Summary

Completely Unoriginal is an affectionate parody of the CYOA/SI/MC genre, taking an overused, underappreciated premise and trying to do something interesting with it. This is a Self-Insert, with power-manipulation abilities, in Brockton Bay. Expect fucking about.

Crossposted from SpaceBattles
In retrospect, maybe Brockton Bay wasn't the best city to be bald in.

I mean, you'd think the beard, the blue plaid pearl-snap shirt, and the fact that my tattoos had fictional monsters instead of alt-reich imagery would be contraindication enough to let people know I had a shaved head because I was prematurely balding in my late 20s, not because I was a bigot.

Apparently the ABB thugs chasing me down the alleyway didn't get the memo.

"Shit shit shit shit shit," I muttered to myself as I raced down the narrow concrete deathtrap, hurtling past overflowing dumpsters and one rather surprised-looking homeless person. Poetry, I know. Shakespeare's got nothing on me, really.

I thought I'd have a LITTLE time to get used to my powers, but noooo. That "Wanted: ABB" drawback (and its accompanying points) were too damn tempting. What an auspicious start to my career in the Wormverse. God help me if the other "Wanted" drawbacks came into play this quickly.

Great, more alleyways. I swear, this city was 90% dark alleyways and abandoned warehouses. Could I even smell the ocean? The sun was completely hidden by grey clouds, no help there. And my internal search wasn't any more successful. No metaphorical lights, orbs, switches, diagrams, ANY sort of clue how I turned my damn powers on.

I turned corners at a skid, marking my passage with overturned trash cans and startled alley cats. I had no idea where I was going and those teenage fucks were gaining on me, hollering and taunting what they'd do to me when they caught me. I could maybe fight my way past one, two if I was being generous, but they had knives and numbers and youthful enthusiasm on their side.

FUCK. The alleyway was a dead end, and if I doubled back they'd catch me for sure. There had to be - a door, almost a cellar entrance. I prayed it was unlocked as I slammed into it with my shoulder with a CRACK I felt as much as heard and the door gave way, revealing a dingy, dimly-lit hallway. Storage closet on my right, bathroom on my left, I staggered to keep my footing and barreled onward, half-blind from the change in lighting.

The hallway gave way to a bar, smelling of beer and piss and decorated with scratched-up pool tables and recycled couches. A few of the locals turned to stare at me, a few older men at the bar, a couple in the corner, a handful of kids around the pool table definitely too young to drink. I hesitated a moment, trying to adjust my eyes to find the exit, there! A narrow staircase in the corner. I pivoted to start running again and-

Something hard tackled me in the back, sending me sprawling and upending one of the small tables littering the room. Stunned, my attacker recovered from the tangle of limbs faster than I did and started swinging at my head, shoulder, anything he could get his fists on as I tried to protect myself. He was laughing, breathless gasps punctuated by the painful smacks of fist against flesh.

"Got you, cocksucker."
"Fuck OFF!" I shouted back, voice (embarrassingly) cracking mid-shout from the exertion. And, strangely enough, he did. In fact, he scrambled off me so fast it seemed like he was thrown.

I looked up between hands desperately trying to protect my head and face only to make eye contact with a very surprised Asian thug. His eyes fell to look at-

The fuck was that on my leg? A stain from running through trash? It was a dim purple, almost glowing. For a moment I was afraid I'd ran through radioactive waste. Brockton Bay was kind of a shithole - I wouldn't have been entirely surprised.

I hauled myself to my feet, body aching, leaning on a much-suffering sofa for support. Before I could say anything, two more (apparently less athletic) ABB thugs ran into the bar from the entrance we came in, and one of the people in the corner stood up and shouted "THE FUCK YOU CUMSTAINS THINK YOU'RE DOING HERE!"

While everyone in the room turned to look at him, I grabbed the nearest table, threw it with unexpected force at the fucker who tackled me, and bolted for the stairs. I heard it smash and the thug give a shout of pain and surprise behind me as I took the steps three at a time, breath ragged and adrenaline giving one last desperate burst. A quick glance around and THERE! An exit!

I barreled through it, sending it smashing into the wall opposite as I made my way back into the street. And it WAS a street, not an alleyway; evening commuters sat in gridlock, the sound of idling engines a comforting roar. After leaning against the wall for a second, trying to catch my breath and glancing behind me to see if I was still pursued - no sign yet - I took a second to calm myself down and tried to blend in with the crowd herding past.

People were giving me looks - quick, act casual! A hand through my beard, smoothing my shirt, a smile I hoped was more winning than unhinged, and they quickly looked away. Hopefully mollified and not terrified.

I spared a glance down at my legs and saw the purple stain. Shit, that was kind of noticeable. Could I wipe it off?

Surprisingly, as soon as I passed my hand over it to try, it vanished.

I could think about what the hell that was later. First, find somewhere quiet to think for ten uninterrupted seconds without someone trying to mug me, beat me and/or kill me. I tried not to show my paranoia too much, only glancing around for further pursuit every few seconds instead of keeping my head on a swivel until something caught my eye.

Oh thank fuck was that a Starbucks?

I didn't even like coffee, but at the moment I was just relieved to see something so familiar, so mundane, as a goddamn corner cafe just like back home. The door dinged as I opened it and - quick situational awareness check came back clean - immediately collapsed into the nearest overstuffed pleather chair.

I was sweaty, I was liberally stained with foul-smelling unnameable filth, my shoes were caked with mud and I desperately needed a shower... but at the moment, I could at least stop, and breathe, and think.
And that's when I noticed the tattoos on my right arm had changed.

Where Khepri was poised to push the sun across the sky, just on the inside of my wrist - look, I was a fan of mythology before I read Worm, not everything has to be related - the sun had been replaced with a pattern in a circle. Stacked arrows, like a boost mark in racing games, inside a purple ring with one notch on it, bare flesh peering through a narrow gap in the ink. That... had not been not there when I had arrived.

I didn't know how long I stared at it, mind spinning in circles, before someone got my attention. I looked up at the pimple-faced, green-haired, rather androgynous teenage barista trying to both shy away from me and seem assertive at the same time. "Sir? I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

I gaped at him - her? - them, mind still trying to change gears and failing. I glanced around to see the tables and chairs around me had cleared out, and some of the other customers were eying me suspiciously. A protest died in my throat - I looked like shit and I hadn't even bought anything. And since I didn't want to buy anything a Starbucks would sell...

Standing up, slowly as to not scare the barista, I tried to give them a reassuring smile. "No problem."

They didn't exactly sigh in relief, but they did stare at me until I walked out through the door, where I officially became Someone Else's Problem.

Time to take stock of my resources. I had fifty dollars, a driver's license to - New Hampshire, knew it! - a bus pass, and someone else's copied powers. I needed a shower, new clothes, and a place to sleep and plan.

Which just left me two questions.

Did Brockton Bay have a YMCA?

And why the fuck did it have to be Skidmark?

Chapter End Notes

Completely Unoriginal is both true and a play on words, considering the OC's powerset. Skitter Mode's a bitch, though. Let's see how well he does, and if his choices can make the most cliche fanfic story ever any more exciting than usual.
I had a list of places I wanted to sight-see, should I ever end up in Worm.

The Boardwalk, with its view of the Protectorate's floating base. The Rig itself. Fugly Bob's, to see how bad the Challenger was. The Forsberg Gallery, to see if it was the architectural nightmare Accord thought it was. A few villainous lairs, just for curiosity's sake. A house with a broken front step.

A ratty YMCA shower room was not on the list. And between my limited starting funds, the day pass to the Y and the two dollars for a padlock (that I got to keep, sweet!), I didn't think I was going to be able to afford a real hotel for the night. And I was going to have to spend money on some more clothes, because mild winters didn't mean I didn't need a jacket, especially if I was going to have to sleep outside. Judging from all the homeless on the streets and alleys, I figured Brockton Bay's homeless shelters were either at capacity or nonexistent.

On the plus side, Skidmark's powers were surprisingly handy for getting mud off of my pants and shoes. Not enough to remove the stains left behind, but at least I just looked dirty instead of like I just completed a 5k mud run and obstacle course.

What was more uncomfortable, however, was the feeling that I was being watched.

It started at the Y and followed me to the Goodwill, but no matter what I did or where I looked - I even tried that "pretend to window shop but actually check your reflection" thing you see in movies - I couldn't actually see who was responsible. The bums spanging on the corner? The teenagers huddled around their cell phones, giggling conspiratorially? I even checked the skies, but no flying cape rewarded my genre awareness.

I shrugged my new-to-me, fifth-hand messenger bag over my shoulder, pulled the navy-style gray peacoat closer around me against the chill, and just let my feet wander. At least this time I avoided alleyways. And kept my bald head covered by a beanie; no need to get mistaken for a Nazi again.

In the end my feet led me to the Boardwalk after all. After quickly purchasing a moleskin notebook and a pen - it cost even more of my dwindling funds, but the Enforcers don't bother paying customers and as far as camouflage went, the difference between "struggling author" and "actual bum" was surprisingly thin - I perched myself on a sea-facing bench and tried to plan.

The Protectorate was an option. Coil was shady as shit, the Merchants were assholes, Nazis were Nazis (and it was amazing how you actually had to add anything to that, these days), I wasn't Asian, New Wave was pretty much just family, and Faultline's crew...

Well, I could give them the answers they sought. And with Blank, I wouldn't have to worry about a fedorable interrupt. But considering how they were brutally "discouraged" in that one interlude, and how my perk wouldn't cover them, and how little good the information would do them in the end... nah, they were too good of people to let them get hurt like that. I certainly couldn't afford to hire them, and with how smart Faultline was supposed to be, she would be too suspicious to actually let me join them for support. There was always the independent route, but if my run-in with the ABB
had taught me nothing else, I didn't think I'd be safe for very long.

If I was even safe at all.

Seeking distraction from gloomy thoughts, I looked out over the water at the glittering force-field surrounding the Protectorate base. Even with gray skies reflected in gray waters, it was a little beacon of hope in a city slowly dying.

The clouds parted, just a fraction, and I felt the sunshine on my face. I stopped thinking for a moment and just let myself breathe, the salt-fish sea scent filling my nostrils. I always liked being near the water; even with the smell of decay, it had a certain purity to it, a wholesomeness and promise of adventure. And this was an adventure. I was actually here, in Worm, in Brockton Bay, and I had a power, with the promise of more to come. I could make changes, I could throw canon right off the rails, I could right wrongs and-

Then the moment was spoiled by a child squealing not ten feet away, the high-pitched sound grating, ear-piercing. I glanced that direction to see an infant, squalling and flailing its tiny arms, its mother shushing it and bouncing it in her arms. I grimaced, but it was in public. Not like she'd brought her crotch-spawn to a movie theater or restaurant. I turned back to the sea, trying to regain the feeling.

Failing at that, instead I complained in my head; it's like I was a magnet for annoyances. First the ABB, then Skidmark, then the mousy-looking woman and her broodling...

...Wait.

I pulled up the sleeve of my slightly-too-large coat and stared at the new tattoo that had formed. Where the serpent coiled around my forearm ended, mouth poised to swallow the world, the earth had been replaced with a new symbol. A double helix in white, faintly contrasted in gray, in a white circle and one notch in the ring.

Before I could even process what that meant, a voice spoke up to my side. "Nice ink."

"Thanks," I answered by reflex before looking up at the speaker. A tall man - easily a head taller than me, but that wasn't as hard as I'd have liked - with a relaxed expression and unremarkable clothing. He gave the faintest hint of a grin and made to sit on the other end of the bench I was admittedly hogging. I begrudgingly scooted over, covering my tattoos with my sleeve and trying not to be too obvious about glancing at him in the corner of my eyes.

He didn't react, just stared out at the sea. He didn't match the profile of any of the capes I was aware of, but admittedly some of the descriptions were rather sparse. He could be Velocity for all I knew. I glanced at my covered arm, but resisted the urge to check for any new tattoos until I had some privacy.

"First time seeing the rig?"

I glanced at him, openly then, but he still wasn't looking my way. Nobody else was close - the woman and child had left a bit earlier - so I assumed he was talking to me.

"Yeah." There. As noncommittal as possible. Maybe he'd take the hint and-

"New in town?"
Damnit. He was either a persistent stranger or wanted something from me. I could have just left, but... Hell, I was in an adventure, I may as well listen to possible plot hooks. Worst case scenario, it was a waste of time.

Well, no, there were far worse worst case scenarios, but the silence had stretched out long enough it was getting awkward.

"Yeah."

Truly, I was a wordsmith for the ages.

He took long enough before replying I was starting to wonder if he really was just a talkative stranger.

"Looking for work?"

Ah, there it was. He was just off-white enough not to fit into the Empire, and the blend was Hispanic enough to imply he wasn't from the ABB. Could be Coil - maybe Tattletale had spotted me? Or the PRT, with him peering over their shoulders? He was too decently-dressed to be Merchants, but then again, I was technically homeless and I was blending in on the Boardwalk too...

"Who?"

He paused, choosing his words.

"Just someone you ran into."

Fuck. That WAS Skidmark in the bar, wasn't it. Saw my face and everything. Thanks, "Wanted". Fucking regretting that now, wasn't I?

Still, not the type of recruitment - or recruiter, for that matter - I would have expected.

Some of that must have shown on my expression, because he cracked a ghost of a smile. "Not asking for life. But we can help you get started. A place to stay, support. You don't join, then hey, we made a friend."

'And someone who owes the Merchants favors', went the unspoken add-on. Not to mention a rap sheet from whatever I did to earn my keep - probably wouldn't be legal, after all.

I didn't answer right away, and he didn't push me. Fact of the matter was, though, they knew my face, they demonstrated they could find me without me spotting them, and I was fucking homeless for the moment.

There was a much more appealing option, of course. It would come with its own complications, though, the closing off of numerous paths and opportunities forever. I realized I wasn't quite ready to commit to that yet.

"Their offer comes with strings attached," he said, and I realized I had been looking at the Rig. That, or he was psychic. His voice was even, calm, almost bored. He could have been talking about the weather for all the emotion that came across.

"And yours doesn't."
He shrugged, the gesture expressive despite its subtle movement, and made a weighing motion with his hands, palms up as if balancing options.

"Hungry?"

My stomach didn't audibly growl, despite what being in a narrative would have lead me to believe. It did clench, though, at his suggestion. It had been cramping something awful since the adrenaline of the chase a few hours before, and I hadn't wanted to spend my dwindling funds quite so quickly before I found a place to stay the night.

I blew out a sigh. "Yeah."

He just stood up, the motion as relaxed as the rest of him, tilted his head back towards the Boardwalk shops and restaurants, and walked away.

After a moment, I stood up and followed.

Chapter End Notes

He really doesn't want to join the Merchants.
"I was expecting more..."

"Unmarked van, black hood, needles?"

I took another bite of my Italian sub rather than answer. The other guy - Steve, apparently - did the same with his tuna on rye. The streets were slowly clearing out of rush hour traffic, and this close to the Boardwalk they were still wide and relatively well-kept. For Brockton Bay, anyway. We strode past cigarette-choked planters holding scraggly ornamental bushes, Steve walking slightly ahead, leading the way. I wasn't sure how long I'd follow him, but a free sandwich was worth listening for a few minutes, and I could always run away if things started getting shady. Maybe even try out Purity's powers, who up to that point had just made the occasional flashes of sunlight peeking between thick cloud cover feel really nice.

"Doesn't inspire much loyalty."

I imagined it wouldn't. Although dependency and blackmail would serve almost as well, if you didn't have much of a moral code. Which, you know, Merchants...

"You new?"

I tensed for a moment, wondering if he was somehow aware of my true nature. Then I realized he was probably asking if I was new to my powers, and nodded.

"Not gonna ask details. But you travel light and don't act homeless. Either you're fresh or your circumstances have recently changed. You got any heat?"

At my puzzled look he elaborated. "Protectorate, warrants out for your arrest, bounties. Anybody hunting you." Presumably he didn't want to bring any more attention to his own organization by bringing me into the fold. Not that he would.

I noticed he didn't say "looking for me" or "waiting for me", because answering that would tell him if I had anyone who would notice if I disappeared. Polite way of dancing around that particular red flag.

"Some pissed off ABB kids, maybe."

He nodded. After less time than I expected - but long enough to finish the sandwiches - he stopped in front of a brownstone, one of several identical townhomes stacked like books on a shelf. It was far closer to the Boardwalk than what I assumed a Merchant safehouse would be comfortable being, but maybe it was his apartment. It was effective camouflage - nobody would suspect it of being anything but upper-middle-class housing.

"Coffee?"

"I don't drink it."
"I don't either."

I glanced at him, and he was ever-so-faintly smirking. Strangely, I didn't feel like he was making fun of me, so much as he was... sharing an inside joke, perhaps. He spared me from having to come up with an answer by reaching for the panel by the front door, a keypad where a lock might have been. "1-2-2-1, then pound," he said quietly. The door unlocked at the final keypress with a light thunk.

Inside was a narrow, sparsely furnished apartment. The faint trace of cigarettes (and what I hoped wasn't sex) hung in the air, but otherwise it was unexpectedly clean. I stepped in after him, giving the place a once-over. It was clear nobody lived there; temporary housing for gang members, perhaps? A place to stash things where nobody would think to look?

Steve ambled - it was the only word to describe his lazy stride - to the second-hand loveseat, leaving me the pleather couch with a scratched-up coffee table between us.

"Help yourself to some beer. Grab me one if you do."

I mean, he wouldn't risk poisoning himself too. I figured it was safe. I waited til I saw him crack the offered can open and take a big swallow before doing the same. The beer was cheap, but tasted no different than I expected, and was reassuringly familiar. Cheap beer, tastes the same no matter what world you're in.

"You want to talk for a bit or get straight to it?"

"I bet you say that to all the girls."

The edge of his lip curled the tiniest bit, but he waited for me to answer, taking another healthy swig of beer.

"Come on then, lay it on me."

It wasn't til he gave me an amused look over the edge of his beer can that I realized the "that's what she said" potential of what I had just said. Well played, sir, well played. I may have grinned, despite myself.

The conversation that followed covered the unwritten rules, the general dynamics of the city's gangs, and broad strokes of what the Merchants had to offer, all of it fairly direct. He didn't shy away from any questions or sugarcoat the gang's reputation, prostitution, drug sales, any of it. Throughout, we killed a six pack and were halfway through a second; apparently the fridge had nothing but frozen pizzas and cheap beer.

In the end, the offer was surprisingly mild. Stay at the safehouse for a few days to get my bearings, tell him if I needed anything within reason - clothes, food, medical attention, drugs, women (or men, or someone from the range between the two, he wasn't about to judge - it did make some of the stains on the couch more suspicious, though) - and if I was willing to meet someone higher up in the gang, I'd be welcome to. If not, I'd get a care package (I didn't ask what that entailed) and be allowed to go on my merry way. He even handed me a cheap Nokia phone with his number pre-programmed.

"This was..."

"Not what you expected?"
"What do you get out of all of this? What if I just take advantage of your generosity and bail? Or tell people what you've told me?"

"Haven't told you anything important. Haven't shown you anything we can't replace. And if we help ten people like this and get even one new cape out of it, it pays for itself."

"Huh."

"Anyway, I'm off. Call or text if you need anything. Try not to burn the place down; if you want to test your powers we have places for that."

"Boat Graveyard?"

"Nah, everybody watches for new capes there. We have some places outside city limits for that."

Seeing I had no other questions - none I could put into words, anyway - he nodded and left, leaving me in the apartment alone with my thoughts.

These were the Merchants?

What, did the Empire have hot tubs and strippers?

Speaking of which...

I removed the coat, revealing my relatively-clean undershirt and bare arms. Nothing new, nothing unfamiliar, aside from the two additions.

I raised a hand to try Purity's powers...

And then remembered what Steve said. Probably be rude to accidentally blast a hole in the wall right after he warned me not to.

I could have called him back, do some testing. I could have explored the city more. I could have gone sight-seeing - with the essentials covered, a full stomach and a comfortable buzz, I was in good shape to go wandering, see where my treacherous feet took me next time.

Instead I passed out on the couch watching nature documentaries on the old tube TV.

Because I was the best adventurer.

Chapter End Notes

Makes you wonder how most gangs do their recruiting. Strong-arming people can't account for all their members, for all that it's mentioned in canon. I mean, it happened to Bakuda, and Tattletale, but everyone else mentioned joined because they needed something the gang had to offer, whether personal or pay or safety.
Day 1.4 : Who?

I wouldn't say super-jumping was *more* fun than flying would be, but it certainly was a fucking *lot* of fun.

After a few hours, I'd woken up to the TV off and a duffel bag of clothes on the couch next to me where I'd sprawled. It was a little disconcerting that someone (I could only assume Steve) had been able to catch me completely defenseless like that, but it wouldn't have made sense for them to make that offer only to jump me in my sleep immediately after. At least the clothes weren't exactly my size - it meant nobody was measuring me in my sleep.

In the end I decided to pass on his offer of power testing. I don't know what the Merchants had gleaned of my powers from what they'd seen so far, but no point in just handing them that information.

Instead I went out roof-hopping over and through the sleeping city.

It took everything in me not to shout "Parkour!" with every power-assisted leap. Turns out my copy of Purity's powers were too weak for actual flight, and I didn't want to try glowing or blasting quite yet. It was still plenty to give me a twenty foot standing leap, though, which was a fucking blast.

Kinda rough on the landings, though. I tried rolling, to spread the impact, but mostly just succeeded in bruising my everything and wearing holes in my replacement jeans.

I wiped my brow; beating the streets was hard work, even if I was just traveling and not actively looking for trouble, and I was starting to regret the hoodie and bandanna combo Steve had given me in the duffel. I was sweating despite the chill, and didn't want to pull the hood down to air out some sweat because my shaved head might be recognizable. Or give the wrong impression.

As I leapt from rooftop to rooftop, dodging air conditioning units and trying not to eat shit on gravel roofs, I did wish my powers were a bit more transparent. A radar would be nice, and some sort of mental list of powers both nearby and acquired. The tattoos were a nice touch, but I had no means of finding new abilities other than picking a random direction and trusting in probably-subconscious nudges to take me somewhere interesting.

Speaking of which, as I skidded to a stop on a high rooftop with a good view of the neighboring streets, I realized it was already occupied.

"Well, *one* of us is going to have to change."

The other man spun in place, fists clenched in surprise. "What?" Their tone was sharp, unamused, a tiny bit angry, probably that I'd snuck up on them. Not my fault, I didn't know he'd claimed dibs on the rooftop.

"How will people tell us apart if we're wearing the same outfit?"

They were *also* wearing the unofficial uniform of new capes everywhere, the loose-hoodie-and-
bandanna combo I was currently sporting. On the other hand, they filled out their much more impressively, a veritable wall of muscle where I was... well, let's be generous and say "wiry".

