravity Falls and the New World of Darkness...the latter of which happens to be a lot more optimistic and fitting of the themes in the show than the Classic one—if you’re thinking Vampire: the Masquerade, Werewolf: the Apocalypse, and Mage: the Ascension that’s the Classic WoD, sorry. New one has a lot more elements of mad science and blatant weirdness to it (I like to say that in the New WoD, people are aware of the supernatural, but also are aware of the fact it turns vicious on people who talk about it, so they voluntarily remain ignorant), and less imminent apocalypse and 90’s punk culture (which is to say the authority figures can just be mistaken and/or uninformed instead of corrupt and/or incompetent). Which sounds a lot more like the supernature-infested town where the only real reason why the supernature is secret is due to liberal use of memory eraser, and giant robots are a specialty of the local kook. I don’t mind betas who are fans of Gravity Falls, I’ve turned the outline into a primer on the nWoD.

It also has a lot more potential for it to remain vaguely possible kids might be involved with a bad part of it directly and come out the other end shaken but alive and not wishing they were dead. So there’s that. Email me or comment on this chapter if you want to know more, and the plot outline.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!