He glanced at me, almost a foot shorter and clearly a quarter his bulk, then back down at his costume, and seemed to deflate a little as the tension eased. Check that - he literally deflated, muscles shrinking to fit the hoodie a bit better, without so much bulging at the seams.

"New hero too?"

"Yeah. Couldn't find anything better to wear either?"

He shook his head slightly, and I got the impression he was grinning. Maybe a little embarrassed.

I took a few steps forward, posture nonthreatening, and held out my hand. "I'm Fax."

He took it after an admirably short pause, hand dwarfing mine. "Browbeat." He gave a firm shake, then let me go.

I took a step back, giving him his space. After a moment, he tilted his head a bit. "Facts, as in factual?"

I shook my head. "Like 'fax machine'." He was giving me a look, so I grinned behind my bandanna and explained. "I chose it for the puns, mostly."

To my sincere regret, he didn't ask me for examples.

I did resist the urge to check my tattoos, though. Definitely don't want to get into that habit; it may tell people too much about my power.

I could not resist trying out his power a bit. Aww yeah, scrapes and bruises gone, muscles bumped up a bit, height-

Motherfucker! I couldn't make myself taller?

I scowled, but Browbeat didn't say anything, just half-turned to look back over the street. Being a proper hero, rather than being distracted by the shinies. Good lad.

"So what can you do?"

"Still figuring that out, to be honest. I'm a bit of a grab-bag."

He nodded, not pressing me for details. Just being polite. "I can make myself tougher, stronger, bit of healing."

"Nice." I didn't begrudge him for not mentioning the other aspect of his power; I wasn't exactly spilling my guts myself.

He shrugged. "Not all that special, in this town."

"Being forgettable is probably safer, in a town this dangerous."

He looked pensive, eyes still scanning the streets below. "I was thinking of joining... joining the
Protectorate."

I glanced at what I could see of his face. He could probably pass for an adult, with that build. Again, with the misdirection. I supposed you couldn't be too careful, even with people who seemed to have no ill intent.

I wondered if that was applicable to my situation?

...nah.

"Not a bad choice. Backup, training, good pay. Considered it myself."

"Keeping your options open?"

"Yeah."

"Motherfucker!" That wasn't him, that was a distant scream from down below. His head snapped to that direction, and I struggled to see what was going on. Was that a scuffle in an alley?

Fucking alleys and Brockton Bay, I swear...

I looked back at Browbeat and-

He had already leapt off the side of the building, one hand dragging over the rough brick wall, slowing his descent.

I shrugged and followed suit.

Adventuring, ho!

Chapter End Notes

Hooray for puns!
Day 1.5 : What a NILF

I was fucking exhausted.

Hanging out with Browbeat was fine; beat up a few muggers (ABB - Lung must be loving me), stick around to babysit the seriously whiny thugs (boohoo, I got maced, well maybe you shouldn't be jumping girls in the street, asshole), give a brief statement to the most jaded, nonplussed cops on the planet, exchange numbers in case we ever decide to patrol together, and I was on my way.

Once in privacy, I did check my tattoos. Right arm was unchanged, but my left, where the Wendigo snarled, one of its eyes had been replaced with a white bar and red stripes on either side - muscle and bone, I assumed - in a red circle, again with one notch. I really needed to figure out what all that meant. I did get the feeling I was tapped out for the day, though.

Again, that part was fine.

But that 'wandering' trick I did, where I simply show up where I need to be? Apparently that tapped out for the day too, because I had absolutely no fucking clue how to get home. I didn't have an address, only a vague recollection of a distance and direction from the Boardwalk, which I also couldn't find. Apparently the coast was a lot fucking longer than I anticipated.

Three fucking hours wandering around in the middle of the night before I thought to text and ask Steve.

Who sent a cab to get me a few minutes later to take me the five blocks it took to get back to the apartment.

I hated Brockton Bay.

So much.

Granted, Browbeat's powers helped with the leg cramps and tiredness, even after I gave up roof-hopping, but apparently that energy had to come from somewhere, because I slept like the dead once I got back to the couch.

And it was the couch, because the bed was king-sized and incredibly lumpy, uncomfortable in more ways than one.

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I woke up when the sun was setting, feeling surprisingly good - thanks Browbeat! - but ravenously hungry.

Two frozen pizzas later, one burnt to carbon and the other still half-frozen, I was sated and ready to be a human again.

I felt my power had recharged, too. Not sure exactly when, or how I knew it, but eh. Powers. I'd
hoped my powers would… improve, in some way, thanks to the recharge, but apparently they required some other sort of trigger. Knowing Worm, it was probably CONFLICT.

Wandering around was an option, of course, but I hadn't exactly been choosing what powers I got. Maybe I should be more proactive? More picky? Maybe I could just go sight-seeing again? Maybe I should start to think how I was planning on derailing canon, and the safest ways of doing so?

Or maybe I would just obsessively read my new thread on PHO for a few hours.

Yeah, that one.

I was impressed how quickly the internet got hold of my picture from my first public appearance with Browbeat. Thank god they reported my name right, because some of the suggestions were truly awful. Especially considering how little of a powerset I actually revealed!

At least the puns were exactly what I'd hoped for. I may have made a 'squee' noise entirely unbecoming of a man of my age and maturity when Clockblocker himself (Clockblocker!) made an off-color pun about my name that was almost immediately redacted. Probably got written up by PR for it, no doubt. Apparently it's unbecoming of a child soldier to make a joke about "not giving a Fax", despite its literal innocence.

Still, I couldn't spend the whole night on PHO, as tempting as it was. Maybe it was the CONFLICT! drive, maybe it was the knowledge that my powers built slowly and so demanded constant effort to scale properly, maybe it was the look Steve gave me when he showed up and saw me giggling at my phone, but I finally got off my ass and put on my "costume" once again. Steve didn't say anything about it; perhaps he just expected as much. It did make me wonder how many times he'd done this particular gambit, and if it had resulted in any familiar villains. Or heroes, for that matter.

That thought gave me pause, and I stopped by him before I left. "Hey, Steve."

"Hmm?"

"Any issue with me being a hero?"

"As long as you're not busting Merchants, no, not really."

"...and if I stop a mugger or rapist who happens to be a Merchant?"

He shrugged microscopically again. "Self-policing. Happens all the time. Don't target them specifically and there's no problem."

Somehow I doubted Skidmark would be quite so chill about that sort of thing, but I wasn't about to call him out on it. Not like I was actually planning on joining. That said, I really should figure out something more long-term. Couldn't keep mooching off Merchant generosity forever (now if that's not a phrase I never thought I'd say).

But first, more roof-hopping!

(After sending a taunting message to AllSeeingEye first, though. I was only human.)
I may have 'wandered' over ABB territory again. I mean, it wasn't like they'd be any less pissed at me. And I may have wanted to get a shot at Lung or Oni Lee, because damn would those be useful powers.

Instead I was suddenly blinded by a brilliant spotlight from the sky. One with an unexpectedly warm, refreshing undertone as Purity's power basked in the brightness like a flower following the sun.

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I lowered the hand I'd instinctively raised in front of my face and took in the sight of the racist glowbug herself as she descended to float over my rooftop. Perhaps it was her power interacting with itself, but I could see her face clearly despite her actinic glare. Definitely that mousy woman with the fussy child at the Boardwalk. She was looking at me with hesitant expectation, as if she expected me to attack her on sight; her posture was halfway between prepared to attack and prepared to flee.

She visibly relaxed when I just waved, but didn't completely lower her guard. "You're a new face."

"Yeah."

"Hero?"

"Yeah."

"Me too."

"So I've heard."

At that she did settle down, clearly pleased I was aware of her intention to be an independent hero. Probably didn't get that reaction a lot, considering she hadn't changed her MO from when she was actively a part of the Empire. I got the feeling she was used to people not being to look directly at her, though, because she had a terrible poker face. In fact, she seemed a bit concerned when she noticed I was making direct eye contact, so I quickly glanced aside.

Seriously, though, her glowing was really nice. Like stepping into a warm bath.

"It's nice to meet another independent hero. I'm... I'm Purity." Aww, she was actually biting her lip in nervousness, like hearing her name would remind me she was actually a Nazi.

I mean, she was, but she kind of meant well. I wasn't about to join her, but I didn't see a point in needlessly starting fights I couldn't win. Plus, you know, that glow.

"Fax. Like the machine. Nice to meet you, too." We shook hands. Made a little small talk. I may have basked a bit too much in her radiance, because she asked me if it was too bright, and I realized I had closed my eyes.

"Nah. Kinda nice, actually."

"Oh! Really?" She looked at me with some curiosity. "What are your powers? If you don't mind me asking, anyway."

"Not quite sure. Bit of a grab-bag," I lied again. She seemed more skeptical than Browbeat did, so I added "A bit adaptive. Like Aegis, kinda?" At that she gave a thoughtful nod, looking at me appraisingly.
"I was planning on patrolling a bit longer..."

"Ah, I was planning on heading back, actually..."

On the one hand, she was a Nazi. On the other, she looked so disappointed, just a bit heartbroken, realizing I still didn't want to be associated with her even though I'd said I knew she wanted to be a hero.

...Damnit. "I... suppose I could hop a few more roofs tonight."

Sheltered by Merchants, seen patrolling with a black hero and a white supremacist former-ish villain on two consecutive nights. The fuck was my life?

The way her glow brightened - literally - with happiness helped, though. I matched her smile with my own (albeit behind the bandanna) and-

-immediately overshot the next roof by twenty feet, tumbling and smashing into the brick wall.

Once she was sure I was fine - thanks again, Browbeat! - she had a bit of a hard time stifling her laughter. Couldn't blame her, to be honest. That would take some getting used to. What changed?

I surreptitiously checked my tattoos and... oh, hey. The ring around Purity's symbol now had TWO notches through it, on opposite sides.

Neat.

And then, as I watched, a new symbol joined the others. This one, held in the clutches of the Eastern-style dragon spiraling opposite the world-serpent, looked like a... a weird, red face? With squashed, angry features and what looked like little tusks...

And that was my only warning before Purity and I were both shanked from behind.

Chapter End Notes

The best part about his powers is I don't have to even try to justify why he keeps getting involved in shit like this. Space whale magic! *waves hands*
I'd like to say I immediately reacted calmly and rationally, sealing my wound, grabbing Purity and making a fighting withdrawal.

Instead I flailed, staggered, made a strangled cry, and only then turned around to blast the clone behind me into ash. The wall behind it was cracked, but even that left me feeling strangely drained.

Purity, on the other hand, immediately shot into the sky. Oni Lee blinked behind her, landing on her back even up in the air, but she spun and blasted him off her before the grenades he triggered exploded.

And HOLY SHIT do grenades make a lot of noise!

I tried to fly up after her, but I was a bit too stunned by the STAB WOUND IN MY BACK to concentrate on using powers. Seriously! Pain is way more distracting than action heroes make it out to be!

Thankfully it only took me a few seconds to remember I had a power for that. I sagged in relief as the wound closed-

Only to get a faceful of Oni Lee, who is surprisingly grabby for an emotionless assassin. Thankfully, between my lower-power Purity blast and a flare of Skidmark's fields, he was pushed back enough to give me enough distance to leap into the sky before he exploded, jumping fifty feet straight up with a slow, drifting descent at the top of my arc. Seeing my flight powers inadequate to the task of keeping me airborne, Purity swiftly grabbed my by the back of my pants and hauled me skyward, occasionally jinking and twisting to throw off Oni Lee's aim.

Then there was a heavy weight on my legs, and the three of us - me, Purity and the Oni Lee clone desperately clinging to me - started dropping. Purity couldn't get an angle on him and still try to keep me from falling, so she disengaged, only to spin and blast away another clone attempting to do the same to her.

Skidmark's field was too weak to loosen his grip on my legs as we started plummeting another attempt at Purity's beams fizzled in my hand I was running out of time I reached out and-

-was suddenly ten feet away, free of the clone's clutches, but still falling.

The clone then exploded, sending me reeling and on a ballistic arc towards the ground, my flight powers overwhelmed and leaving me too stunned to try to figure out a way of softening my landing. There was a flash of light, and Purity swooped down to grab me before I hit the rooftops, grunting with effort as she hauled me skyward, arms wrapped around my chest. It was only a tiny bit emasculating, and more than a tiny bit - is there a word between arousing and impressive? Improusing? I may have a thing for stronger women, and for all Purity being kind of a pushover when it came to Kaiser, she had it where it counted.

But that may just have been her warm radiance speaking.
Up until it abruptly dimmed, as once we were high enough she stopped being as much of a beacon for Oni Lee to teleport to. I glanced back. Nope, still cute. Damn.

"Hold on," she grunted, and I may have made a bit of a squawk of surprise as she poured on the speed, hauling ass away from the teleporting serial suicide bomber. For all Browbeat's power gave me added bulk, I was never the biggest guy - for once, it worked to my advantage, as I doubted Purity would have been able to manhandle me otherwise.

Regardless, after a minute or two we were home free, angling towards Empire territory. I assumed, anyway. Fuck if I could tell anything about the city from this height.

"You alright?"

It took me a second to realize I was the one who spoke. Purity grunted a bit. "I'm fine. Got him off me before he could stab me too deep. You?"

"I heal." Speaking of which, I had some nasty shrapnel wounds from the grenades that needed patching up. Glancing down, the hoodie was riddled with holes and deeply stained with blood. Good thing it was cheap.

"Good."

We descended the rest of the way in silence, save for the rushing wind and the pounding of my heart from leftover adrenaline.

Cape fights were way more intense than fiction would lead you to believe. I felt like a wet noodle, muscles clenching and unclenching on their own as my body came to terms with the end of combat. I was shaking by the time Purity released me onto the rooftop of a five story building near what I assumed was downtown. As soon as my feet hit the cement, I sagged to my knees, trying to regain my breath.

Purity, to her credit, gave me some space while I processed what had happened.

"First cape fight?" Her voice was gentle, understanding. I could only nod.

"Oni Lee is a pain," she complained, and I barked out a laugh at the long-standing frustration in her voice.

For a solid minute she said nothing while I used Browbeat's powers to manually slow down my heart rate and breathing. Handy, having that sort of biofeedback. Not enough fine control to keep the adrenaline crash from hitting me like a ton of bricks, though.

"I couldn't help but notice those beams you shot looked like mine." I froze.

Her tone wasn't accusing, wasn't confrontational. When I didn't answer, mind racing to come up with an excuse, she continued "And I'm pretty sure you teleported away from that clone."

Damnit, she wasn't supposed to be that observant. She was waiting for a reply...

"Like I said, adaptive. Which is why it's hard to get a handle on my powers."
She nodded, apparently buying it. After a thoughtful pause, she said "Your powers would be a lot better on a team, I'm guessing."

I stood up, legs finally solid enough to support me, and leaned back, spine popping as I stretched. I delayed facing her as long as I could, because I knew what was coming next...

"Don't get caught up in the Empire, Fax."

Or not.

I blinked, looking her way. Our eyes met, height almost matching without flight to give either of us an advantage. On second thought, it made sense. She was ex-Empire, after all. When I didn't reply, she continued.

"Kaiser has a way of getting under your skin. Finding exactly what you want and dangling it in front of you without ever letting you get it. He's dangerous."

When I nodded, she blew out a sigh, relieved.

"I'm too gay for the Empire, anyway."

She suddenly tensed, eyes wide. I swore she was half a second from blasting me in shock. Before she could make up her mind to, I added "Just kidding."

"Ah." She breathed out a half-laugh, half-sigh. Glancing away, she seemed at least a little embarrassed by her immediate reaction. Still not a fan of "the gays", but at least aware she shouldn't be a bigot. At least a little. Or maybe that was me reading too much into it.

"Can I get your number?"

Her gaze snapped back to me, half-shocked again, but with suspicion for the other half this time. Cognitive whiplash.

"To patrol again. Or for backup."

"Y-yes. Of course."

I grinned and we exchanged numbers. Hers ended up next to Browbeat, to my amusement. Before she went on her way, she paused. "Thanks. For giving me a shot."

"Hell, thanks for saving my life."

She nodded, a small grin on her face, then flared once more from dim to brilliant light before taking to the sky in a streak of white.

I watched her fly away, lost in my thoughts.

Things were moving way quicker than I had expected. On the one hand, I needed to be active on the cape scene to build my powers. On the other hand, I needed to survive long enough to build my powers. That fight with Oni Lee, as brief as it was, nearly killed me twice. I wasn't fast enough, strong enough, maneuverable enough, or versatile enough. My smattering of powers made for a decent grab-bag, but I wasn't even using those effectively.
I scoffed at the direction my thoughts were headed. When did things get so serious? I was just planning on faffing about in the Wormverse.

When did it start feeling... real?

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun DUN
This time I wandered around the city on purpose, and not because I was lost.

I mean, I was lost. New city, unfamiliar landmarks, damn near identical buildings, endless alleyways... it was easy to lose track. Especially at night.

But for the moment it was nice to just let my body move and my mind wander.

I ran towards the edge of a rooftop, laid down a field and jump just before I hit it, pumping flight as I launched myself like a bullet. Spot my landing site, aim myself there with my flight and easing my descent, then hit the ground running. Repeat.

Simple, mindless, heart pounding and lungs pumping like a bellows. Subtle uses of biokinesis kept my oxygen distributed and muscles patched even as they tore, strands snapping like over-tightened bowstrings only to creep back together under my powers' guidance. Part of my attention finished patching up the wounds Oni Lee graced me with, power still too weak to heal them outright.

Meanwhile, my thoughts bounced around my head like a bean in an empty tin can.

Purity was kind of cute, but that whole Ubermensch thing she still sort of believed in really didn't do her any favors. And the whole 'mom' thing was kinda hot, except when you had to actually deal with the little monsters. They don't even have personalities of their own til they're, like, eight. And don't even develop decent personalities until their early twenties, if ever. Let's just say I hadn't exactly shed a tear when Skitter made her hard choice, chasing the Slaughterhouse Nine.

God, wasn't that a horrible thought. Thank god I didn't choose "Slaughterhouse is Hiring". Everybody hated S9 arcs, even when I was writing them.

I angled my body just right to clear a barbed-wire fence on top of an otherwise unremarkable warehouse somewhere in the shittier part of town. Not that you could really tell. Maybe it was the practice, but I was getting noticeably better at the whole "Parkour!" thing. Even started nailing the rolling dismount, transitioning smoothly into a run the second my body was oriented properly. With a subdued "Woop!" I did a flip as I cleared the other side of the fence, grinning all the while.

Seriously, super-jumping was a hell of a lot of fun. Even if I was starting to flag; enhanced endurance only helped me so much, and I was feeling spent. On the plus side, it was a nice reminder of how awesome having superpowers was, and how things weren't as bad as they seemed once the holes Oni Lee blew in me healed up.

Finding one of the million unoccupied, dark alleyways, I slipped off the bandanna, wrapped it in my holy hoodie, and quietly thanked Steve for getting me dark clothes that didn't show bloodstains as clearly as my white shirt would have.

Speaking of Steve, he was waiting for me when I made it home shortly after the sun rose, taxi rumbling off into the building rush-hour traffic.
"Have fun?"

I just grinned and threw my shirt at him, along with the bloody remains of my costume, heading towards the bathroom.

After a much-needed, entirely-too-long shower, leaving me feeling significantly refreshed, I was surprised to see him still waiting for me when I got out, toweling my beard dry. I raised one questioning eyebrow his way.

"Skidmark wants to meet you."

"...Fuck."

He held his hands up placatingly. "Your time isn't up. You don't have to make any decisions yet. You've just been making waves and he wants to know who he's helping out."

Seeing my displeased expression, he shifted tack slightly, gesturing at my arms. "Those different than yesterday?"

I froze. I *really* needed to get more long-sleeve shirts. Despite my impulse to play it off, I glanced at my arms. Skidmark, Oni Lee and Purity (with two notches!) on one side, Browbeat and-

Huh.

My mind raced. When did I...?

Must have 'wandered' over their lair on my rooftop tour of Brockton Bay's seedy underbelly. In the arms of the Dullahan, where its head should be, a yellow square with a white question mark lay, encircled in yellow.

Steve was still waiting, one eyebrow quirked slightly.

I just grabbed a shirt (long-sleeved!) from the duffel in lieu of answering.

He was pretty good at waiting in silence, I had to give him that.

Finally, new clothes acquired, I asked "We have time for breakfast?"

"Pick something up on the way."

"Any good breakfast tacos?"

"...What?"

Damnit.

Even in fiction, you couldn't get a decent breakfast north of the Mason-Dixie line.

---

Maybe I was a bit slow on the uptake, but it wasn't until we'd received our glorious bounty of McDonalds breakfast sandwiches (McDonalds! An acceptable substitute for food!) and continued
our cab ride that I realized Steve never actually paid for anything. Cab drivers didn't ask, the cashier took one look at him and hit a button on the register... Was this a "made man" situation? Were the Merchants the mafia on Bet?

He didn't pay any attention to me as we dug into our breakfasts, an extra pair of McMuffins slowly cooling and/or congealing in a greasy bag nestled between us in the backseat of the cab, instead choosing to spend the whole time texting quietly.

I decided it was as good a time as any to check PHO, and was completely unsurprised to see a reply waiting in my inbox.

**AReasonableFacsimile:** I know something you don't know~

**AllSeeingEye:** And what do you want?

A little disappointing, to be honest. I was hoping for more of a battle of wits, not a to-the-point retort. And it wasn't even clear if it was a "ugh, what do you want random weirdo" reply or a "I know your blood type, mother's maiden name and GPS coordinates and I'm asking you an armor-piercing question about your goals on Bet" reply.

Which, in retrospect, *did* kind of suit what I knew of her. Well played, Tats.

Before I'd decided on how best to answer, the cab pulled onto a gravel parking lot near the outskirts of town. Steve handed me a bandanna - more symbolic than anything - and after slipping it on I followed him out of the car to find myself approaching the side door of a dirty-looking strip club, the kind that had "BYOB" and "Totally Nude!" proudly emblazoned out front in flickering neon. I felt like I was at risk for Hepatitis just walking inside, but Steve strode on through with grace and purpose, not even slowing down to let his eyes adjust to the abrupt relative darkness. Blinking, I followed more hesitantly as he slipped between cheap tables and ratty sofas, passing the two small stages and heading straight towards the curtain labeled VIP.

Glancing around I saw a handful of people sitting and drinking, despite it being 9am on a Sunday, and one unhealthily-skinny girl smoothly gyrating on stage, unwieldy heels swinging like medieval maces through the air and a pair of old men staring hungrily at her from the rail.

Steve held the curtain to VIP open for me, then led me to another curtain, this one leading to a U-shaped booth with one occupant.

"You're a bit flat to be a stripper."

Skidmark grinned at me with shelled-pistachio teeth, more of a sneer really, and grabbed the breakfast sandwiches from Steve's outstretched hands. "Cute. But my male strip club is a few miles down the road, if that's your kink, sweetcheeks."

Touche. I slid into the booth opposite the gang leader and Steve leaned against the wall just inside of the curtain, keeping an eye out through a gap in the cheap suede every few seconds.

Skidmark devoured his breakfast messily, eyeballing me the whole time. I stared back, not wanting to be the first to break eye contact.

"You thinkin' bout joinin' the Empire?"
"Hell no."

"Good."

A brief pause while he reached for the second sandwich, hastily unwrapping it with practiced motions.

"You pickin' fights with the ABB?"

"They started it." At his renewed examination, I added "Thought I was a Nazi just because I'm bald."

He chuckled. "Profilin's a bitch, ain't it? Try being black."

I nodded, giving him the point. Especially in Brockton Bay.

We looked at each other, him leaning back, arms behind his head. To be honest, I had been expecting a lot more swearing. Then again, the Merchants had continued to surprise me the last few days.

"Honestly? I don't trust your fucking intentions."

I raised an eyebrow, and he narrowed his eyes. "Yer ID is fake." I glanced at Steve accusingly, but he was looking out at the corridor again. "-you've clearly never been homeless or hungry, you act like a fresh trigger but know shit you shouldn't, coincidences follow you like stank on a bitch and you've been playing the field like a two dollar slut between independents, Empire, ABB and us. If you sucked Armsmaster's halberd I wouldn't be fucking surprised, neither. Screams setup."

I opened my mouth to interject but he talked over me, leaning forward now, clearly on a roll. "Not to mention your motherfucking powers." He abruptly lunged at me, catching me by surprise, but he just grabbed my wrist and yanked back my sleeve, revealing the arrows-in-a-circle, now with two notches. "Weirdest shit I've ever seen but even a goddamn junkie can see patterns."

My eyes darted back to Steve, anger starting to overwhelm my shock, but movement out of the corner of my eye brought me face to face with-

-When the fuck did Skidmark even grab a gun?

I froze. Its barrel seemed massive, a yawning darkness an inch from my left eye. It clicked, the sound loud in the small booth, as he pulled back the hammer.


Well, fuck.

Chapter End Notes
How's your suspension of disbelief on this one, folks? Tried to have a canny, well-informed Skidmark without him pulling a fanon! Tattletale and drawing conclusions out of his ass.

Also, thanks for your support and kind words! Helps quite a bit :D
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Time seemed to slow down as I stared down the barrel of that amusingly-in-any-other-context large gun.

Biokinesis wouldn't let me survive a headshot, especially not point-blank. Skidmark's fields, Purity's blasts, a vague inkling of Krav Maga I assumed was Uber's or even a Solar Flare would be just as likely to get me killed as it would throw off his aim. I was in an enclosed space with no room to maneuver, and a flicker of my eyes towards the curtain revealed it was closed, giving me no opportunity or space to teleport.

Dammit, I hated this Skidmark.

Gun was still inches from my eye and he was waiting impatiently for an answer quick think of something anything-

"...Yours?"

Oh goddamnit please don't

"You're definitely too flat to be a hooker."

Joking is good right? You don't joke with people you're about to kill oh fuck you totally do fuck fuck fuck

His eyes flickered towards Steve and I sensed the faintest hint of motion out of the corner of my eye was this my chance or was I just going to end up getting myself shot

"Ten kay."

"W-what?" I didn't squeak shut up

"Ten big ones to leave me and mine alone." His eyes were laser-focused on me again, and I felt like a frog on a dissection plate. His hands weren't even shaking, damnit, wasn't he supposed to be a junkie? Focus! He was offering me money now? He had me dead to rights!

"O-ok?"

"We meet on the street we go opposite ways. Anything else, supplies, connections, we negotiate then. We got a deal?"

I almost nodded before realizing I'd just end up headbutting his revolver. Instead I hissed out a "Yes. Deal."

For a moment I thought he was going to pull the trigger anyway - just fucking with me before killing me - and then it lowered and I breathed for the first time in what felt like hours.
I did NOT squeal in surprise when Steve dropped a briefcase on the table. Anyone saying otherwise was a dirty goddamn liar.

Skidmark chuckled, leaning back, all tension vanishing from his posture.

"Relax, sugartits, it wasn't even loaded." He did something quick and complicated with the revolver and it was suddenly faced away from me in his hands, cylinder out and the table visible through six holes in the metal.

I wanted off this rollercoaster of emotion.

"I almost blasted you!"

Skidmark gestured with his chin at Steve. "His is loaded."

His-

Jesus christ are these people wizards? When did a gun get in Steve's hand!? Skidmark laughed at my wide-eyed expression, the sound harsh and unkind. I was too shocked to be properly offended.

"Why?" It took me a second to realize I was the one who spoke, betraying my own common sense screaming at me to leave well enough alone.

"Steve says you have 'growth potential'. Wanna see what you'll do with it. Bribery just gets us off your shit list. And if your bosses were payin' you more than that, you wouldn't've been surprised by the amount."

At the stunned look on my face, he laughed again. "That look never gets old."

Funny, I felt like I aged ten goddamn years.

"Now go on, get. Unless your offer was for real..." He gestured at his crotch with a leer and I got the fuck out of the booth.

Steve met me outside the club where I was noisily emptying my stomach into the scraggly bushes by the parking lot. McDonalds looked even less appetizing on the way out. Also, it looked like several people had beaten me to it.

I eyeballed Steve as I wiped my mouth with the back of my sleeve. The gun had magicked away again, I noticed. On the one hand, fucker sold me out to Skidmark. I should blast him and fuck right off.

On the other hand, he apparently helped persuade Skidmark to pay me off rather than kill me. That earned him points. That, and he was holding the briefcase towards me, as I'd left it behind on the table. Perhaps I could give him the benefit of the doubt.

"He always that intense?" I asked him as I took the briefcase in weak hands, legs trembling, voice shaky.

He replied with that stupid almost-not-there grin of his and a hint of a shrug.
"Need a lift?"

"To where?"

"Apartment's still yours til you find your own place." He paused as I gave him an incredulous look. "Told you your time wasn't up."

He appeared to be completely impervious to my hate-lasers. Damn. Clearly I needed to start hanging out with Gallant.

A thought struck me - we'd taken several different brands of cabs the last few days. "Are any of the cab companies not owned by Skidmark?"

He just gave me a certain look in response.

Somewhere out there Tattletale's smug-sense must have been going haywire.

Chapter End Notes

FUCKING HELL, SKIDMARK
"I can't handle this shit."

Steve just stood there, hands in pockets, waiting for the cab to come back. I was sitting - still not trusting my legs to be steady - with the briefcase tucked close next to my legs. He offered no comment in response to my (only slightly whiny) statement.

"Capes take days off, right?"

Somehow he managed to convey silent agreement without changing his body language in the slightest. Or maybe I was just projecting again.

"...I need a drink."

He glanced at the strip club behind me.

"Somewhere not owned, run, or sponsored by Skidmark. Or the Empire. And definitely not the ABB."

He looked thoughtful for a second. Or maybe he'd stopped paying attention.

When he did suggest a place, I facepalmed. Of course.

"...Fine, but we need to make a stop first."

"Plus it's Sunday morning."

"Also that."

I pulled up the address I was looking for on my phone, gave it to the driver once we got in the cab. It was kind of a long drive, and I found myself drumming my fingers nervously on the briefcase.

...Did banks normally accept fat stacks of cash? One would think that would raise some flags. On the other hand, in Brockton Bay, they'd probably have a teller lane just for that.

"Should I be just be... walking around with this much cash?" I half-whispered to Steve, who gave me a bemused expression, one eyebrow quirked up.

"...Cash?"

I looked at the briefcase, then popped the tabs and flipped it open.

Instead of stacks of non-sequential, unmarked bills, I found...

A bit of foam padding, a black debit card with no name on it, and a single business-card-sized piece of paper. On it were printed what looked like an account number and then a string of numbers and
letters that I assumed was the password.

"...Number Man?"

"Of course."

"...Then why the fucking briefcase!?"

"Presentation."

ARGH

---

I stood awkwardly in front of a fancy gate and fancy stone fence, looking through the gaps in the wrought iron down the long, tree-lined driveway.

I felt ridiculous. Not to mention hilariously out of place. Note to self - get on that fucking new costume, seriously. It was way too nice a part of town for a bum in a hoodie and bandanna. Granted, I could have just done a flyover, but that might have been misconstrued...

I looked at the "No Soliciting" sign - right above the "Press Contact" sign with a phone number and email address - and pressed the intercom button right above that. Steve had elected to give me some privacy, and was taking the cab around the block.

"Pelham residence, Shielder speaking."

"Morning! I'm Fax, independent hero." I resisted the urge to follow that up with 'have you heard the good news?', but only just barely. "You got a minute to talk about, uh... hero things?" Ok, probably should have planned out what I was going to say better. Or at all.

A pause. "Sorry, we get a lot of fakers. Can you prove your power in a non-destructive way?"

I stood there thinking for a moment - made sense, considering how generic my "costume" was - then shrugged and leapt twenty feet in the air. At the top of my leap I gave the distant house a friendly wave, then drifted back to the ground.

"Alrighty then. Give me a few minutes? My mom probably wants to meet you too."

Perfect. "Sure, no problem."

Three minutes later, the gate buzzed.

Despite the size of the estate and the nice part of town, one of New Wave's two headquarters wasn't nearly as ostentatious as I expected. It was a large, nice home, but it definitely felt lived in. Comfortable, even.

The two heroes meeting me at the door in full costume definitely stood out, though. Lady Photon and Shielder shook my hand, all professional warm smiles and PR-approved handshakes. She invited me in, and he immediately greeted me with "I looked you up on PHO. People are going nuts trying to figure you out."
Of course he did. "My allegiances or my powers?"

"Both, dude."

"Don't be rude, Eric. Please, come on in." Photon Mom to the rescue. I suddenly realized they probably had to put on their costumes this early on a Sunday because of me, and felt an irrational spike of guilt. They wore them well, though.

I picked up the conversation as they led me to a comfortable living room, tastefully decorated, with an absolutely massive flatscreen on one side. "I haven't checked my thread in a bit. What's the latest guess?"

He shrugged. "Some sort of Trump, but everybody keeps debating what kind."

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Some water, please?" Lady Photon nodded and slipped away to the kitchen. As soon as she was out of earshot Shielder leaned in conspiratorially.

"What's the deal with you and Purity, man? You've gotta know she's bad for your rep as a hero."

"Hey, she split off from the Empire months ago. Been trying to go hero."

He gave me a skeptical look.

"Plus she's a MILF."

"Dude!"

Lady Photon returned with a glass for me, one eyebrow raised at Shielder's half-amused, half-shocked expression. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing important." Shielder snorted.

She glanced between us, then decided not to ask. "So you wanted to talk to us about being an independent hero?"

The conversation that followed was light and nonspecific, which was good, because I was in no state of mind for intrigue or plotting after my run-in with Skidmark. They discussed some of the difficulties they had establishing themselves - carefully sidestepping any mention of Fleur - and encouraged cooperation with the Protectorate, assuming I didn't want to join them. They did not suggest I unmask. They did recommend a good shop for costumes, with mix-and-match and custom designs available. I chose to take that in the kindest light, and not as criticism, since my costume was kinda shit.

Most importantly, I didn't alienate them, leaving on friendly terms with a team contact number in hand, and when I checked my tattoos back in the cab with Steve, I had... huh. Only one addition, with two notches.

On the chest of the Harpy on my left arm was a yellow starburst symbol in a blue ring. I bet Laserdream would add to that stack, instead of getting her own ring. Related powers, I supposed.
Either way, I had something I needed to do. (Not like most bars were open on a Sunday morning, anyway.) I had Steve drop me off between the nicer part of town and the bulk of Brockton Bay with a promise that I'd call him later.

Then, taking a deep breath, I kicked off from the ground and didn't come back down.

**FUCK YES**

Shooting upwards - ok, it was only about as fast as I could run, but still, *it felt* fast - I saw the city shrink below me, streets becoming thin lines, tall buildings becoming miniature models, trees becoming green blurs, and oh the bay. Even with gray skies and that stupid Boat Graveyard, from this height it was beautiful, the Protectorate Headquarters shining like a jewel in a field of blueish-gray.

And then I was splashed in the face by the cloud cover, but when I stopped sputtering and wiping my eyes...

I looked up and saw the sun in all its glory.

Maybe it was Purity's powers turning me into a discount Kryptonian; maybe it was the first steady sunlight I'd seen in days; maybe it was just the quiet, broken only by the occasional distant bird cry, the rush of wind, and the distant rumble of the city far, far below; but for the first time since I'd arrived in this crummy little city I felt at *peace*.

I wasn't sure how long I floated there, just above the clouds. A touch of biokinesis let the thin atmosphere sustain my breathing, kept me warm from the brisk breeze, and four different charges of borrowed flight powers held me aloft with the merest effort of will. All throughout, the sun filled me with energy and light, warm and all-encompassing, banking a fire in my belly.

With the city below me concealed by fluffy banks of grey, dirty water, I could have been anywhere on Earth. Just me and the sky, a beautiful solitude.

As good a time as any to finally test out my blaster powers, right?

The blue-white beams actually looked pretty awesome with the double-helix spiraling around them, and unlike Purity's beams (constantly recharged by that glorious day-star) I felt no drain in their use. The shield was thin, almost invisible, an eight-foot bubble centered around me, its effectiveness unknown. My beams just passed right through it, which made sense.

Whatever, details. I COULD FLY!

And fly I did, swooping between banks of clouds, diving down through the wet and - oh, hey, I'd drifted quite a bit, ok there's the city - doing spins and barrel rolls, whooping and laughing all the while. I half-expected one of the city's few heroic flyers to stop and say hello, but I supposed a cape-heavy city like Brockton Bay was pretty jaded about superpowered flight by this point.

It was with a lighter heart and grumbling stomach that I finally descended into the city, letting gravity do most of the work (and almost eating pavement when my flight powers weren't as good at sudden stops as I expected). I didn't know if it was my rough morning and thrown-up McDonalds or if flying just made a man hungry, but I knew where I wanted to go.

It was time to check out that Fugly Bob's Challenger!
I regretted everything.

It was delicious, but I regretted everything.

Motherfucker came with a goddamn milkshake and half-pound of fries, just in case your bottomless gullet wasn't satisfied with half a cow's worth of grilled beef on a bun the size of your head. I wondered if even Aegis could finish one.

Hell, I wondered if finishing one was an unofficial way of identifying parahumans.

I handed the waiter my new debit card with a weary, slightly-greasy smile. Fuckers earned those fifty bucks fair and square; I could accept defeat with grace.

And I had the most amazing nap once I got back to the apartment.

Alright. I had almost put enough distance between myself and the goddamn terror-fest of the morning to consider myself human again.

For that final step, it was time to get some fucking drinks.

Chapter End Notes

Three guesses as to where he's going.
Palanquin was fucking nice.

Pretty empty, but was barely six on a Sunday. Which meant the drinks were cheap and wow I didn't have to worry about that anymore, did I?

Of all my superpowers, having disposable income was probably gonna be the hardest to get used to.

The doorman had looked down at me with suspicion, but between the relatively nice clothes, lack of jackboots or red suspenders, and the three days of stubble showing I was balding, not a skinhead, thank you, he let me in the club without comment.

Two bars, a stage, a big, slightly-raised dancefloor, raised platforms that weren't quite cages hanging from the ceiling, booths and a second, smaller stage in the back, and a chill house DJ spinning low-key tunes at a reasonable volume? A man could get used to this sort of luxury.

I wasn't sure whether to invite Steve - the jury was out on whether I could trust him or not, his general helpfulness aside - but it was a moot point. He said he wasn't exactly banned, but was discouraged from plying his trade there as a sign of respect to the hosts. Which made sense - letting in some drug dealers but not others would show favoritism, and Faultline's Crew was notoriously impartial.

So I sat alone at the bar, knocking back gin and tonics, enjoying the mellow tunes and browsing my thread on PHO. Shielder was right, they were going nuts on there. Some people were completely convinced I was a Tinker, with a variety of tools covering my different publically noted powers (and there was a surprising amount of video of me, considering how brief my engagements were - even one of me just parkouring around the city and eating shit from miss-timing a landing, which of course had the most views, the bastards). Others claimed me as the second coming of Eidolon, but they were pretty far in the minority. A good amount assumed I was a mercenary after being spotted with both Browbeat and Purity, and of course there was an entire shipping contingent deciding which (or both!) I was inevitably sleeping with.

"Rough day?"

I was buzzed enough that it took me a second to realize I was being spoken to, and another to figure out who was asking. "Hmm?"

The bartender, a sharp-featured woman in her twenties, gestured at the fourth gin and tonic nearly empty in my hands. I drained it, then gave her a small smile. "You could say that, yeah."

"Another?"

"Please."

She mixed another drink quickly, movements efficient and long-practiced. When it was in my hands, she went back to setting up the bar, always moving, never sitting idle. Time to lean, time to clean, I
supposed, even if it was a bit much for a nightclub on a Sunday evening. Faultline ran a tight ship, it seemed.

"You must see a lot of capes."

She arched one eyebrow, gave me a polite, completely fake smile. Yeah, right, like Faultline running the club wasn't an open secret. Still, I imagined they had pretty good discretion, what with being mercenaries and all.

"In Brockton Bay, I mean."

Flawless recovery.

She fixed me with that plastic smile for another second, then continued wiping down the bar. "Less than you'd think. Most people go their whole lives without seeing capes except on TV, or maybe flying high overhead."

"Heh. Sometimes it seems like capes're the only actual people that matter in the city, and everyone else are just... background characters."

She snorted slightly. "Some capes certainly act that way, for sure."

I chuckled, a little louder than necessary. Maybe I should slow things down a bit.

Oooooor maybe I could biokinesis my way into processing alcohol better!

...

On the other hand, messing with my biochemistry while buzzed sounded like a spectacularly bad idea.

She was actually leaning against the bar now, elbows on the polished wood. Near enough to talk quietly, still not in my personal space. "Sounds like you've got experience, there. You a cape-chaser?"

The way she said that was just neutral enough I couldn't tell from context if that term was used locally in the same sense as "storm-chaser" or "chubby-chaser", and I was afraid to guess wrong and make an idiot of myself. Better play it safe.

"I mean, a little."

She nods, expression still impassive, vaguely friendly. Damn, she had a good poker face. Then she leaned in conspiratorially and said, in a lower voice, "Armsmaster buzzed me on his bike last month. Passed six inches away, scared the shit out of me."

I grinned. "Niiiice. I always wanted to see that bike of his. Sounds like a bad ass piece of machinery."

She shrugged. "It's alright."

Pffft. Brocktonites and their jaded view of the world.
"So that's my big cape story."

Pushing off from the bar, she fixed me another gin and tonic without me asking. Actually, I didn't even realize I'd already drank the one in my hands. They were pretty damn good.

"That's it?"

"Like I said, most people don't see a cape in person at all." She seemed a little defensive, a little challenging. "What, you got anything better?"

Oh boy did I. "Skidmark had a gun to my head..." I glanced at my watch. "Eight hours ago."

"Uh huh." Not even pretending to believe me. "And why did he do that?"

"Thought I was a Russian spy."

"Mnhmm. And why didn't he just shoot you?"

"Because I'm not a Russian spy."

"Ah. That makes sense."

"I'm a Chinese spy."

She didn't quite laugh, but she did blow a little air out her nose and her lips twisted into an almost-smile, which I counted as a success. Not like Steve's almost-smile, which was that sort of knowing, man-of-the-world, seen-it-all-and-done-it-all-twice thing. More like someone who wasn't used to smiling, too used to hiding their emotions. Had an ex like that. Murder for taking cute pictures together. I'd mention it, but I wasn't about to be that asshole who told a woman to smile more.

"So what other capes have you seen, secret agent man?"

"I'd tell you, but-"

"-then you'd have to kill me?" Definitely an eye roll for that one. "Uh huh."

"Alright, fine. Purity gave me a wedgie once."

"And then asked you for your lunch money?"

"Nah, my phone number."

She got up off the bar after that, muttering something something "chaser" under her breath. Didn't walk away, though.

...Oh, right. I was at her bar. Maybe I was overstaying my welcome?

I knew drunk me enough (and boy was he showing up tonight) to err on the side of caution from long experience. With a polite smile I tried to push myself off the bar with the intent of climbing to my feet.

I was interrupted by another gin and tonic placed on the bar in front of me with a thunk. I looked up
from the drink to the bartender, about to say I didn't want to keep her from her work, but she interrupted me.

"So did you?"

"Huh?"

"Give Purity your number?"

I smiled. She pressed her lips together in something approximating a smile, if I didn't know better.

---

I awoke to the sound of the shower running, a pounding headache, and a mouth that tasted like Skidmark looked.

Could... could Browbeat's power defeat a hangover?

Survey says... not without drinking some water first.

Clearly I needed to hang out with the guy some more. I bet he could defeat a hangover on his own.

That mystery resolved, I tried to figure out where I was and who was in the shower.

Through my bleary eyes, I could determine a few key facts.

One, I was naked.

Two, this bed was very lumpy.

Three, I thought I recognized that lamp in the corner.

Conclusion: I had successfully made it back to my apartment, and possibly got lucky.

My phone! Phones had evidence, didn't they? But where was phone?

I fumbled, squinting, at the nightstand, nearly knocking over a glass of water. Further searching found no phone, but did discover two clearly labeled advil.

Conclusion: I may have been robbed, but at least whoever I took home was considerate.

On a whim, I checked - yeap, still had both my kidneys.

Possibly a candidate for sainthood, then.

I drank the water and downed the advil, sensing the fluid move through my body with my limited biokinesis. It didn't help the headache, but it took my mind off of it at least.

At some point after that, the water shut off, and after the sound of shuffling feet in the bathroom, someone emerged, towel around their waist.

Either the bed was lower than I remembered, or they were very tall.
Also, no breasts to speak of.

Conclusion: not a stripper.

"Morning," said Steve.

"Heughgh," I replied.

"Uh huh."

I swallowed, working my sandpaper tongue a bit, trying to English. "How bad?"

He paused. He was probably giving me one of those looks of his, but the joke was on him - he was too blurry for me to get it. Ha!

"Long or short version?"

"Short."

"You got trashed, struck out with the bartender, drunk-dialed Purity, then called me to take you home."

"Uuuuuugh." Body too weak to flip myself over to hide my face in shame. Wait! I could fly!

My body lifted off the bed, spun, and dropped back down with a muffled WHUMP until my face was mashed into the pillow.

It was at that point I remembered I was, in fact, still naked, as the blankets did not survive the transition.

Meh. If he had taken my clothes off, I had probably been covered in vomit; we were a little past the point of embarrassment. Plus the breeze kinda felt nice. Goosebumps on my back.

"Sorry if I made a mess," I mumbled into the pillow.

"Heh. That's part of the job."

I managed to control my body enough to raise an arm slightly, giving him a thumbs up in gratitude, before collapsing back on myself.

When I woke up again, there was still-warm pizza within arm's reach, along with more water.

Definitely a saint.

Chapter End Notes

TAKE THAT, SHIPPERS!
Day 4.11 : Thinking Things Through

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**AReasonableFacsimile:** I know something you don't know~

**AllSeeingEye:** And what do you want?

**AReasonableFacsimile:** An exchange of favors. You answer questions for me in the future, I help you deal with your two-timing boss.

**AllSeeingEye:** Son of a bitch

Heh. Eat shit, Coil.

Nothing new or exciting on PHO, aside from messaging Tattletale. I wished I could've seen her face when she got that hint.

Once I managed to get my half-dead ass out of bed and in a shower - flight is an amazing power for being lazy - I figured I would make some phone calls.

"Hello?"

"Heyyyy, sorry about last night-"

"I did *not* appreciate being woken up at 3 am for that."

"Yeah, it was unacceptable and I apologize. Won't happen again."

"Good."

"..."

"Did you at least get home safe?"

"Yeah, my... roommate gave me a ride, made sure I didn't die by hangover."

"Good." A slightly-awkward pause. "If you'll excuse me..."

"Right! Right. Just wanted to... yeah. I'll let you go."

Welp. That could have gone worse.

"Hello?"

I could hear the ocean, some rumbling in the background. Seagulls. Boardwalk?

"Hey, BB. You up for a patrol tonight?"
"Um."

"I didn't drunk-dial you too, did I?"

"What? No, it's just..."

"Bad time?"

"Sorta. I'm actually heading to the Rig right now."

"Arrested, recruited, or spying for the Illuminati?"

"What."

"Right, dumb question, the Illuminati already control the Protectorate."

"Man, I don't even... I'm joining."

"Good for you!"

"Thanks..."

"..."

"Good luck with your, you know. Solo thing."

"Yeah, thanks. Talk to you later."

"Yeah."

They grew up so fast.

Tats would be chewing on that tidbit for a while, I should probably give Purity some space, I doubted Shielder and Photon Mom want me bothering them on a weekday, Steve was off doing Merchant things (I assumed), Browbeat was going straight... What do?

Crash Browbeat's recruitment?

Crash Browbeat's recruitment.

---

Holy crap there was a force-field BRIDGE to the Rig? I thought they used a ferry or something!

Wait, no, why would Mr. Hebert have wanted to get the ferry up and running if there already was a ferry?

...What did it say about this reality that things were canon even if I didn't remember them that way?

ANYWAY I didn't see Browbeat, but I did see a PRT outpost on the shore side of the bridge, which
was as good a place as any to look. I landed with all the grace someone who had been flying for less than a day could achieve and made my way towards the entrance, glass doors proudly emblazoned with the blue-and-gray PRT shield logo sliding open at my approach. A tiny gift shop and a receptionist desk greeted me once inside, with a cheerfully alert young man behind the counter.

"Can I help you?"

"Hi, yes, I'm independent hero Fax. I'd like to hear a recruitment speech please."

"Ah, great! I think we can definitely accommodate you there. Would you like to meet with a member of the Protectorate?"

"Why yes, I do believe that would be nice." Shit, that guy's cheer was obnoxiously infectious.

"You're in luck, we have one on site right now. Would you mind staying right there for just a minute? Feel free to check out the gift shop while you wait!"


Glorious.

"Fax?"

I turned around to see oh man don't fanboy don't fanboy-

"Miss Militia. Pleasure to meet you."

Eye crinkles.

INTERNAL SQUEEING INTENSIFIES.

"Same." She shook my hand. I did not hold her grip longer than appropriate. Totally normal handshake. "I admit, you have good timing. I was already on site."

"Lucky me." Not checking her out, maintain eye contact. Completely natural smile (thank god I had a bandanna).

"There is a small office onsite. Would you follow me?"

I nodded. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

She paused mid-turn. "Nothing my teammates can't cover for me. Why do you ask?"

Hmm. To honest or not to honest?

How could I lie to Miss America herself? "I was kinda... planning on crashing Browbeat's recruitment?"

Her eyes grow hard. "Please follow me."
Once in the small meeting room with the door closed, she turned on me. "How familiar are you with the unwritten rules?"

"Pretty familiar?"

"So you should also know that harassing a prospective Ward, in their civilian identity, with their family, is something the Protectorate takes extremely seriously."

BACKPEDAL.

"I didn't- I was just talking with him on the phone- I didn't know-"

I just remembered the scene where Miss Militia stuck a gun in Tattletale's mouth to keep her from starting shit. For all her reputation as team mom, she did NOT fuck around.

She let me babble excuses for a few seconds before (thankfully) interrupting.

"If that's true then you don't mind staying here with me for the next 20 minutes. Just to make sure."

"No no, no problem."

She gestured at the table and I fell into a seat. She, however, remained standing by the door, and I couldn't help but notice the rifle slung casually over one shoulder, hand not quite on the grip. With what I knew of Miss Militia and her history, I really should have realized she would have very strong opinions about child endangerment.

And maybe it spoke of my opinion of her from canon, or maybe just her presence, that I hadn't even considered fighting back (or even running away), just apologizing and appearing nonthreatening.

I hung my head in my hands, muttering "I did not think that through. At all."

After a little while, she apparently took pity on me enough to break the tense, awkward silence.

"So." I glanced up at her, lowering my hands (slowly!) to the table, still clearly visible. "You were interested in hearing about the Protectorate?"

I may have looked dumbly at her for a moment before remembering yes, that was what I had said to the man behind the counter. I nodded.

Her eyes softened a little bit, perhaps a hint of guilt. "If it was an honest mistake, I hope you'll understand my reaction. I take the safety of the Wards very seriously." Not an apology, but an acknowledgement of my concerns. Smooth.

"No, no, I get it. Perfectly reasonable response."

She nodded, either in acknowledgement or approval. Or both. The gun shifted to something smaller, at her hip, but still within easy reach, and her body language shifted to be a hair less intimidating.

"The Protectorate has a lot to offer. Training, resources, a team to back you up."
"Mmhmm."

The rest of her spiel was short, to the point, glowingly positive, and obviously rehearsed. Or maybe just memorized from a pamphlet she read ten years ago. No mention of the survival rates for independents. Maybe they only include that for hard sells, or that was Armsmaster's thing.

Of course, I wasn't really all that interested, and she seemed to notice. Perhaps she was worried her aggressive response had scared me off, because or maybe it was part of the procedure for impressing potential members, because she asked "Would you like a tour of the Rig? A chance to meet some other heroes?" The 'perhaps ones who haven't threatened you with a rifle and possibly scared you off' went unspoken. Not that her tone was at all pleading.

Hmm. I hadn't had a chance to check my tattoos, but I was pretty sure I upgraded Browbeat and added Miss Militia (I tried to imagine what hers would be. A set of crosshairs? Bullseye? A rocket launcher?). I still wasn't entirely sure how my power chose targets, but it seemed to be by proximity and on a first-come-first-serve basis. So it would be kind of a crapshoot to see who I ran into first on the Rig.

What the hell, it was on my list of sight-seeing destinations. Why not roll the dice.

Chapter End Notes

PLANNING!
The novelty of the force-field bridge was completely lost once you're put in a windowless PRT van for the ride. Sure sure, security and privacy, but still, what a colossal waste of Tinkertech shenanigans. Not to mention a power outage would dump us, van and all, in the brackish waters of the bay.

Miss Militia picked up the conversation again first, sitting across from me on the uncomfortable benches in the back of the van.

"The bridge has multiple redundant power supplies."

"Hmm?" Not quite my idea of small talk, but hey, different strokes...

"Oh, it's just that people often get nervous on the light bridge. It's safer than it looks."

Oh. I shrug. "I'm not worried. I can fly."

She shifted in her seat, as if hesitant, or about to ask a risky question.

"Do you mind telling me a bit about your powers?"

Heh. I wondered how long it would take for that to come up. "I'm a bit of a grab bag," I lied smoothly. "Still trying to figure out everything I can do." Not even lying, there.

"We offer power testing, even to non-members. It's a great resource, and knowing the limits and strengths of your power can mean the difference between life and death in the field."

"Plus you've got bets to settle on PHO?"

Eye crinkles. But she totally didn't deny it, either.

Then the van stopped, and a few moments later the back door opened. I followed Miss Militia out and gaped at the courtyard, an unexpectedly open space with sea and light-bridge behind and the structure of the rig rising up all around in clean, modern lines. Seemed a bit wasteful on a rig where space was at a premium, but between the shock-and-awe value to visitors and the fact that anyone coming from the bridge would find zero cover and plenty of sightlines to no-doubt-concealed weapons, it made a bit more sense. The iridescent force field surrounding the whole thing was a nice touch, too.

Miss Militia gave me a moment to process, then cleared her throat and gestured at the other person waiting patiently in the courtyard I had missed in my appreciation for the theatrics. "Fax, this is Dauntless. Dauntless, independent hero Fax, here for a tour." Right, as if he wasn't already aware and just happened to be standing in the courtyard for no reason.

I shook his hand, suddenly intensely self-conscious.
I really needed to get a professional costume.

And more muscles.

He smiled. "Nice to meet you, Fax."

And my teeth whitened.

"Damn, man. Just... damn."

He chuckled good-naturedly. "Welcome to the Rig. I hope you like what you see."

...Too easy. I just grinned back and followed him through a metal door to what looked like a security checkpoint. The faceless PRT goon waved him through the fancy, probably-Tinkertech metal detector, waited a moment, then addressed me. "For security purposes we ask that you disclose any weapons, electronic devices, Tinkertech of any description, flammable, toxic and/or biohazardous materials..." My, that was quite a list. And you know what they say - behind every warning label there's a stupid story.

I nodded along, then fished through my pockets, dumping wallet, cell phone and pocket knife into the proffered bucket. I stepped through and-

BEEP BEEP BEEP

Annoyed, I stepped back and took off my belt, then-

BEEP BEEP BEEP

"Sir, please empty your pockets."

I reached into my pockets with mounting irritation, knowing them to be empty...

Then pulled out a pocket knife and placed it on the nearby counter.

Which was weird, because I hadn't had a pocket knife when I left the apartment that morning. Much less two.

It blurred into green and leapt into my hand.

Ohhhhh, right.

That.

I resisted the urge to facepalm and looked around. Everyone's eyes were bouncing between me and Miss Militia, except for her eyes, which were fixed on the small knife in my hand. Her own weapon twitched, jumping from a holstered gun to a sheathed sword in a larger blur of green energy.

"...Did I mention I was still figuring out everything I could do?"

"Huh." Her voice was mild, but what I could see of her face revealed mixed emotions.

"I'm... sorry?" I offered, not sure how I felt about it either. Not the power-copying part, that was
awesome. More the realization that copying someone's powers could be construed as taking away a part of what made them who they are, something deeply tied into their personality and traumas.

"Why don't we stop by the power testing lab first?" Dauntless suggested, trying to defuse some of the sudden tension in the room. "If you need some help figuring out your powers, I mean. They really helped me get a handle on mine."

I was still watching Miss Militia, and it wasn't until she tore her gaze from my knife to meet my eyes that I realized Dauntless was waiting for my reply.

"I dunno. Maybe I should just... go?"

She shook her head slightly, paused, then replied. "You're of course free to leave whenever you'd like. But I would be curious to see your power testing as well." She grinned, or at least her eyes crinkled a bit in a way that implied she was grinning. "I have bets to settle, after all."

Chapter End Notes

Dauntless headcanon = total beefcake.
Day 4.13 : Tempting (Fate)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Tempting, but... not on the first date." I'd already revealed more about my powers than I'd intended the Protectorate to know just yet.

Plus, you know, nobody actually liked power-testing scenes.

Dauntless seemed willing to accept that, but Miss Militia looked like she was going to say something. Instead I added, "Not that I'm opposed to cooperating with the Protectorate, though. And I'll tell you enough to settle a bet or two. After the tour?"

After a pause, Miss Militia nodded, eye-smiled and said "Very well."

I turned back to the PRT goon silently watching the whole exchange and gestured slightly with the pocket knife. "So do I need a waiver for this, or..."

---

Unsurprisingly, we encountered no other parahumans on the Rig tour.

Despite it being where they worked and sometimes lived.

No peek at secret areas either, of course; no Tinker labs, obviously. We did take an extended walkthrough of the testing facilities, though, no doubt to see if their sensors could pick anything up, and to provide surprisingly hard-to-resist compulsions to play around with the gear, which I thought was both subtle and clever of them. After all, what fresh parahuman could keep themselves from punching a giant, Brute-rated version of that arcade game? Or not taking a potshot at the numerous shooting range targets? Or give the aerial obstacle course a try? Points for psychological warfare.

Throughout the tour, both Miss Militia and Dauntless took turns expanding on a lot of the points her earlier speech touched on. I asked a few questions, clarifying things canon had left frustratingly vague, and they answered me candidly and with good humor. I asked about Image, and they confirmed that personal trainers, cosmetic dentistry and PR training was all part of the package. They even managed not to come off as insulting when they mentioned the quality costume work the Protectorate got.

At the end I was guided to a conference room with a view of the city, shimmering force field giving the shithole a somewhat softer focus.

I'd planned what to say during the tour, and launched into it without preamble.

"So! I do get very weak versions of a cape's power when I first meet them. I have a limit on how many I can gain in a day. I have not held to any powers longer than four days. As far as I can tell, it has no effect on the original power. I have no parahuman radar, so rest assured I'm not a walking violation of the unwritten rules. That's all I'm prepared to say about my powers at this time."

The two Protectorate capes exchanged glances, Miss Militia apparently giving Dauntless the go-
ahead. "Thank you for sharing that with us. I know how important it is to ensure secrets about one's powers are kept safe. Rest assured, though, we take information security extremely seriously, and if you ever change your mind on testing or choose to trust us with more details," he smiled, the light of the sun setting over the city making an almost audible ding as it reflected on his alabaster teeth, "your secrets are safe with us."

Oh wasn't that just precious. I just glanced at the security camera in the corner for a moment, then nodded. "Thanks. And thanks for the tour."

By the time I made it back to the apartment, I had two autographs, a Protectorate-issue flip-phone, a second notch on Browbeat's circle, and in the clutches of the Kraken wrapped around my left forearm, two new circles: an orange triangle I was fairly certain was a "delta", ringed in orange, and a goddamn mushroom cloud ringed in green.

Way to aim high, powers.

Steve was there when I got home, filling a bowl in a rather complex-looking water pipe. I floated onto the couch next to him and, after lighting it and taking a massive drag, he wordlessly passed it to me while the cherry was still hot.

When in Rome...

And that's how I discovered a few important facts.

One, Steve Irwin was still alive on Bet, and not only a parahuman, but a Brute of no small capability.

Two, yogurt-blasted Cheerios were amazing.

Oh man, that alligator was so fucking confused. Ha, man.

---

You know who I hadn't pissed off yet?

The Nazis.

Three guesses as to whose territory I was in.

"Hey guys, have you seen Kyle?"

The group of bald cliches spun around angrily at my interruption, the black woman pressed against the wall trying to make herself as small as possible.

"The fuck are you-"

"Have you seen Kyle? Seen Kyle? He's about this tall-" I made a gesture with my hand, holding it up approximately 45 degrees up. "Has a little mustache?" I held my other finger in front of my nose, mimicking a mustache. "Seen Kyle? No?"

"Go fuck yourself." The two nearest approach menacingly, not appreciating my sense of humor. Philistines.
I blasted them like the others, careful to use the more generic New Wave beams rather than the more powerful, variable, and recognizable Purity beams. No sense in getting her in any more trouble for associating with me than she already was. Only one of the thugs shouted "Cape!" this time, which was a welcome change. I didn't even wear a cape.

One of them did manage to shoot at me, breaking my shield and sending a little spike of pain in my skull (from the feedback, not the bullet), which was distinctly unpleasant. It also left me vulnerable for a few seconds before I could put it back up again.

So I shot him in the crotch.

Twice.

I didn't ask Steve why he had a drawer full of zip-ties, but it certainly was convenient.

"You alright?"

The woman nodded.

"I'm calling the police," I said, pulling out my phone, "do you want to stick around and give a statement?"

"Y-yeah, sure. Thank you."

I gave her a thumbs up and waited for an answer on the phone. "Hey, me again. Corner of Fifth and Westchester, five assailants, one victim, willing to give a statement. No major injuries. Yes, I'll stay on the line."

I amused myself waiting for the cops by grabbing all their wallets and making sure they were disarmed. That, and making small talk with the would-be victim, trying to keep her mind off of what had almost happened.

Then my shield popped at the same instant I heard the woman scream and a gun go off at the end of the alleyway. I spun, wincing, and blasted the newcomer in the face.

They stood up a second later, completely unharmed. Also, super fucking white.

"Pasty Pete!"

He scowled at me, which really was quite an odd expression on someone with white irises, and raised his hand-cannon of a pistol at me again. I'd moved in front of the woman, backing up until she was inside my hastily re-upped shield. I was starting to consider I may have been a smidge too hasty in antagonizing the Nazis when my powers weren't quite up to the task of handling average man with a gun. Still, the plan was the same whether it was the whitest whitey that ever whited or Hookwolf himself.

"You're in the wrong neighborhood, hero."

"You know, it's so hard to tell with all these fucking alleyways."

Just had to stay calm. Yes, that WAS a very large gun. No, it was NOT a great time to have Skidmark flashbacks. I'd handled the brownshirts just fine, I could handle the Eternal Nazi too.
"Stick to harassing the Chinks and keep-"

I didn't hear the rest of what he said because I was too busy blasting him again, spinning around, grabbing the woman and shooting off into the sky. I must have missed, because a second later my shield popped with another CRACK of the gun and a spike of pain, followed by yet another shot and a real stabbing pain in the back of the leg. Then I was out of sight over a building and flying as fast as I could out of Empire territory.

"Shit shit shit shit shit," she muttered to herself, clinging desperately to me as we ran away.

"Ditto," I grunted, trying to fly, get my shield back up and close the gunshot wound in my thigh before I bled out. I focused on my biokinesis, sensing the bullet lodged in my thigh bone - seal that off, it wasn't important - and furiously trying to patch the femoral artery it had nicked while keeping my blood pressure high enough to stay conscious.

"Oh fuck!" the woman screamed, and I had just enough time and awareness to spin so I was on the bottom as we crashed into a rooftop, black tar abrading the hell out of my cheap costume. I hadn't realized...

Oh good, she was ok. And was grabbing my phone, still in my hoodie pocket, where a tinny voice had been calling out for a little while.

"Hello? Please he's - we're at the 7-11 off Park, on the roof. He's bleeding and-"

Chapter End Notes

He really should have waited until he was actually bulletproof.
I woke up in a hospital bed, like so many Taylors before me, nestled by beeping equipment and sterile tile. The sun - warm, comforting - beamed through slats in a nearby window. My leg was bandaged tightly, and I was practically swaddled in blankets, except for one arm. An IV drip fed into it, needle disappearing into tattooed skin, and a heart monitor was clipped to a fingertip. I seemed to be wearing a paper gown, and... oh, ok. A thin fabric domino mask on my face. Nice of them.

For a few minutes I just stayed there, halfway between waking and sleeping. It was quiet, the muted sounds of a hospital muffled by a closed door.

No one bothered me. Panacea didn't burst into the door the second I was awake. The nurse must have just visited, because they didn't interrupt my solitude either.

I didn't have anywhere I needed to be. I didn't have anything I needed to do. I didn't even feel particularly compelled to use my powers.

I just... was.

I couldn't remember the last time I knew this sort of tranquility. Even in my real life.

Funny how getting shot would put me in a meditative mood.

I let the chaos of the last four days flow over and through me, seeing what stuck where. Eagerness in finding new powers, in seeing things I'd only read about. Spikes of terror from nearly dying several times over. Deep, life-affirming joy at reaching new heights, literal and figurative. Bonds of... if not friendship, then camaraderie. People I wouldn't mind seeing again, getting to know better. Even if they weren't real.

That was a jangling note in the harmony of my thoughts. Even if they weren't real.

Did that really matter? Was I any more real than they were? Not like the real me had powers. The real me was sitting in front of his computer, stringing words together in a haze of smoke and sweat. Really needed to get that A/C fixed, buddy. But there, in the hospital, I was comfortable. Safe. Capable of changing the world, a world full of people, living their lives with all their heartaches and sorrows and triumphs and loves.

These people were as real as I was.

A smile crossed my face at that thought. There. That was better. It made giving a shit about them make more sense. Feel more right.

I sat in that state of mind, that satisfaction of a puzzle solved, for an unknowable amount of time. The sun disappeared behind clouds, reappearing with a surge of warmth, then vanishing again.

Like all good things, that time had to come to an end. And like most good things, it was for a stupid reason.
My bladder was fit to burst.

I pulled out the IV, careful to seal the flesh behind it. With another effort of will, I finished the job of repairing that bullet hole that nearly killed me. Patched up those abrasions on my back where I hit the rooftop.

Then I floated out of the bed to the bathroom, where there was much relief to be had.

I found my shirt, shoes and wallet in a neat pile by the door, and a bag full of the bloody scraps that had been my pants, underwear and hoodie. Maybe there was an advantage to having a cheap costume after all. It worked for Lung.

Someone knocked on the door, then opened it. A nurse, middle-aged. "Ah, you're up. I'd object to you being up and about, but I'm told you have some regeneration?"

I nodded. "Yep. Thanks for keeping me alive til it kicked in."

"Normally we'd suggest doing a few more x-rays to make sure everything healed up correctly."

"Eh."

He grinned. "I'll get someone in here in a few minutes with the discharge paperwork."

I waited til he was out of the room before slipping out through the window and flying away. It was an awkward fit, but I wasn't a big dude.

Fuck hospital bills. I was only so rich.

When the breeze hit me, though, I realized I probably should have waited til I had some replacement clothes.

Eh. The Goodwill employee had probably seen weirder in this town than a guy in a paper gown flying in to buy pants.

When I pulled out my bank card, though, I saw a little slip of paper had been placed behind it. On it was a phone number, and on the reverse side the words "The job offer you were expecting." With a face sticking its tongue out drawn next to it.

...Well, she wasn't wrong.

---

When I got back to the apartment, Steve was sitting on the couch watching the news, one hand occupied with his phone.

"Honey, I'm home."

He leaned his head over the back of the couch - the tall motherfucker - and gave me the up-down. "You look like shit."

"You say the sweetest things."
He blew air out through his nose in response, a hint of a grin, then looked back forward to the TV. "Pot's on." The kitchen smelled like coffee. And weed.

"Blegh. Pass."

"Wuss."

I flicked him off in response as I floated passed him to the bedroom and a much-needed shower.

By the time I got out, he had passed out on the bed, still fully dressed. Dude kept weird hours. The Merchant life, I supposed.

Between the shower and a frozen pizza, I was starting to feel human again.

"Pelham residence, Sarah speaking."

"Morning. Fax again."

"Oh, good morning. What can I do for you?"

"I spoke with the Protectorate yesterday."

"Thinking of joining?"

"Possibly? I was wondering if you had some time today to discuss what they offered."

There was some rustling. "How does 1pm sound?"

"Better with lunch."

"Heh. We can meet at a cafe, if you'd like."

"Sounds great."

"Actually, if you want to meet another member of the team, my daughter has the day off from classes. We were planning on meeting around that time; would you be alright if she came along?"

Aww yiss. "The more the merrier."

"Great."

After discussing the details, I still had a few hours to kill before our meeting.

I supposed I'd been putting it off long enough.

Time to get a goddamn costume.

Chapter End Notes
All the fucking lasers, pew pew
Day 5.15 : Pretty Fly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I was nearly bouncing in my seat by the time Sarah and Crystal Pelham entered the cafe. More flight! More shields! More pew pew!

Living the dream. The dream of lasers. The laser dream, if you will.

I was in my new costume, such as it was. Black pants, dark grey (slate, apparently) jacket with a vaguely military cut, a zipper down the front, discreet extra pockets on the sides like built-in belt pouches, and a wide collar that, when zipped up, nearly reached my ears. Head cylinder. So Shino, very conceal, such style, mucho cred. A dark scarf that wasn't quite built in served as a mask, complete with a discreet biker's clip on the nose so it didn't slide down, and to top it off, a herringbone flat cap.

Look, I was going for comfort over style, alright? And my beard was kind of distinctive. The old bandannas had barely covered it as it was. Plus, all I had to do was unzip the jacket, pull down the scarf and I was just a dude in a jacket and hat.

The jacket was the best part, though. On the front and back, a large, lighter grey circle about eight inches across stood as a placeholder for a logo. I just bought it as is, because circles were sort of my thing. Saved money AND inside joke. It was the perfect costume!

Look, I may have had Browbeat's powers, but I just wasn't the kind of guy to wear spandex in public.

When they did arrive, lunch was about what I had been expecting (although canon didn't quite describe how attractive the Pelhams were. I mean, damn. Good genes, yo). I thanked them for recommending the costumer, they made polite noises about the new look, we ordered panini, I made a show of trust that was really just convenience so I could eat my sandwich in peace (we were in a private section for capes, because of course that was a thing in Brockton Bay), and we talked about the Protectorate. Blah blah options blah blah considerations blah blah responsibility. Turned out Uber had tricks for maintaining conversations? Dude was more versatile than I thought.

After lunch I flew off and YEAH BABY

I was FAST!

Well, faster. Not "keeping up with highway traffic" fast. More like "Usain Bolt running downhill with a tailwind" fast instead of "me being chased by clowns" fast. It made all the difference in feeling, though. I was actually getting enough wind in my face that having a shield up was required instead of merely convenient. Speaking of which, the shield was definitely a smidgen more solid, more opaque. More noticeable as well, but eh. Details.

The sun still felt fucking glorious.

Bonus side effect of Purity's power? I could pretty much stare right at that shiny motherfucker without blinking. Required secondary power to being a living solar flare, I assumed. It also meant
that when I took a selfie with the city peeking out through a gap in the clouds down below, I wasn't squinting.

Hello, "Verified Cape" tag on PHO.

Also, hello Dragon!

AReasonableFacsimile: Hi there! I'd like to be verified as Fax, independent hero in Brockton Bay. <hellafly.jpg>

Tin_Mother: Careful using your phone while flying, many capes lose them that way. Also, verified. Welcome to PHO.

AReasonableFacsimile: Don't worry, my costumer threw in a free wrist strap with my costume purchase.

Tin_Mother: Glad to hear it. Fly safe, now.

Definitely living up to her name.

Apparently I'd spent a while up there, basking in the radiance, because all of a sudden I had company.

"Hi!"

"Ohshitfuck!"

And then I dropped my phone, because I hadn't actually attached the wrist strap yet.

Glory Girl swooped down - putting my speed to shame, damnit - and snatched it out of the air. She handed it over with a dazzling grin. "Careful with that."

"Thanks."

"They make wrist straps for-"

"I know, I know." I fished said strap from one of the side pockets, waving it. "Fax, nice to meet you."

"Glory Girl, likewise." We shook hands, which is strangely awkward when neither of you are touching the ground. Like you'd expect one or the other of you to bob up and down, but you didn't, and that was weird. Space whale magic!

"How'd you know where to find me?"

"I recognized the view." She held up her phone with my selfie at the top of my thread. Damn, they worked fast. "Eric was talking about you, thought I'd see what the fuss was all about, you know?"

I grinned at her enthusiasm. "I hope I live up to your expectations."

She made a so-so gesture. "Ehh, 6 outta 10 for the costume."
I shot my hands to my chest. "Ouch! Straight for the heart." I let gravity take hold, falling backwards, clearly slain.

She laughed, then flew down after me upside down, easily keeping pace. "Drama queen!"

"Prom queen!"

"Twice!"

Man, that aura was pretty nice. Way too young, but I could see what Pan-Pan saw, just a little. I slowed to a stop, upside down like her, and she stopped as well. Her hair feel loosely around her like a golden halo, but her skirt stayed in place, because space whale magic. Strangely enough, my hat stayed on, too.

It felt surreal. Suspended by nothing, the city high above, endless sky below. Chatting like we were sitting waiting for the same bus.

"So, what's a superhero to do for fun in this town?"

"You bulletproof?"

"Mostly?"

"Beat up Nazis?"

"Ehh, did that yesterday."

She gave me an appraising look. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I didn't mention I woke up in the hospital for my efforts. Maybe it was her aura, maybe it was my lifelong, childhood fear of the judgement of teenage girls, but I didn't want to admit weakness in front of freakin' Glory Girl.

"Hmm." She held up her hands, ticked off options on her fingers. "Movies, parties, clubbing, beating up Merchants-

"Eh."

"-sneaking into bars-

"Got boring after age 25."

"-beating up ABB-

"Friday night."

"-shopping-

"Pass."

"-nights out with my boyfriend-"
"He's not my type." She grinned.

"-patrolling with the family-"

"Don't want to overstay my welcome."

"-ferrying Amy around town-"

"Your job, not mine."

She ran out of fingers, putting one hand thoughtfully on her chin in a classic "thinker" pose. Lowercase "th".

"-messing with Uber and Leet?"

"...I'm listening."

Chapter End Notes

Meanwhile, Coil is waiting impatiently by the phone wondering "will he call?"
It was agreed - next time the nerd-duo live-streamed their capers, we’d crash it. We exchanged numbers to coordinate, and I was already coming up with costume ideas in my head.

"So are you trying to join New Wave?"

Amy had texted her asking for a ride to the hospital, so I accompanied her back to the Dallon home via a rather scenic route, and it may have turned into a race because auras and/or general competitiveness. Unfortunately for my pride, she was nearly twice my top speed, even with recent improvements.

"Isn't it a family thing?"

She shrugged, half-cape fluttering slightly. Didn't move from the wind, but did at her gesture. Weird. "You've been meeting with us a lot the last few days."

It was my turn to shrug.

"And your powerset is a pretty solid match. That shield looks just like my cousin's."

Was it getting hotter outside, or was it the exertion from flying?

"Actually, have you always been this fast? Eric said you could barely hover when you first showed up, like, two days ago."

Ok, play it cool. It wouldn't be a big deal if I didn't make it a big deal. Plus the Protectorate already learned my cover story, and it may be better if I told New Wave before they did, assuming they'd give them a heads up.

And if it was a big deal, it'd be easier if Glory Girl were the one to tell them, because aura.

There. A plan.

"Yeah, I've been figuring out my power a bit more lately."

"Oh?"

"I think I'm sort of a sponge?"

She arched one perfectly manicured eyebrow in question.

"Like, I temporarily pick up a tiny part of the powers of those around me."

She gave me a thoughtful look, abruptly stopping in mid-air. I overshot a few yards, not quite as maneuverable as her, and floated backwards until we were once again in conversation range. And also because we'd been shouting for a little while and it was getting annoying.
"And you've just started figuring that out."

"I mean, I've had the general idea..."

"So you've had ulterior motives for meeting with my family the last few days. Just, soaking up our powers without us knowing."

OH FUCK that aura was INTENSE. Jesus, had she been suppressing it this whole time?

I suddenly felt very, very small.

Something sharp and metal jumped into my hand so I shoved them into my pockets. Kept them from visibly trembling, too.

"I went to y'all for advice." I had to grit my teeth to keep them from chattering.

And then she was in my face, outer shield shattering without even slowing her down, her own power stopping her hand half an inch from my cheek where she'd tried to slap me. The inner force field immediately popped, but it absorbed the blow. She pulled back her hand, recognizing the effect, and her expression grew dark, thunderous.

"Fucking thief."

"Not stealing, just... copying..."

"What, were you trying to replace us? And would you have even said anything if I hadn't noticed?" She'd started floating slightly upwards, putting her in a dominant position, and even as I realized it was just a matter of height and I could float up myself to match it still felt like she was larger than life. "You could have asked. If you were honest, an actual fucking hero, we would probably have helped you out! But you thought lying to us would work better." She punctuated the last word by poking me in the chest, shattering my inner shield again. Girl was a goddamn walking siege engine.

"I don't even think you're a fresh trigger! I think you knew, the whole fucking time. Just used us."

Somehow her aura flared even harder, damn near making me shit my pants. Skidmark with a gun inches from my face had been less terrifying.

I gasped for breath, struggling to breathe. Jesus, I was whimpering, entirely too aware of the power she could wield and just how high above the ground we were. Uber gave me some vague thoughts of breathing exercises, but they could only do so much.

She made an annoyed sound and the aura eased up a notch. Still terrifying, but hopefully actually capable of speech.

"I was afraid."

"What?"

"I don't want anyone to know my powers because everyone will be after me."

She crossed her arms. "What, you're that strong? I thought you said the powers were weak. And
"temporary." Her voice was scathing, unforgiving.

I winced, grit my teeth. "They... stack. And I really haven't had these powers before Friday. I don't... actually know for sure how long they last."

She scoffed. "So, what, you're the lovechild of Dauntless and Eidolon?"

"...Kinda?"

Her glare narrowed. "Who else?"

"Look, it's bad enough I've told you all this, and you're gonna tell your family, and then it'll leak, and then everybody will-"

"Who. Else."

"Skidmark Purity Browbeat Oni Lee Uber Miss Militia Dauntless your aunt your cousins and you."

"Since Friday."

I nodded.

"...Jesus."

"I had to move fast. Get power before someone else had power over me."

"Why couldn't you just go to the Protectorate? It'd be an all-you-can-eat buffet of powers."

"I don't... trust them."

She threw up her hands in exasperation. "You're not exactly being trustworthy here!"

I conceded the point, and not just because she could break me in half and none of my powers would actually stand a chance of stopping her yet.

"So... what are you going to do?" If she spilled the beans I pretty much had no choice but to join the Protectorate, and I really didn't want to be a cog in that machine.

"I'm not about to lie to my family. Especially not for your sake." I could have mentioned the multiple crippled or nearly-killed gang members she had had her sister heal in secret, but I didn't need Dinah's help to be 99% certain that would be a fatal move on my part.

She blew out an annoyed sigh. "But I'll make sure we keep it between ourselves. If you ARE going to be a hero you need our help." She suppressed her aura and it felt like the sun came out from the clouds after a nuclear winter. I could breathe again.

"Just... stay away from my family. If you need our advice, call." I nodded.

With one last irritated, frustrated look, she flew off, leaving me behind.

I took a deep breath, then flew upwards until I was above the cloud cover. Turning to face the sun, I let its warmth fill me, try to dispel the lingering cloud of SHEER PANTS-SHITTING TERROR
Glory Girl's aura had hammered me with.

It was only somewhat successful.

Well, at least it wasn't Carol. She probably would have just cut me in half.

Still, I hadn't made it five whole days in the Wormverse before spilling the secret of my power. I wasn't even fully bulletproof yet! I just had to hope I could gather enough power before the endgame.

Assuming I lived that long.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that could have gone better.
At some point while I was recovering (and not at all moping) above the thinning clouds I started to get a weird feeling.

Like... a fullness? Even though I was hungry? I couldn't hit a limit on Purity's solar batteries, could I? No, this felt like something I could... push.

Oh, right. Hello, Dauntless.

Not that his power did me much good. A fraction of a power that was already all about fractional gains didn't really fit into my timeline, such as it was. I was tempted to stick it in something stupid and mundane, like my scarf or the cheap watch I got along with my costume. I fished in my pockets to see what I had and found that pocket knife.

Huh. I wonder what else...

Oh, neat. Pretty much anything one-handed and melee was fair game. Knives, shortswords, hammers, clubs, kukris, balisongs, kamas, chisels, wrenches, needles, punch-knives; even at a fraction of what MM could conjure up that was still a pretty impressive list and I wasn't even sure what I was missing.

Then I remembered why I was looking in my pockets to begin with, and had a crazy idea.

I turned my everweapon into a simple gravity-assisted folding stiletto, the kind I carried around with me for years, and then tried to shove Dauntless's power into it. It did...

Absolutely nothing noticeable.

But the 'over-full' sensation was gone, and the knife felt a little more real. I switched its shape around and the sensation didn't change, which was good.

Alright, that was a handy distraction (pun!) but I was still on edge from the encounter with Glory Girl and didn't know how to handle the lingering anxiety. The dread of wondering what my miss-step had cost me and what the consequences might be.

So I flew home, only slightly disappointed to find that it was empty. For all that Steve was kind of a smug asshole who nearly got me killed and was using me the same way Glory Girl accused me of using New Wave... at least his calm was reassuring. Like, not only had he already seen it all, but he wasn't that impressed.

Restless, I passed the time playing with knives, using Uber's skills to become slightly more adept at it. I didn't know if Miss Militia's powers came with instinctive understanding and expertise with all of her weapons, but my nerfed version sure as hell didn't.

I awoke to a sandwich hitting me in the stomach, my knife embedded tip-first in the coffee table (next to a bunch of similar scratches and holes), and Steve plopping down on the loveseat. He
grabbed the water-pipe and started filling it again, his own sandwich on the armrest next to him.

I unwrapped the sandwich. Italian, nice. "Thanks."

"Mhmm." He turned the TV on, showing Steve Irwin shouting excitedly into the camera over the roar of an entirely-too-close-for-comfort Ash Beast. I floated over to the kitchen and came back with a six-pack just as he was lighting the bowl.

There were things I should probably have been doing. Even without any more charges for the day, there were people to contact, connections to make, plans to set in motion. As terrifying as it was, my encounter with Glory Girl shouldn't have discouraged me from pushing onward - if anything, it should have motivated me to move faster.

But for a few more hours, I just chilled.

And that was ok.

---

"Sorry again. About yesterday."

"Mmhmm."

Purity and I floated in comfortable silence, her just outside my shield bubble, fifty feet or so above ABB territory. She didn't mention anything about the fact that I was able to fly where before I couldn't. I think she was just glad she had someone she could call to patrol with who didn't condemn her as a villain or owe loyalty to her former gang. And, you know, was white. Strangely enough, even though I couldn't gain any more charges from her for the day, I still felt compelled to accept her invitation when she called me up.

Maybe it was that combination of overwhelming firepower and helplessness. Made her seem strong and vulnerable at the same time.

Aaaand I was still kinda-sorta baked. Should have known Merchants would smoke strong shit.

"I heard you ran into the Empire last night."

"Heh. Yeah." Compared to staring down Glory Girl, nearly dying seemed to have a bit less of an impact. It felt like it had been a lot longer than... hell. Less than a day before.

Purity looked frustrated. Why did she look frustrated?

"Because you... you... argh!" Oh, did I say that out loud? Had to be more careful with that.

Quick, be reassuring.

"Just took down some muggers."

Ok, that didn't seem to help. "The ABB are terrorizing a third of the city, the Merchants are spreading their filth across half the Docks. Don't you think you could do more good taking *them* down?"
"And stay out of the white neighborhoods?"

"Yes!"

"Is that you asking me? Or your ex-husband?"

She stopped short as if slapped, eyes wide. I slowed to a stop, turned to face her. Was... was that over the line?

"Sorry, I didn't mean..."

"How did... what."

"I just, you're trying to get away, be a hero, and-"

"How do you know who my ex-husband is?"

Oh.

Oooh.

"That... isn't common knowledge?"

She raised her hands at me, ready to blast me out of the sky, but it was confusion as much as anger that crossed her face.

"...Kaiser, right?"

Her hands dropped a little, and I could see her eyes glisten a bit. Which was kinda trippy considering she was blindingly bright to anyone who didn't share her required secondary powers; like the tears themselves were made of liquid sunlight.

"Two years."

"Hey, I'm sorry I-"

"Almost two years since I split off from... the Empire... trying to be a hero, and my name is still tied to his."

"Look, I don't know how well known that is. I just read it somewhere online, didn't question it."

She turned her back to me, floated away a few feet. Her hands were clenched into fists at her sides as she gathered her composure. I had the feeling she really just wanted to blast something. Or someone.

I gave her her space, guilt gnawing at my gut. Too many mistakes. Even if this one was minor, a slip of the tongue, it was still something else I didn't think through enough.

She started drifting away from ABB territory, which made sense. She was kind of a glowing bullsseye, especially at night. She was moving slow enough that I didn't think she was leaving me behind, and she didn't object when I followed a few feet away.

When I couldn't take the silence anymore - and it didn't look like she was going to break it - I spoke
up again, softly. "I know you're trying to be a hero, trying to distance yourself from your Empire background. I know you don't take orders from Kaiser anymore." For a while, anyway. Until Bakuda, pretty sure. "I'm sorry I assumed..."

"It's fine," she said, voice quiet. The wind almost snatched it away. "Let's... try again another night." She still faced away from me. "Soon. Ok?"

"Y-yeah." I stopped myself from babbling another apology; I thought I was just making things worse. "You know how to reach me."

She nodded, and I fled.

I was 2 for 2 on flying powerhouse allies I'd estranged in one day. What's next, I-

Nope. Nooope. I wasn't going to finish that. I'd tempted Murphy enough lately as it was.

Chapter End Notes

He has a way with the ladies.
"Well if it isn't Purity's main squeeze."

The same bartender was back, my same stool available. Like I never left. The DJ had changed, and there were slightly more people milling about and enjoying the atmosphere, but otherwise I could barely tell I'd blacked out there only a few days before.

"Nah, she wanted a break."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I said the wrong thing. Bad habit of mine."

"Mnhmm. Bluecoat?"

I nodded and she mixed me another gin and tonic.

"I'm counting on you to keep track of these. Apparently I didn't do such a great job of it myself on Sunday."

She gave me a wry look. "Counting on the bartender to keep you sober is like trusting the fox to watch the henhouse, isn't it?"

"I got home with my wallet intact. My faith in you is unshaken." Even if she was something of a fox. 100% certain I didn't accidentally say that aloud this time.

She gave me a look that wasn't quite a smile.

For a few minutes I let myself relax while she busied herself at the bar, tending to customers and bustling about.

"Any new cape encounters since last time?"

"Hmm?"

"As a Chinese spy I imagine you have them every day."

I grinned. "Apparently I'm a terrible spy. Can't keep a secret worth a damn."

"Not a great trait for a spy, no." I nodded my agreement.

The night passed slowly, drink by drink. Couples and groups came and went on the dance floor. Apparently Uber's power had some vague hints in that direction, but I didn't indulge them. Wasn't in the mood for dancing, especially not alone. During a lull, she picked up the conversation again.

"So what do you do? When you're not wooing supervillains, I mean."
My grin was a little lopsided. "Careful. That's skirting the unwritten rules, yannow."

"I thought that only applied to capes?"

"Don't think you've fooled me. I've seen past your clever ruse."

She stopped wiping down the bar and raised one eyebrow fractionally. "Oh?"

"No one would expect to see Mouse Protector tending bar in Brockton Bay. It's the perfect disguise."

A pause, then a slight exhalation through the nose and the closest thing to a smile she'd shown me yet. "Curses, foiled again."

I tapped the side of my nose conspiratorially. "Smarter than I look."

"What gave me away?"

"All the cheese puns you didn't make."

I held her gaze for a moment, but broke first; I couldn't keep a straight face.

She didn't laugh along with me, but I could tell she wanted to.

Oops. Almost fell off the stool; caught myself in time.

"And I think you've had enough."

I grumbled a bit. I did assign her that responsibility; I shouldn't argue. "Fine, mom."

She muttered something that might have been "god, another one" under her breath.

After texting Steve and receiving confirmation that a cab was on its way, I blew out a sigh and turned back to the bartender. "How do you deal with it?"

"Hmm?"

"All this..." I waved a hand vaguely about. "Cape stuff. The world being what it is. Bet being kind of a shithole."

She shook her head slightly. "Same way you do everything else. One day at a time."

"I was hoping for something more profound."

She shrugged, the motion fluid and expressive. "I'm just a bartender."

"And Mouse Protector."

"You really are terrible at keeping secrets."

"Damnit."
Steve was nowhere to be found when I awoke, but I also wasn't in nearly as bad a shape as I had been before.

My feet still didn't touch the ground between hydrating, peeing, heating and eating a frozen pizza and showering, though. If I didn't have biokinesis I would probably end up tremendously fat from the sheer laziness of my lifestyle. Even if I only ate, like, once or twice a day, on average.

I hadn't checked my tattoos in a bit, so I took some time to do so while I had the apartment to myself. The starburst on the Harpy's chest had four notches, evenly spaced around the ring, and above its head was a tiara in a ring, both in gold. I'm sure Glory Girl would have been thrilled.

I heard an unfamiliar sound, and it took me a moment to track it down to the second, Protectorate-issue cellphone. The one I'd use to call the cops, um. Two days ago?

"Hey Fax, it's Browbeat."

Huh. Wasn't expecting a message from him. Especially not on the Protectorate phone.

"Sup?"

"Going on a training patrol with Dauntless. You want in?"

I looked outside. It was, what, noon? "You get a lot of daylight robberies in this city?"

"That's why it's a *training* patrol."

Hmm. "They tell you about my power?"

No delay. "Yes."

"And you're ok with meeting?"

"Yes."

Not the most loquacious fellow, that Browbeat. Still, I smelled something fishy.

"Protectorate put you up to this?"

Ah, there was the pause. About a minute later: "Maybe."

What an honest lad.

"You alright with being a bribe?"

"It's a living."

Fair enough. "When and where?"
They probably hadn't needed to give me such specific directions. I could've spotted Dauntless from a quarter mile away.

Dude was shiny as fuck.

Damn if he didn't cut a good figure, though. Between him and Browbeat, I'm pretty sure the Protectorate was trying to persuade me to join them through sheer beefcake. Instead all it made me feel was short.

"Fax! Glad you could join us. I like the new costume!" Firm handshake, smile that could blind passing planes. Maybe tone it down a bit, eh Dauntless?

"Thanks. Digging the new duds for you too, Browbeat."

"Thanks." His voice couldn't possibly be dryer. He may have used his power just for that. Probably wasn't pleased about the circumstances, and frankly, I could understand his frustration. He had already expressed his concerns at his unremarkable power, and there I was compelling the Protectorate to use him as bait because of mine, and making him redundant in the process. I wouldn't be happy to see me either. So I figured I'd cheer him up a bit.

"Not a lot of people can pull off spandex."

"It's not spandex. It's Tinkertech cloth." Did I detect a little bit of defensiveness there?

"Uh huh. Must have good, what'sit, compression?"

"It stretches." Sounds like he didn't quite choose the skin-tight bodysuit look. Or that diamond on his mask. Speaking of which...

"So does it light up?"

"What?"

"That thing on your forehead."

"No." A pause, then less confident: "Pretty sure."

"Maybe it's a bottle opener?"

He almost crossed his eyes trying to look at his own forehead before catching himself. "What, like-" he mimed putting a bottle to his face and twisting.

"It'd be efficient. Armsmaster's secret project. The one that would finally propel him into the ranks of the Triumvirate."

His mask covered his expression, but I chose to believe he was grinning. Just a little.

Dauntless watched the exchange at a bit of a loss, then defaulted to cheer. "So! You ready to patrol?" I nodded. "Great! Here's our route."

What followed was three hours of walking. Well, them walking, me floating a few feet behind them.
(and only a few feet up. Enough so they'd have to look up at me for a change. Jerks. And Browbeat's power still wouldn't let me make myself taller.) Dauntless kept up small talk throughout, but really lit up when we hit fans and he could spread his charm around via selfies and autographs and sheer polished charisma. Browbeat somehow managed to blend into the background despite being a hulking brute, in both senses of the word. I drew enough attention for the both of us, and got completely sick of saying "No, still an independent. Just helping out the Protectorate" and "No comment" over and over again. At least the scarf meant I didn't have to try fake-smiling for the cameras.

I was somewhat gratified to meet people who had no idea who I was. After all, I'd just gotten a costume and, hell, had only been on the scene less than a week. If they weren't obsessively following PHO, they had no idea who the hell I was.

It was kind of nice, actually. Put my ego in check a bit.

But the first question after "who are you?" was always either "can I have your autograph?" or "so what are your powers?", and I was only happy answering one of those questions with a yes.

Dauntless, bless his heart, did his best to jump in whenever people started asking too many questions about my powers (undoubtedly trying to settle bets). Probably because each time someone did, I floated another few inches in the air. By the end of the three hours I was two stories up, and Dauntless was straining his voice and his cheer trying to keep up conversation. Thanked me for keeping a lookout, like it was all part of the plan.

Not that I minded the attention, really. It just didn't seem to matter. These were NPCs. Nameless faces in the crowd. I wasn't in it for them.

Maybe I was a smidgen irritable at the monotony. And bored. And somewhat annoyed at the Protectorate on Browbeat's behalf.

Honestly, if I'd wanted to patrol for PR I'd have straight up joined the Protectorate. It was not a compelling pitch, in my case; public adoration didn't do anything for me, Dauntless was only so good a conversation partner, and I kept seeing Browbeat being stolid and stoic and... shit. I was starting to see why Glory Girl had been so peeved.

Besides the whole 'taking advantage of her family under false pretenses' thing.

Finally we reached the end of our patrol. I'd mostly tuned out Dauntless by that point. A shiny, well-muscled blur. I bet he had really nice hair under that helmet.

"Look, Browbeat."

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about all this."

He shrugged expansively. He had lots of shoulder to shrug with. "It is what it is."
Poor Browbeat.
You know what I hadn't done lately?

If you guessed both "wander aimlessly" and "antagonize the ABB", you're probably Tattletale. It'd been, like, four days on both counts. And after that rather dull patrol, I was up for something a bit more interesting.

And since I'd managed to get four charges of outer shield from the Pelhams, one charge of body shield from Glory Girl, and I was finally starting to see a bit of Browbeat's point-blank telekinesis come into effect, I was feeling a bit more confident.

Only a little.

Compared to the patrol, though, I received the exact opposite reaction. Maybe it was because I was in ABB territory, maybe it was because I didn't have Dauntless clearly putting me on the side of Lawful Good, but I got a lot of suspicious looks and awkward trying-not-to-make-eye-contact side glances.

Granted, my costume didn't really scream "Defender of the Weak, Protector of the Innocent, Scourge of the Unfaithful". It was literally shades of gray, which, while it certainly worked for Alexandria (I wasn't cribbing her style, shut up), wasn't the traditional paradigm of obvious heroism.

I took to moving a bit faster. Not because I felt uncomfortable without the hero worship, but because neither of us knew what the other one expected, and that made for some awkward tension wherever I went. "Is he here to mug us?" they'd think, "do they want my autograph or for me to fuck off?" I'd wonder, it was kind of a mess.

Didn't see many people wearing red and green, either. There were gang tags, sure, but it wasn't like they were everywhere, or prominently displayed. You'd just catch the letters, or a dragon, or a cool-looking swirl of gang colors out of the corner of your eye, passing by infinite alleyways, on the backs of street signs, scrawled on abandoned storefronts.

It wasn't until I picked up the pace that I realized they were avoiding me. I started catching glimpses of bandannas being tucked away, or people ducking into alleys and back doors and shopping centers just as I flew closer. Which, honestly, didn't mean they were afraid of me so much as they didn't want to deal with the hero. Business as usual; hide from the heroes, back to business in a few minutes once they moved on.

I kicked it up further, taking corners at speed, moving more randomly. I was rewarded for my tactics by stumbling upon a gaggle of teenage wannabe-thugs wearing the colors, squatting on the back door of what looked like an electronics repair shop.

They froze; I stopped. We had a moment.

"Fuck," one of them muttered quietly.
I drifted closer, and they seemed to fluctuate between wanting to seem tough and trying to appear nonthreatening. I reached out a hand, and with a reluctant sigh, one of them handed me the lit joint they had been passing around.

No one said anything as I reached up, pulled my scarf down enough for my other hand to hold the joint to my lips (hands and collar still covering my face) and took a good, long hit.

They definitely stared when I passed the joint back.

Ten seconds later I exhaled through my scarf, making it look like smoke was rising from inside my collar. "Thanks."

"...Yeah, no problem."

The one holding the joint looked at it for a few seconds, unsure what to do. The kid - I swear, none of them were older than 20 - next to him solved the problem by grabbing it and taking a hit himself.

There. New equilibrium reached, informal truce in place.

"So... who are you?"

"Fax." I reclined a bit, as if I was leaning back against a wall, but in mid-air, because powers were awesome. "I'm kinda new."

"Independent?" What gave me away?

I nodded. They hesitated, then one of them spoke to the other in what was probably Vietnamese. Seeing me show no sign of recognition, the other replied.

They argued for a little bit, before the taller of the two - a strongly-built young man with a bandanna folded over one eye - gave me an appraising look. "What do you want?"

I shrugged. "Just looking around, really." I doubted any of these kids were important gang members with valuable information about the gang's whereabouts or activities, much less the location of any of their capes. They weren't breaking the law - at least, any laws I cared about - and I saw no reason to antagonize them needlessly.

"You know you're in ABB territory, right?" I nodded. "Kinda dangerous to be 'looking around' here as a hero." He almost spat the last word, as if challenging me to claim the title or contest his treatment of it.

"Honestly? I was expecting to be attacked by now."

He seemed a bit confused at that answer. They chatted a bit more in Vietnamese, the joint still making its rounds between them.

"You trying to muscle in on Lung's turf?"

"Not really the territorial type."

"Picking fights?"
"A mugger here and there."

"Harassing people?"

"I mean, you tell me."

He crossed his arms. "So, what, you thought Lung or Oni Lee would just... show up, because you want them to? Because you're a special snowflake with powers?"

I opened my mouth to argue, but... he had a point. Oni Lee had attacked me earlier because I was with Purity and appeared vulnerable. Even Alabaster had only come after me because I was actively arresting gang members.

Perhaps I was overestimating my own importance a bit.

Perish the thought.

"Do you want me to beat you guys up?"

The others shifted a bit, watching the exchange with interest. He stood up a bit straighter, not backing down. "You think Lung would show up because of us?"

Damnit.

I blew out a sigh. "Thanks for the reality check, kid."

"Lao."

"Thanks, Lao."

He stared me down for a minute, then reached out towards me, joint in hand. I didn't want it again, but... I recognized the peace offering for what it was. I took a small hit and passed it.

On a whim I looked at the electronics store behind them, ads pasted over windows covered with thick iron security bars. "They sell cell phones?"

Lao hesitated for a second, then nodded.

"Aight." I floated past them, door making a jingling sound as I entered. Dense rows of electronics, stereos, cables, VCRs, DVD players... and pre-paid cell phones. Nice. I grabbed one off the shelf that looked like the one Steve gave me and hovered over to the register.

A plain-faced man, maybe in his late thirties, watched me with the most impassive stare I'd ever seen on a person. Not even a little bit impressed at the flying, costumed man in his discount electronics store. Like Steve's level of don't-give-a-fuckitude, but turned to 11.

As he rung me up, I asked "Any good banh mi places around here?"

He took my cash in silence, just staring. Kinda crept me out, to be honest. I came to terms with the fact I probably wouldn't get an answer, but then he spoke in a quiet, slightly-accented voice. "Lily's Sandwiches."
I glanced at the nametag on his apron. "Thank you, Hao."

He stared at me for a moment, then handed me my change without further comment.

I got the hint that I wasn't particularly welcome and didn't linger.

Not seeing a point in aimlessly wandering ABB territory further, I flew home (after checking out the sandwich shop. It was pretty damn good.) I supposed I had been relying a bit too much on my "wander" ability, if it even was a real ability and not just bad luck.

Perhaps I'd have more luck at night. Or with a bit more planning.

Chapter End Notes

Can't win them all.
"C'mon fellas, I don't want any trouble."

"You hear that buys? Coon doesn't want any trouble."

I was surrounded, four guys with Empire markings or tattoos or colors backing me into an alleyway, pressed up against an overflowing dumpster. One even had a leather jacket with a swastika on it, which was a bold choice, even for Brockton fucking Bay.

"Yer in the wrong part of town, nig-"

My fist smashed into his face with a satisfying wet thwack. Popped the inner force field, but Browbeat's was still going strong. Just a little extra power between me and whatever I was hitting. Or whatever hit me, like the length of pipe anonymous jackbooted thug #2 discovered had far less effect than he had hoped.

Uber's power provided a few vague hints of where to be, how to dodge, ways to redirect attacks towards other opponents. Three guys down in ten seconds. The fourth tried to run and got a pipe spinning into the back of his legs for the effort.

Eight zip-ties, four wallets, three knives, two cell phones, one poorly-maintained gun and a phone call later, I was speaking with the ever-professional BBPD dispatch and they were on their way.

I'd learned from my encounter with the ABB thugs. Going around in costume, flashy and flying, was no way to encounter gang members. I mean, it worked a few days before, but even then they knew they were going in to fight a cape and went in shooting.

But going around in disguise? Much more effective.

Especially since my disguise was that of a shorter, thinner, African American man in a nice suit.

The hardest part was letting go of the beard. Thankfully, Browbeat's power giveth as well as taketh away, and I was fairly certain I could regrow it overnight. I hoped. I'd hate to spend time regrowing it the normal way.

The easiest part was finding assholes who had issues with wealthy-looking black men who didn't look like they'd put up much of a fight.

I was Nazi catnip.

And the best part was, what alt-reich thug would admit to being beaten up, mugged, and turned into the police by an unarmed black man with no obvious superpowers? Sure, they could assume I had a Brute rating, but I wasn't flying, blasting, or wearing a costume. It'd sound like they were just making shit up to cover their shame at letting a member of an 'inferior race' beat them while outnumbered and outgunned.
It was delightfully gratifying.

The police didn't say anything about it, either. Just urged me to be cautious, as the neighborhood was an unfriendly one to 'certain folks'. I nodded, smiled, and did it three more times in four hours.

By the fourth patrol car they weren't even asking questions anymore. They didn't call in the PRT either, though, so they were either happy to accept that I wasn't a parahuman or just didn't want to deal with the paperwork and jurisdictional issues if I was. And the calls were on the new burner phone, so they couldn't even trace that back to me either.

And if the Empire started being more cautious around easy-looking targets of my description? Well, I was happy with that result. And I could always change into another form anyway.

See? I could plan.

The only problem was my cheap jacket (it only looked tailored because I could alter my dimension to match it, instead of the other way around) was getting ruined from the fighting. So I slung it over one arm and continued moving around Empire territory, ducking into obviously unwise alleyway shortcuts and pretending to look nervous.

My tattoos refused to be hidden, even with Browbeat's power, but hey, that's what long sleeved shirts were for. And the white stood out even more at night against my dark skin.

And then I struck paydirt.

Halfway through an alleyway, I was startled by a tremendous crash! as dumpsters flew out of the sky and blocked off either exit. I was trapped.

"Oh god!" I wailed. "Somebody, help!"

"Save it, jigaboo." Sabrina the Teenage Nazi swooped down on a chunk of concrete, hovering some fifteen feet over the filthy alleyway. "Thought you were so fucking clever, didn't you."

I stood up straight, adjusted my tie, weak affectation dropped. I couldn't help but smile. "Well, yes. A little. Are we fighting now?"

A secondary cloud of orbiting debris - a mailbox, a few cinderblocks, a manhole cover - sprung up around her in an aggressive fashion. "Bring it, monkey."

Oh, how I wished I could have just shown off. Just a little.

But no, I was still playing the role of the extremely-athletic-but-still-possibly-unpowered do-gooder. Had do better with this temporary cape identity than I did my other one. Keep them guessing.

So I took a running leap, kicked off one alley wall, bounced off the other one in the narrow space, moved just ahead of the flung debris, reached out and up and-

Gave Rune a flying bitchslap, almost knocking her off her floating platform.

"Motherfucker!"

And while she was stunned, I ducked into a roll onto the nearby rooftop (Thanks, Uber!) and hit the
ground running, dodging behind A/C units and skylights, trying to stay out of her sight. I dove down into the next alleyway before she could catch up, tagging a trash can - probably small enough, right? - and willing it to throw itself down the opposite direction from me as a distraction.

...And nothing happened.

Rune roared her angry defiance as she cleared the edge of the building, hunting me down, and it was time to run and not think. We played a desperate game of cat and mouse for a few minutes, me speeding up with flight in the moments she was out of sight, and eventually I lost her by hiding in a sewer, barely shimmying into the storm drain by dint of my disguise's thinner frame. Not the most dignified of escapes, but, eh. Results.

I gave her ten, twenty minutes to vent her frustration and give up before I cautiously slipped out of my hiding place. I made my way to a private enough place that I could take to the skies and fled, mind spinning. I'd had enough time in the drain to think, and try out her power on a few other, increasingly smaller objects, and... nothing.

Had I hit some sort of limit? Were some powers out of my reach?

Dread built on insecurity built on fear until I made it home and checked my tattoos. Dauntless had a second notch, Browbeat a third, but there was no sign of Rune. None. Zip. Zilch. Nada.

Desperately, I checked the rest of my ink, and...

When the hell had I grabbed a second charge for Oni Lee?

Earlier in the day... I must have done a flyby like I did for Uber and not noticed. Fuck, that was nerve-wracking! My world had started to crumble on itself for a while there!

It would have been nice if my powers gave me a tingle or something when I gained a new power. Would that have been too much to ask?

I showered off the sewer gunk, tossed the suit and shirt in the trash, grabbed yet another long-sleeve shirt, threw a pizza in the oven and started flipping through channels.

The backdoor clicked open, Steve slipping in quietly. He looked haggard, five o'clock shadow darkening his face. He saw me and gratefully accepted a beer, and we sat and watched TV in silence.

It took me an hour, two reruns of Nick at Night "I Dream of Genie" and four beers to realize I was still in my "defenseless black man" disguise.

"Hey." I gave Steve a look when he turned my way. Gestured at my face. "Nothing? Really?"

He just blinked slowly and turned back to the TV. "Looked better with the beard."

Well. He had a point.

Chapter End Notes
The question is, did Steve really not notice? Or did he see a stranger on his couch, drank beers with them, and not give it any thought?
"Hey."

I cracked open an eye. "Five more minutes."

"You want Oni Lee's power?"

Groaning, I shuffled around til I could see my watch. Six in the morning.

"Not that much." I rolled over and scooted over to the edge of the...

Hm. I wasn't on the couch.

A brief glance determined I was floating a foot or so above the couch. It was definitely more comfortable, but probably something I should keep an eye on. Might blow my cover under certain very specific circumstances.

"You piss off the ABB?"

Still talking to me. Damnit Steve, don't make me blast you.

"No."

For fuck's sake. I could still feel his look while facing the other way and with my eyes closed.

"No," I insisted. "I went around ABB territory, didn't find trouble, talked amicably with some kids dressed like gang members, and left." I spun around, finally giving him some of my attention.

"Why?"

"Oni Lee's wrecking Merchant hangouts two blocks from here."

"Why would he attack the Merchants? I've harassed everyone except..." Oh.

"Yeah."

"And you think he's after me."

"Yeah."

"Fuck."

He didn't answer, just gave me a look.

What did I do to piss him off? And of all the times to be out of charges... son of a bitch couldn't have waited a few hours? And what, had he followed me home after my unsuccessful ABB visit?
"Wouldn't showing up just confirm where I live?"

"Other safe-houses."

I blew out a sigh. I knew the ABB didn't have much respect for the unwritten rules, but it was still kind of out of the blue, wasn't it?

Shedding the blanket wrapped around me like a human burrito, I moved towards the pieces of my costume scattered around the living room and kitchen.

"You'll be paid."

I waved him off, then thought better of it. "I mean, I'm not saying no to money, but I was going anyway."

He shrugged minutely. "Part of the deal." True. I could have just slipped out, let Oni Lee flail aimlessly around the neighborhood none the wiser. At least getting paid was a *rational* reason why I was willing to risk my life against a heartless killer.

And not because I was a little bit excited at the prospect.

Armed with a few hours sleep, a slice of cold pizza and directions, I didn't bother getting a few blocks away from the apartment before taking to the air. From a height, before the dawn, it was hard to tell exactly where Oni Lee had attacked. There were a few small fires, and the distant sound of sirens, but no sign of the man himself.

I cranked up my shields to max - not that there was a sliding scale, but it made me feel better - and floated a few stories above the streets, head on a swivel for the teleporting assassin.

I didn't have to wait long. One second I was alone in the sky, the next I had a goddamn ninja on my back stabbing and shattering my inner force-field.

Note to self - outer shields didn't prevent teleportation. Good to know.

Shouting, I spun around trying to dislodge him, catching him the chest with a blast of New Wave-brand lasers. The clone tumbled off bonelessly, poofing into ash before hitting the ground. I jinked and spun, trying to catch where the bastard was hiding between teleports and to throw off his aim. I floated purposefully, tried to lure him away from the apartment; no sense trashing the place.

Fuck! Oni Lee clone on my legs, dragging me downward. A blast solved the problem, but it had me pinned long enough to get another clone on my back. At least it didn't stab me before I reached a hand over my shoulder and blasted it in the face.

Then it exploded.

The thundering hammerblow shattered force-fields and flung me smoking through the sky, a fiery screaming meteor in the Brockton Bay night sky. It took all of my concentration and Browbeat's much-abused powers keeping me from dying on the spot. I only hit the ground for a moment, but it was long enough for clones to dog-pile me, pinning me to the ground with their bodies. A panicked Purity blast drilled a hole - literally *through* two of the clones - and I used the line of sight to teleport twenty feet away before the whole clusterfuck exploded *again*, adding yet more shrapnel to the my collection.
There was something desperately unfair about a serial suicide bomber.

I just needed a fucking second to stop the worst of the bleeding and - no, fuck off, pew pew - take to the air and - Skidmark field, keep him from getting a grip on my legs, blast for good measure - get some fucking distance SHIT TELEPORT - and if I flew high enough I could - get off get off get off eat sword! - get out of fucking sight!

Yes I ran away damnit, I was bleeding like a goddamn sieve! A sieve full of hot shards of metal.

I was nearly a mile in the air before I felt like I could take that fucking second to heal myself. Thank god for Browbeat, and for his willingness to act as a bribe. I'd be dead if - I owed him a fruit basket. As it was, I felt like death warmed over as I painstakingly sealed off dozens of wounds, spitting out metal and patching over anything vital long enough not to pass out this time.

And considering the height, I wasn't sure I'd survive the landing.

I didn't know how long I floated up there, internally focused on that desperate race to not die, but the sun was peeking over the ocean by the time I could stop to actually breathe.

In retrospect, that was a terrible fucking idea, I had to admit. Oni Lee was a bastard.

I took a shaky breath - in, out - the wounds not pulling at my muscles with every movement anymore. Still twinged, but good enough. With trembling hands, I pulled out my cell (carefully slipped my wrist into the strap) and called Steve. I needed all the naps, and he knew of other safe-houses to crash in. Ones Oni Lee hopefully didn't know about.

"Fax."

That... that was not Steve.

"Who is this?"

"We have your boyfriend." He's not my- focus, details. The phone rustled.

"Hey." That was Steve, sounding more than a bit ragged. "You ok?"

"Fine. What-"

The sound of the phone moving again. A measured voice, cold, arrogant. Gravelly. Slight Asian accent. Masculine as balls. I had a guess who it was.

"He is alive."

I forced myself to take a deep breath of thin, high-altitude air. In, out. Not enough air. Force it anyway.

"The fuck you want?"

"You challenged me."

"I didn't-t-!"
"You were a fool to attempt to intimidate Oni Lee."

"I did what-"

"I have answered your challenge in kind. We will fight. I will kill you." It wasn't even a threat. It was a statement of fact.

I wasn't fucking ready yet. Hell, I couldn't even take on Oni Lee!

But if I didn't fight, then Steve was toast. Literally.

*Damnit Steve. You owe me.*

"When and where?"

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Chapter End Notes

Shit, meet fan.
“C’mon, c’mon, pick up.”

"Hello?"

"Hi I know there’s probably channels for this but I don’t have time can I please speak to Faultline.” Mind racing. Miss anything? Right! "This is independent hero Fax. It’s a business proposition."

I really hoped the Palanquin staff knew what to do when they got calls like this. Surely I couldn’t have been the only one who didn’t have Faultline’s professional mercenary request hotline in my rolodex. I’d have just knocked on the back door, but that could end up being counterproductive.

"Look, I don’t know what rumors you’ve heard, but the Palanquin isn’t actually-" Hold on a second. I recognized that voice!

"Mouse Protector?"

A sigh.

"Come on, help me out here. It’s urgent."

Click.

Damn it! I didn’t have time for this. If she wasn’t going to help, I had to-

My cell phone rang. I didn’t recognize the number.

"Hello?"

"You’re being reckless." She made it sound like that was a crime on par with killing kittens.

Wait a minute...

"...You’re Faultline?"

"You have two minutes."

Christ, I’d process that later. Clock was ticking.

"Lung has kidnapped a friend of mine. Wants me to fight him in twenty minutes. I-" Fuckit. Go for broke. "I need to meet with Newter, Gregor and Spitfire."

"Why?" Her tone was sharp, demanding.

"I can temporarily gain limited copies of powers." A pause. "I don't even have to touch them. Just be in the same room for a second. I'm not asking you to risk their lives fighting Lung."
C'mon, c'mon, if you're gonna say no say it quickly.

"Two thousand."

"Deal."

"Up front. I'll send you the account information-

"I don't know how to do that. I'll just give you my card."

"..."

"I've trusted you with it before."

"Back door of the Palanquin."

---

I couldn't even knock before the door opened. The orange man who couldn't know touch, the obese man with translucent skin and shells on his skin, a woman in black and red with a gasmask. They looked tense, expectant, spaced around the room strategically.

Before they can even say anything I checked my tattoos. Left arm, the Medusa, three new rings. A whorl of a shell in light blue, the curl of a tail in orange, a gas mask in black, each with one notch in the ring.

Newter - man, even the sclera of his eyes were light blue (the spice must flow) - held out a hand. I hesitated for a moment - no time for a drug trip, thanks? - then realized what he was asking for. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my wallet and handed him the black card. "Thanks."

He slipped the card into a pocket and shrugged, taking a step back. "Easy money."

Then Faultline entered, wearing her eclectic riot/samurai dress/armor. "You get what you need?"

"Yes."

"You're really going to go fight Lung on your own?"

Sigh. "Seems like it."

"Why don't you ask Purity to help?"

I open my mouth, close it. "I assumed he wanted to fight me one on one." Even if I couldn't see her eyes, she had a hell of a glare. "...And if I brought in anyone else he'd kill the hostage?"

"Did he say that?"

"...No."

"Did he give any indication Oni Lee wouldn't be involved?"
"Damnit. No he did not."

I couldn't see her face, but her body language shifted from frustration to something closer to faint pity. But maybe that was me projecting again. "Sounds like you've got some calls to make."

"I don't suppose you..."

"Against Lung? No."

"I could-"

"I don't think you have that kind of money."

"Fair enough." I turn to leave. "I wasn't planning on doing it this early either..

"Good luck."

I nod, making eye contact with her crew, tried to give them a smile they wouldn't see anyway. "Thanks."

---

Two rapid-fire phone calls and other hurried preparations later, I made it to Lung's rendezvous point with a minute to spare.

I'd been concentrating on Browbeat's powers, and was a much bulkier man than the one that woke up that morning. Even spent a minute or two soaking up the sun, while otherwise occupied on the phone; thankfully the cloud cover wasn't as permanent as my first few days in the city had led me to believe. Between recharging my solar batteries and my enhanced musculature and reinforced bones, I was armed for bear.

I could only hope it was enough to survive Lung.

Thin trails of smoke marked out the warehouse Lung had chosen for the meeting point. It was in Merchant territory, of course; if he was looking for a fight, he wouldn't want it to spill out on his home turf. Especially not with his typical levels of collateral damage.

Circling it once, I couldn't see inside, nor did I spot Oni Lee waiting nearby. I took a deep breath and descended to the only visible door, made to open it... changed my mind and kicked it open, blast ready in hand.

I was struck first by the smell. Charred, greasy, uncomfortably like burnt hamburger; it made my stomach roil.

My glowing hand passed over Lung, standing seven feet tall, bare-chested and barefoot, little coils of smoke rising from his metal dragon mask. He had his arms crossed, showing no sign of reaction from my dynamic entry.

Behind him and to the side, Steve hung on a chain, kept from spinning by Oni Lee at his side.

Steve looked like shit, bruised and battered. One eye had swollen shut, and parts of his shirt were melted to his skin. I could see his chest rise and fall, jerky but visible - still alive.
Oni Lee looked like he was waiting for a bus for all the emotion that showed in his body language.

And then there were the bodies.

Lung had apparently warmed up for his fight with me by tearing the shit out of what I could only assume had once been the Merchants occupying the building. Now they were just a pile of steaming, charred corpses, haphazardly dumped out of the way in a corner.

I swallowed bile, forced myself to keep my eyes on Lung. One hand pointed at him, ready to fire if he moved an inch.

My breath caught in my throat - the scarf did not do nearly enough to cover the stench of death and ashes.

"I-" Stop looking at the corpses, focus on Lung damnit "I didn't mean to challenge you. And I still don't know when I supposedly tried to intimidate Oni Lee. This is all just a misunderstanding."

Lung said nothing, eyes like burning coals staring at me from behind his metal mask.

"Just... let me grab my friend and I promise I won't set foot in ABB territory again. Lesson learned, yeah? You're the boss."

His voice was more growl than words and carried a sense of absolute finality.

"No."

So I blasted him in the face full force, brilliant white spiraling around a blueish beam core.

He reeled, taking a small step back and uncrossing his arms, lowering himself into a crouch. I was already moving, darting the the side of the warehouse and up off the ground, both hands aimed and firing at his face, trying to overwhelm him right out of the gate. He threw up a hand and a wave of fire exploded outwards, nearly blinding me with its intensity. Even grazing me, it popped my outer shield in seconds and filled the air with broiling heat.

While he was still blinded I threw beams at Oni Lee and the chains holding up Steve. The former poofed into ash a moment later, the latter collapsed bonelessly the floor, unable to support his own weight.

Lung's fucking enhanced senses made him spin at the sound, flamethrower hands pointed at his former captive - blasting him in the face didn't turn his aim, fucking dammit-

I teleported on top of Steve, covering him with my body, and Lung released a torrential gout of flame at us both. Outer shield popped again, inner shield cracked a moment later, I couldn't see, I couldn't breath, need to escape I blasted a hole in the ceiling and with Steve tucked tight against my body I leapt and-

Lung's massive claw wrapped around my leg and slammed me into the concrete, sending Steve tumbling into the pile of burnt corpses. Fighting against his grip, not yet able to teleport away, I continued blasting him as he grabbed my chest with his other hand and squeezed.

Even with biokinesis reinforcing my body, even with the support of the touch telekinesis acting as a
buffer, even with some of the flames splashing harmlessly against my skin, I screamed in agony.

Lung lifted me off the ground, already nine feet tall, and I saw his face, or what was left of it. Mask turned to slag, face still running with melted flesh replaced with scales even as I watched, one of the eyes I'd struggled to disable stared at me with glowing hate. I flared Purity's glow, trying to blind him even for a moment, but with me in his grip he didn't need to see.

He opened his mouth wide, already starting to split at the jaw. I saw the light at the end of the tunnel, fire building, ready to burn me to ash.

I shoved my hand into his gaping maw.

Foam expanded from my palm, rapidly swelling as I pushed it out as fast as I could. Gregor's foam, fire-retardant and hard-setting, laced with Newter's hallucinogenic fluids. I only spewed it out for a moment before he reeled back again, gasping, choking, coughing as it filled his mouth and throat.

Instead of letting me go in his shock, he slammed me once, twice against the floor until my legs shattered under the force of the blows. Only then did I manage to blast his hands enough to slip his grip, sending myself flying backwards, sprawling along the ground.

Steve. Where was Steve.

Still dazed, spinning from the pain and lack of air, I lifted myself up with flight, legs useless. There! I blinked to his side again, slipped charred arms around his chest and flew up again, Lung too far to lunge, still growling and rasping as he cleared the gunk from his throat. Go go go go go go go go! Swaying drunkenly, half-blind, smashing against the edges of the too-small tear in the ceiling, I had barely made it ten feet before Lung - fuck if I knew how he was still breathing - exploded out of the much-abused warehouse in hot pursuit. Fire lanced out from his outstretched hands, tracing the outline of my outer shield before it popped like a soap bubble and-

A brilliant helix of white light smashed him back to the ground like the fist of an angry god.

Someone in red caught me before I hit the ground. My ribs were a steel vice, legs splinters; I really had to stop being such a sieve.

"I've got you, I've got you," the man said, lowering us to the pavement. There were bright lights, flashes of color. Costumes. The Protectorate.

Lung roared, counterpointed by beams and blasts and explosions. The warehouse collapsed noisily, unable to withstand the onslaught.

I saw uniforms, but not costumes. Paramedics. They bustled around me, why - oh, I'd put my shield up again. I dropped it, and they swarmed over us, gently prying my fire-blackened arms from around Steve, rolling him on his back, preparing a gurney.

His one good eye opened, found me.

Then there was someone between us. A shout of warning, a gunshot. They fell, and I saw Oni Lee's mask, cracked where the bullet passed through.
And then everything went white.

Chapter End Notes

A little bit of lighthearted fun.
I woke up in a hospital bed again.

Blankets, IV drip disappearing into my arm.

Straps holding me down to the hospital bed.

Quiet beeping, muffled sounds.

Dark outside. Clock read 9:30. I assumed it was PM.

Everything hurt.

I let it.

*Steve's dead, isn't he.*

He was right next to Oni Lee when he exploded.

*Fuck.*

My fists clenched, unclenched, grasping at nothing.

I could have saved him. If I'd been more prepared, more careful...

*He didn't have to die.*

My eyes were hot, and I rubbed them with one raw-fleshed arm. It hurt.

It hurt.

Why did it hurt?

*This wasn't supposed to happen.*

Did I *want* it to hurt? Did I *want* him to die?

The fuck was *wrong* with me?

I heard a high-pitched keening. My throat was raw, smoke-burnt, cracking at the sound.

*It was such a good dream.*

I wasn't just going to wake up from this, was I.
Take two.
Day 7.24 : Dead Tired

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I didn't notice the video screen until I saw the face on it.

She wasn’t beautiful, but she wasn’t ugly either. Even ‘plain’ wasn’t the right label. She was exceptionally average in appearance, to the point that it was borderline eerie.

"Dragon," I croaked. Throat hurt, more so after I woke up.

If she was surprised I recognized her, she didn't show it.

"Good evening Fax. How are you feeling?"

"...Hurts." A flash of sympathy crossed her features.

"Are you able to heal yourself?"

"Yes."

For a moment, I wanted to just leave it. Feel the pain.

But that was stupid. Didn't help anyone. To quote a much wiser man than I, "to suffer unnecessarily is masochistic rather than heroic."

A focus of will, and my body began cannibalizing the enhanced musculature for undamaged flesh, shedding the layers of charred meat and skin like a particularly morbid cocoon. Bits clung like shredded wrapping paper, tucked inside blankets and the straps holding me to the bed. I was closer to my normal 'hero' size; muscular, not grotesque.

"I'm sorry about the straps. You were floating while unconscious, and we were afraid you would injure yourself or dislodge the IV."

I nodded.

I took a deep breath, pain jarring in its absence.

"...Steve?" She didn't say anything for a moment. "The... hostage."

"I'm sorry." To her credit, she did look genuinely remorseful. Or at least decided to express such on her avatar, for my benefit. "He didn't make it."

I nodded. I hadn't held out much hope otherwise. Didn't mean my eyes didn't water anyway, though, my throat tightening, hearing it confirmed.

"Lung was taken into captivity. He'll likely be sent to the Birdcage."

I nodded again. Good. Fuck that guy.
"Oni Lee?"

"I'm afraid he escaped capture."

Damnit. Well, at least it meant I could avenge Steve myself.

I was fairly certain it was too early, but...

"Was there a bombing incident at Cornell?"

Dragon shifted, apparently curious at the abrupt shift in topic. "Not that I'm aware of. Why do you ask?"

No Bakuda. No bomb spree. No breaking out Lung.

Good.

I shook my head at Dragon's question. She took it in stride, letting it go, at least for the moment. No doubt I'd get questions about any precognitive abilities when Bakuda did make her debut, but that was far enough down the line it would probably be moot by then.

"Are you hungry?"

Famished. Wherever Browbeat's power drew mass from, it still made me ravenously hungry afterwards. When I nodded, a panel shifted in the nearest wall, and a small tray emerged, smoothly moving to my bedside.

Between bites of rather bland chow, I asked Dragon "Where am I?"

"You're in an isolated medical facility in PRT headquarters. We weren't sure what your range was on your power, or when it reset."

Explained why she was babysitting.

"Armsmaster would like to speak to you, if you're ready to receive visitors. He can do it remotely or in person, whichever you feel more comfortable with."

I sighed around a mouthful of mashed potatoes, taking a moment to chew. I really wasn't in the mood to answer questions, and especially not to get a sales pitch. A glance at the window revealed it was smaller than the one at the other hospital, and didn't appear to open.

Dragon must have picked up on my reluctance. "You're not under arrest. He just has some questions about the events of this morning. It would help prosecute Lung, possibly ensure he gets the Birdcage."

Just needed a fucking minute. To... process.

I channeled my inner Libertarian. "Am I being detained?"

"I understand you've been through a traumatic experience. You can take as much time as you need, if you're not ready to talk about it."
I was ready to continue the mantra - "Am I free to leave?" - but was hit with the sudden realization I didn't have anywhere to go. Even if the apartment was somehow untouched by the ABB when... this morning, there was no reason to go back. Some clothes. Frozen pizzas and beer. Nothing left was irreplaceable.

And it was assuming the deal was still on with Skidmark.

Faultline had my card, but I had a few hundred in my wallet. If she hadn't robbed me blind by now - and that didn't seem her style - another few days wouldn't make a difference.

"We also have counselors on site who you can talk to. Everything shared with them would be completely confidential."

Bless your heart, Dragon.

First things first.

"You mind if I get seconds?"

She smiled. "Of course not."

---

Dragon let me watch the news. The Protectorate was crowing at the victory of having captured Lung, even crediting Purity for the assist along with me. Nice of them.

"While none of the heroes received severe injuries, casualties included."

Cartoons. How about some cartoons.

They were different on Bet. Apparently due to the damage Leviathan did to Japan, the animations were....

Nope. Even I couldn't pretend to be interested in that.

Eventually I got sick of stewing in my own discarded flesh and got out of bed. Dragon provided a biohazard bin and fresh sheets, as well as a pair of sweats and a t-shirt in a nearby drawer. I pulled them on after taking a very, very long shower.

Dragon herself came and went. I imagined she was busy.

Every once in a while she would check in on me. Not pressuring, just... asking. No, I didn't want to speak with Armsmaster. Not yet. A counselor... maybe later.

Time passed.

I let it.

I slept. Tried to think; tried not to think.

Food came and went.
The sun rose, brightening the small, north-facing window. I waited for, and felt, the surge of energy that indicated fresh charges.

Just because I saw no point in needless suffering didn't mean I was ready to keep going like nothing happened. I felt... a little churlish, perhaps. Stubborn. I wasn't about to wear black armor with spikes on the inside to remind me of the pain I caused, but I had earned a day off. On the seventh day, God rested. On the eighth day, I did.

I slept some more. When I woke, my pillow was wet on my face. I flipped the pillow over.

I surfed through PHO on a guest account, looking through archives. The site was older than I expected, and had active roleplaying and creative writing sections. Too meta for my taste.

I made small talk with Dragon, resisted the urge to talk about things I had no reason to know. Saint was always watching, after all. No sense in getting Dragon slain just because a junkie with an itchy trigger finger was watching her every move.

In the afternoon I got mail.

Flowers. A balloon with "Get well soon!" cheerfully emblazoned on it. A card, signed by New Wave. Nice of them, if unexpected. Guess they weren't too upset with me.

An envelope with my card in it, no sender, no note. Thanks, Faultline.

A card, somber colored, signed by Miss Militia, Dauntless and Browbeat. "I'm sorry for your-

A thank you note from Purity. For talking with the Protectorate, giving her a chance to do something openly, undeniably heroic. Not in so many words, and she specifically mentioned "that animal, Lung", but the sentiment came across. An offer, if I needed anything, and an invitation to patrol together. Sweetheart.

Late in the evening I agreed to speak with Armsmaster. Over video.

Even on a screen he looked remarkably heroic. Perfectly clean lines, down to his facial hair. Good diction. Unexpectedly empathetic. Ignored my disheveled appearance, red eyes, bushy beard.

He asked to-the-point questions, I gave to-the-point answers. He didn't seem surprised by any of my responses.

Questions I didn't want to answer, I ignored in silence. He skipped them, moving smoothly to the next question. Didn't mention Faultline. Didn't say how I knew Oni Lee was attacking. Didn't have an answer to why I thought Lung went after me.

Armsmaster, to his credit, didn't discuss my future, or the Protectorate. He did thank me for contacting them; the minimized response time undoubtedly saved lives. He was better at reading my reactions than fanon gave him credit for, because he ended the conversation soon after that. I was too tired to blast the screen anyway. And I would have owed an apology to Dragon.

Too damn tired.
I awoke shortly before dawn.

I wondered what would happen.

Would I lose all my powers? Would the ones I had decay? Would a tattoo appear on my forehead, reading "play the damn game" in all caps? Did unspent charges roll over, or just vanish?

Fuck it.

I stared at my arms with morbid curiosity, waiting for the sun to rise.

By the light of the earliest hints of the day, a hint of movement caught my eye. On my left wrist, a black line made a clean separation between ink and untouched skin, visual negative space.

And on that line, the ring around my forearm, was a single, small, gap. A notch.

Chapter End Notes

BUT WHAT COULD IT MEAN!?
"Hello?"

I had a handful of missed calls when I checked my cell phone again. Purity, Dauntless, and one other number.

"Well if it ain't the fuckin' illustrated man himself."

I suppressed a shiver. Even with everything else that had happened in the last week, I still got a chill when I heard his voice.

"Skidmark."

"Damn right, bitch."

"I'm sorry. About Steve."

*My fault.*

A pause. "Yeah." Silence from both of us, for a moment. "Hooker with a heart of gold, silver tongue and balls of steel. We'll get that motherfucker Lee."

"Wait, what?"

"I'm gonna kick his shitlicking teeth in-"

"No, that other part."

A pause, then a phlegmy, coughing laugh. "You didn't know.″ He chuckled when I didn't reply, clearing his throat a bit, spitting wetly. "He wasn't just a recruiter, he was my most popular fuckboy. Suave sumbitch could suck the chrome off a trailer hitch."

Huh.

Did that change anything?

Not really. Everyone made a living somehow.

It... *did* explain some things, though.

"Gonna avenge that tight ass of his by fucking the ABB dry."

"Good."

A pause, wheels turning.
"So. We cool?"

"Yeah." I nodded, even though he couldn't see. If leaving the Merchants alone meant what was left of the ABB crumbled to ashes... "Yeah, we cool."

Plus, you know, if anyone had broken the deal, it would have been me. If Skidmark was willing to let it go...

"Good. You want in on shit, you let me know."

I hung up the phone, slipping it back into the pocket of the PRT-issue sweatpants. I looked down over the city, soaking in the sunlight.

The Protectorate had let me leave without issue, although they did give me a subdued sales pitch before I left. Kid gloves, with encouragement to work together, joint patrols, cooperation in raids against gang activity, access to testing and resources even if I didn't want to join, the expected spiel.

After checking in with Skidmark, I still had another bridge to mend.

"New Wave, Lady Photon speaking."

"Hi Sarah, it's Fax."

A pregnant pause.

"I hope you're feeling better."

"I am, thank you. And thanks. For the flowers."

More silence as she gave me a chance to state my intentions. I gathered my thoughts, planned my words out a little better than I usually did.

"I'd like to speak with New Wave, clear the air a bit. Over the phone is fine," I hastened to add. "I... believe I owe you all an apology."

This time I gave her some time to consider her reply.

"I believe you do." I winced. That was definitely her Mom voice. "But a team meeting can be arranged."

"Thank you."

"I'll call you back with details."

Well.

That was promising, at least.

Until then, I had errands to run. Grabbing an extended-stay hotel, stocking it with beer and frozen pizzas, visiting the costumer to replace the gear Lung destroyed - thankfully they pre-made extras
once you buy your first set, because having superpowers lended themselves to wardrobe issues - and then buying more replacement clothing, toiletries, other mundane things people with superpowers didn't think about unless there was a plot-relevant encounter involved.

At some point I got a text with a time and an address from Sarah. I confirmed, noting with some surprise it was back at the Pelham house.

I had a couple hours before the meeting (presumably to give everyone time to get off work and school) and should have spent that time figuring out what that meant, how to best take advantage of the situation.

Instead I floated a foot above the hotel bed and stared at the ceiling.

I may have drifted off. I woke up sweating.

A few times I distracted myself by looking at the notch in the tattoo ring around my wrist, trying to figure out the fuck it meant.

I had no idea.

And that was mildly infuriating, a frustration dimmed only by general exhaustion. Couldn't my powers have been even a little more explicit?

---

I waited outside the gate, sans costume. It had been annoying taking a cab after getting used to flying, but at least I felt a little less ridiculous than I did the last time. I was dressed nicer, too: jeans, long-sleeve dark blue button-up, black flat-cap, boots. I almost didn't look out of place in the swanky neighborhood.

"New Wave."

"Hey. I have an appointment."

A pause, then the gate made a clunk sound. I didn't step through it.

"The first three people I meet..."

Another pause.

"Understood."

Only then did I step through the gate and make my way down the winding drive. It was unseasonably warm out; the wind helped, and the sun was more invigorating than it was overbearing, but I still felt myself sweating as I approached the front door.

Sarah met me at the door, in costume. Her expression was carefully schooled, the cool neutrality odd on her heart-shaped face. My arm itched, and I tried not to fidget.

I took my hat off and waited on the doorstep, nodded respectfully. "Lady Photon." Wait. I itched where the Harpy lay on my skin. While she looked at me, as if weighing and measuring me on the scales of justice, I tried to figure out what it meant. I got the vague sense of... confirmation?
"Sarah is fine. Come on in." I gave her a brief smile and did as instructed. My arm stopped itching for a moment, then started up again twice as strong. Laserdream and Shielder were waiting for me in the foyer. For lack of a better word, I accepted one and... refused? the other. The itching stopped. I would figure it out later. Needed to focus on being polite.

"Hey." Not up to my usual standards, but they took it in stride. It was hard to tell what they were thinking. They seemed a bit surprised to see me out of costume, I thought. Perhaps they were withholding judgement til I said my piece.

"Fax?" That was Shielder, breaking the slightly awkward silence and giving me an appraising look.

"Yeap."

"How old are you?"

I quirked an eyebrow. "27, why?"

He made a sympathetic face. "27 and balding? Ouch, dude."

I ran a hand over my still-regrowing (in some places) hair self-consciously while Laserdream elbowed her brother. "Not cool!" she hissed.

I grinned despite myself as Sarah laid mother's glare on him. Placing my hat back on my head, I replied "I used to shave, but then I got chased by ABB punks thinking I was a skinhead last week. Guess I'll stick with hats."

"Sorry," he said, although whether it was in response to my statement or the reprimand from his family was unclear.

"Everyone's waiting in the dining room," Sarah said, a little too forcefully. I nodded and followed their lead.

Glory Girl was waiting by the door, and... I felt my arm itch again. Just above where it itched earlier. A moment later I tried not to scratch my arms as four more places starting itching in unison. Flashbang, Manpower, Brandish and, hiding in the back, Panacea all looked at me as I walked into the expansive dining room.

_Goddamn_ was that uncomfortable. Desperate to make it stop, I turned my attention to the first itch and... I had to come up with a better term for it. Confirmed?

I suppressed a sigh as the itching stopped.

Questions would have to wait for later. First, I had to face the firing squad.

I looked around the room, making eye contact where I could. Glory Girl had her arms crossed but wasn't quite scowling. Carol was definitely giving me side-eye. Most of the others looked carefully neutral. Panacea just looked curious... maybe a little afraid?

Right. She definitely did not want anyone copying her power. Couldn't blame her, what with her hangups.
I forced a smile. "Hey everyone. Fax, at your service. Nice to meet you."

---

After introductions and an offer for a glass of water I gratefully accepted - I wasn't the best at public speaking and damn if New Wave couldn't make a man feel put on the spot - Sarah started when I didn't appear ready to speak.

"We saw you help take down Lung."

_The smell of burning hair, couldn't breath, chest in a vice_

I flinched and broke eye contact, took a shaky breath. Missed her start talking again.

"...agreed, despite your earlier... misdirection, to give you a chance to explain yourself. Start fresh, with transparency and accountability."

I glanced around. Carol, Brandish, looked like she'd swallowed a lemon, but smoothed out her features when she caught my attention. Seemed like not everyone was pleased with that decision. That was fine. In retrospect, it wasn't the wisest course of action.

"Thank you," I croaked out. Trembling hands brought the glass to my lips, hurried swallows, tasting ash.

Deep, steadying breaths. Everyone's attention on me like a physical pressure.

"My name is Chris, and I'm a Trump."

Uncomfortably familiar for a second there.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you what I could do when we met. As I told Glory Girl, I was afraid. Of how people would react. I still don't know for sure how long my fractions of powers last, but I do know that my power grows over time, and that makes me dangerous."

There were some side-glances across the table at the admission. Glory Girl saying it was one thing, I supposed, but to hear it from the horse's mouth...

"I want to be a hero. Hell, I want to save the world."

Another deep breath, and I dropped my eyes to the table. Mahogany, lacquered within an inch of its life. I made sure I had put my glass on a coaster.

In a quieter voice, I continued. "I've made a lot of mistakes since I got my power."

_One eye opened, finding mine. A flash of white._

"Please forgive me."

Chapter End Notes
Now y'all get to re-read the chapters with Steve to see how heavily I'd foreshadowed that.

Imaginary internet points to people who guessed it beforehand.

Also, to answer the mystery - not spending any of his charges for the day did indeed upgrade his power manipulation ability itself. In this case, he earned the ability to accept/refuse to pick up a power. No more risk of accidentally picking up the wrong thing or spending a slot early. He doesn't know what specific power he's in range of unless he has an existing mark, but he can tell the number of different powers and get a sense of whose power he'd be confirming if multiple are available and he can see them.
"Hey, Chris."

"Mm?"

Glory Girl looked... contrite? The scowl had somewhat faded under the weight of my apology and the team had agreed to discuss any future collaboration between us amongst themselves, thanking me for my (belated) honesty. As I was escorted out, however, Victoria took me aside.

"I told mom all the things I said to you the other day and she pointed out I said something... out of line."

I quirked my eyebrows up in question. What was she...?

"It was... inappropriate and inexcusable that I accused you of... lying about how recent your trigger was. Just because you seemed to be in a good place when I met you didn't mean the trauma wasn't fresh and I know that's a really sensitive subject and I won't bring it up again after this." She paused, then finished with "Sorry."

I blinked. I had no memory of her saying anything at all about my trigger. I just remembered terror and me making frantic excuses so she didn't break me in half... yet without that aura active it was hard to associate this apologetic teenager with that walking siege engine.

That might've been her aura working in the other mode, though.

"It's ok," I said reflexively when she looked expectant. "Don't worry about it." And after she gave me a quizzical look to make sure, I added "Thanks for the apology."

That seemed to do the trick, because she nodded and flew away (until her mom quietly barked out "Victoria!" and she reluctantly returned to walking).

It made sense, though, in retrospect. Trigger events for capes were serious business, and even second generation capes would know enough about them to not want to bring them up casually, much less accusatively.

It wasn't until I was getting in the cab that I realized the events of the last few days were, in some ways, my belated initiation in to the ranks of the Trauma+Powers club.

...Jesus. No wonder capes were fucked up.

On the other hand, it helped... not lighten the memory, but at least... contextualize it. Capes went through some tough shit to get their powers, every last one of them (with few exceptions, like second gen capes and Cauldron). In Worm, power always came at a price. I was just... paying my due.

I felt a brief spike of anger at myself for being dismissive of... of my mistakes. And then I had a mental image, crystal clear, of Steve giving me one of his expressive-yet-subdued barely-shrugs and
not-quite-grins, and I couldn't help but smile.

Yeah. Steve would have given no fucks.

That made me feel better.

Talking things out with New Wave made me feel better.

But you know what would still help?

Alcohol.

---

"Speak."

"Hey, Mouse Protector."

I heard a brief exhalation that might have been a sigh. To my ears it sounded fond, of course, but I may have been biased.

"Yes?"

"Thanks for returning my card."

"Of course. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"I was just checking to see if it's alright for me to come drink there tonight. I've had... a rough week, and could use-"

"I'm not sure that's the best idea."

Gears grinded in my head. Why- oh. "I'm not... I'm at capacity, right now." A moment's thought. "I always was, at your bar. Honest."

"I have no way of verifying that. I'm sorry, but we don't do pro bono work."

"I-" I mean, I could show her my tattoos, but... it was bad enough the Merchants and possibly the Protectorate knew about that. And if she didn't want me there, she didn't want me there. "Alright. I'm sorry to hear that, but I respect your decision."

"Thank you." A pause. "If you want to hire us in the future, keep my contact information."

"Yeah."

Damnit.

That hurt more than it had any right to.

I was in no mood to drink alone, I didn't want the sales pitch that would come by inviting anyone in
the Protectorate even if they wanted to drink with me out of costume, Browbeat was too young, I wasn't crazy enough to try drinking with Skidmark...

-----

I stared out at the ocean, dark with the setting sun behind me. On the bench beside me was a double-thick paper bag full of wine and beer. Beneath my feet, the waves slapped and hissed as they rushed in and out of the pylons and wave breakers supporting the Boardwalk. Out over the bay, the Protectorate base shimmered, suspended in mid-air.

A chill wind blew, and I clutched the jacket of my replacement costume closer around me.

High above, a star descended from the sky to eventually land, gracefully, at my side. She reflexively lowered her glow before remembering it didn't bother me and bringing it up again.

"Hey, Purity." That glow was nice. A warm radiance, banishing the chill from the biting breeze.

"Good to see you, Fax." She brushed off the bench, then sat down primly, alcohol between us, glancing around to see who was nearby.

There weren't any crowds near us, but those that did see her there didn't react in as much fear as they might have before... the last few days. A little bit of heroic rep went a long way, apparently. And if some did slip away at the sight of her, at least they didn't run screaming or call the Protectorate on us.

She seemed to glow a bit brighter as she noticed that as well.

"Thanks for the card."

"Of course. Thank you for calling me, and for... speaking on my behalf."

"You're a hero." Ok, a still-racist, still-homophobic, still-bigoted ex-neo-Nazi who refused to fight against her former gang, but at least she was trying.

And she came when I called for help. That counted for a lot.

"Thank you," she sighed, voice quiet, "for saying so."

I gave her a small smile, and she returned it.

After a moment, she pecked inside the bag. "You were serious about that drink." She sounded slightly incredulous.

"Drinking's no fun by yourself. I needed a friend."

"I already had a-" she caught herself, presumably before she mentioned a babysitter. "-the night free. I was planning on patrolling, but..." She leaned back a bit. "It's been a long time since I took a real night off." She glanced around. "You weren't thinking of drinking out here in the open, were you?"

"Nah. Just seemed a nice place to meet."

It was the first place I met her, after all, even if she didn't know it. And also... a good place to say goodbye.
I slipped a hand into the bag, withdrew a can of cheap, generic beer. Popping the tab with a smooth motion, Purity watched with quiet understanding as I poured some of it on the weather-worn wooden slats of the Boardwalk.

*One eye opened, finding mine. The ghost of a smile.*

"Here's to you, buddy."

Chapter End Notes

The angst is tapering off, promise.

On the other hand, I hope it wasn't too abrupt - traumatized last chapter, over it this one.

Y'all let me know how you feel about it.
"I stop here sometimes when I need breaks on patrols. Hardly anybody ever comes up here."

I looked around at the small rooftop garden perched on top of one of the skyscrapers downtown. A bench, an overflowing ashtray, and a slightly overgrown wall of hedges with a view looking over the bay. None of the nearby buildings could see into it, and the only security camera faced the door leading up from the stairs. A nice place to drink in peace.

As we settled onto opposite ends of the bench, she reached into the bag and pulled out one of the bottles of wine and a plastic wine glass. She peered into the bag. "Do you have a corkscrew?"

Shit. I rarely drank wine, and it slipped my mind.

Unless...

I reached into my pocket, and the small pocketknife turned into a simple corkscrew and handle. Nice.

I'd been charging it every afternoon but, assuming my proportions were right, it still hadn't reached even one full charge. The rest of the time it just slipped out of my mind. I did figure out what it did when I was naked, though - apparently a small ring with a hidden blade counted enough as a weapon for the power. I could only assume the same for Miss Militia, unless she went into the shower wearing nothing but a holster. Which... was not a bad mental image. Mmm.

"Thanks," she muttered as I opened the bottle and poured her a glass. Then she leaned back into the bench, more relaxed than she had been out in public view. I followed suit, pulling down my scarf and taking a healthy swig of cheap, familiar beer. She glanced aside as soon as she saw me do so, but my collar still covered the bottom half of my face. Made the maneuver a little more awkward, but eh.

She tasted her wine, found it satisfactory, and took another modest sip, accepting my gift with a slight sigh.

"Don't take a lot of time to yourself, huh?"

She winced. "Not... really. Between my job and my... family, I end up feeling guilty. There's always more work to do."

"Amen to that."

We settled into companionable silence.

Eventually, we made small talk. Neither of us spoke of specifics, nothing incriminating, nothing that would reveal too much. On my part, mostly on her behalf. I didn't want a repeat of the Kaiser incident; no talking canon (or fanon) knowledge for granted. I was determined not to refer to anything she didn't tell me first.
It was a bit harder most of a six pack later, but if I slipped up again she didn't mention it. She was also getting through that bottle of wine, so maybe she just didn't notice if I did.

Conversation meandered. I preached the good word of breakfast tacos, she tried (and failed) to hide a disgusted face and described her own favorite local restaurants. We commiserated about Brockton Bay's frequent cloud cover. I enjoyed just... chatting. Faultline (and how dumb did I feel that she was hiding in plain sight that whole time?) just made conversation while between customers, and Steve and I hung out but didn't talk all that much.

It was nice.

---

After a lull in conversation, she broke the silence. "I'm sorry. About your friend."

I felt something twist in my gut, but forced a smile she couldn't see anyway. "Thanks."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I didn't say anything, and she didn't push. The bag of booze was on the ground now, mostly empty. Purity was making headway into her second bottle of wine.

After a minute, I shook my head. "I feel like I'm... being dramatic. I only knew the guy for a week."

"But you were brothers in arms." She met my eyes. "You fought together?"

Skidmark, staying his hand. "In a way."

She nodded in sympathy. "It's always hard."

"Could..." Fuck it. Between her warmth and the comforting buzz from the alcohol, I was feeling a bit forward. "Could I have a hug?"

She hesitated for only a second before putting down her wine glass. "You poor thing," she murmured. "Of course."

Scooting over, she wrapped one arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer. I held her - not too tight - trying not to overstay my welcome. I hadn't realized how much I missed touch, over the last week. Brockton Bay was not the friendliest of places at the best of times, and I came empty-handed, knowing no one.

"Tell me about him." Her voice was quiet, felt as much as heard.

After a pause - I wasn't sure I could get words past the lump in my throat - I found my voice, soft and unsteady, speaking into her shoulder.

"He was a good man. Didn't ask for anything, gave everything without asking. Always knew more than he let on. Just seemed to... understand."

She squeezed me slightly, encouraging. I closed my eyes, voice growing thick.

"I couldn't save him. I couldn't..."
My eyes grew hot, and I blinked back tears. I was being *stupid*. I made to pull away, apologize-

Purity shifted, pulling me closer, resting my head on her chest. "I'm sorry." She held me, hands making soft circles on my back. "It's ok." Her voice was gentle, caring, understanding.

I... let go.

---

I didn't know how long she held me, but when I pulled away she gave me a moment to recover, checking her phone.

I felt... empty. Drained. But in a better way than I had before.

Glancing at Purity, I felt a bit embarrassed. She hardly knew me, and if her taste in company was any indication she probably didn't have a lot of emotionally vulnerable men in her life. I wondered what she thought of me.

Fuck it. I needed that, and she helped. I wouldn't beat myself up for that. Self-care was important, yo.

After a minute she turned back to me, a soft, apologetic smile on her face. "It's late. I need to check on..."

"Of course. Don't let me keep you."

I grabbed another beer. I didn't have anywhere I needed to be, and the bench was more comfortable than I expected. She slipped on her shoes - didn't even notice they'd come off - and faced me, a little awkward. "I'll see you around?"

"I'd like that. And... thanks."

She smiled again, unsure. "No problem." Wobbling only slightly in the air, she took off, a brilliant streak of light in the night sky.

The rooftop was darker and colder for her absence.

Chapter End Notes

Drunken conversations are best conversations.

I was starting to become a decent blaster, thanks to that latest dose of New Wave goodness. Unconscious, battered or otherwise disabled bodies littered the street where the remnants of the ABB and the opportunistic Merchants had started an impromptu brawl. Between the gang violence on both sides and the looting, it seemed easiest to blast them all and let the BBPD sort them out in lieu of God.

It was more satisfying than I'd thought, letting loose on these schlubs. I started doing trickier shots, sweeping with the blue-white beams, aiming for legs as they ran so they'd knock each other down like dominoes.

My outer shields could now take several shots before cracking, and my inner shield another one. Between the two of them and my constant offense, nobody piled on enough heat to test Browbeat's telekinetic field.

Finally. *Finally* I was bulletproof enough to take down thugs without fear of ignominious defeat.

People were even starting to shout "Fax!" instead of just "Cape!" when I showed up, which was remarkably gratifying. Although some of those might just have been Merchants swearing through their thick East Coast accent.

Once everyone was down, I started making my way through the mob. Occasionally I had to pew pew someone back down while they thought I was distracted. The few people I'd managed to break bones on - directly or while falling - and those who'd been injured in the fight before I arrived got laid out separately, marked as higher priority.

It wasn't terribly exciting work, but it was engrossing. Like a particularly complex mini-game in a larger RPG. Although I was a little surprised I'd managed not to run into any capes-

Aaaand speak of the devil, my arm started itching. I tried to figure out who it was exactly without looking, but... Protectorate?

"Excellent work, Fax! We'll take it from here."

Hey Dauntless.

"Hey."

And Browbeat.

"Yo." Descending, I met the two of them as they stood in front of one of the PRT vans they'd climbed out of. Around them, faceless armored PRT goons set up a perimeter and started sorting through injured.
I rejected Dauntless - seriously, his power was neat but took for-fucking-ever - and accepted Browbeat, thankfully ending that infuriating itching. And couldn't that feature have been a little less irritating?

"Is that containment foam?"

Holding up a hand, I let a bit of foam bubble up from my palm. "Poor man's substitute." I then dropped it on the pavement and wiped my hands against each other. I'd run out of zip-ties earlier and had improvised with Gregor's power. Praise be to space whale magic; the stuff didn't seem to stick to skin, just to itself.

Dauntless flashed a brilliant smile. "Nice thinking."

I nodded in thanks. "Busy morning?"

His grin faded. "Indeed. Violence has been escalating. The ABB is headless and the other gangs smell blood in the water. This is the third gang conflict called in just the last few hours."

I winced; it could definitely have been worse, though. A bit of fighting in the streets was nothing compared to a Tinkertech bombing spree.

"Anything I should look out for?"

"We can send you text updates, now that we know you're in the field."

I turned to Browbeat, grinning a bit. "You having fun cracking gang member skulls?"

He gave me a superbly deadpan look and answered, "You mean quickly disabling violent combatants with policy-mandated acceptable use of force?"

"Oh yeah, of course. What you said."

"Hell yeah."

"Good man."

My phone buzzed in my pocket. "Scuse me."

I read the message while they talked with one of the PRT goons.

"Guys. Guys."

Dauntless and Browbeat looked at me questioningly.

"Where's the nearest costume shop?"

---

"You got it?"

"Here!" I threw Glory Girl a bundle of green cloth.
"Wait, isn't he a-"

"Yeap!"

Her grin was wide and fierce, showing lots of teeth. "Perfect."

I was striping off my jacket and shirt, changing my face enough that the scarf wouldn't matter anyway. The hat went too. With the extra charge of biokinesis, the changes - started on the flight over - went faster than they would have and the somewhat finicky details were easier to visualize and manifest. I went ahead and nabbed her power while I was at it, because hell yes.

She slipped the tunic over her costume, arranged her hair just so, and hair-pinned the stocking cap into place.

Once our costumes were in place - she gave mine a perplexed look, but didn't comment - we flew towards the music.

I saw them before I felt my power respond to them.

Two men, gleefully wading their way through ABB and Empire thugs. One, blonde, naturally muscular, in a white muscle shirt and jeans, wielding red gloves that occasionally sprouted bright flames as he swung his way into the melee. The other, clearly wearing some sort of muscle suit, looked like a knockoff Browbeat in build, shirtless but with elbow guards, blue pants with a lightning pattern and red boxing shoes. A hilariously exaggerated cleft chin and facial scars completed the look.

I was a little disappointed I had no idea who they were. Maybe it was a Bet thing?

Glory Girl swooped down, made a classic three-point landing (yes!) and slowly stood up, making sure they saw her costume.

I landed beside her and crossed my arms, scowling. My skin was completely green and slightly striped, except for yellow abs and pink ovals on some muscles. My ears were pointed, and my once-again bald head bore two small antennae.

I was really starting to appreciate the versatility of Browbeat's power.

"Halt, evildoers!"

They froze.

They looked at us.

They looked at each other.

Then the shouting started.

"Oh come on!"

"Link isn't a girl! And he doesn't talk!"

"What the heck is Piccolo doing here?"
"You're not even trying to match the theme!"

"They have to be doing it on purpose."

"I dunno, I mean it IS Glory Girl..."

"Special Beam Cannon!" I shouted, and fired a New Wave/Purity beam combo, white spiraling around a bluish core.

"Crap!"

They scattered, moving oddly. A little jerky, like their movements weren't quite flowing with their muscles. Tinkertech, presumably.

"For the horde!" Glory Girl shouted, charging fists-first at the one I presumed was Leet.

"That doesn't even make sense- ow ow ow stop"

I laughed - feeling lighter than I had in days - and charged the other. Judging from the way he dodged, and the way my arm itched by the Dullahan, I was pretty sure this was Uber. I accepted, crossing my fingers that I hadn't just grabbed the worst Tinker power I could possibly get. With my martial arts insight finally supplying a bit more than just vague hints, I thanked my lucky stars and rejected Leet to stop that damn itching.

The boosted power still wasn't enough to keep up with the original, of course, and definitely not with Tinkertech something-or-other letting him make impossibly sharp adjustments in momentum. He wasn't just stopping on a dime, he was spitting out change, staying inches ahead of my punches and occasional beam.

"Intentional theme-breaking aside - bravo for that, bee-tee-dubs - that's an amazing costume." He backflipped past a low kick, hand-springing back into a stance. "How the hell did you pull it off?" His voice was low, probably pitched not to be caught on the Snitch, wherever that little camera was hiding.

I stopped to trip an Empire thug, then fired off a blast knocking a pipe-wielding ABB member off his feet before he brained said thug. Uber waited politely, shifting his weight back and forth in a simple repeating pattern.


He was grinning, I was grinning, Glory Girl was bodyslamming Leet into a brick wall, everyone was having a great time.

Then Oni Lee showed up.

Chapter End Notes

I've never actually played Streets of Rage, but come on - the city's full of gang members
duking it out on the street. It was perfect.

It was either that or double dragon, and I imagine they'd probably already done that game earlier on in their career.
Day 10.29 : Nemesis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oni Lee.

I whirled, fist smashing through a clone, arm sticking out through its back before it could do so much as move to attack. With that same hand I blasted another clone that appeared near Leet and Glory Girl, then propped my foot on the nearest clone's chest and kicked, pulling my arm free with a snarl. It poofed into ash a few seconds later, but I was already moving on to the next one.

Oni Lee was here.

Uber wasted no time rushing to Leet's side, where Glory Girl was helping him up. "Time to go!"

Leet nodded at his bro, fishing through pockets hidden in his battered muscle-suit for something, presumably Tinkertech.

If they stayed, they would die.

With no one to give him direction, he simply did what he did best. He killed.

Oni Lee killed Steve.

My eyes were constantly moving, sensing any hint of the teleporting assassin. With Uber's talent turned towards martial arts, I was light on my feet, combining flight and footwork to stay on balance even as I hurled beam after beam after endless clones. When one appeared behind me, next to the others, I grabbed it by the back of the neck and hurled it into the building across the street an instant before it exploded. Glory Girl, who had stepped in front of the nerd duo with arms spread to shield them, flicked her eyes at me and then at them huddled behind her, still fiddling with some gadget or another. I understood her question.

"Grab them and go," I growled, half from biokinesis making me sound like Christopher Sabat, half from sheer, unadulterated hate.

Oni Lee had to die.

As part of my attention pumped up my muscles, my blood roared in my ears, eyes rapidly twitching to cover the shopping center courtyard where prematurely-detonated Oni Lees had turned the fallen gang members too slow to escape into chunky salsa. Fuck, it wasn't even just the Empire he was hitting, either. It was rapidly becoming a bloodbath.

Oni Lee had to die by my hand.

For a second I thought Glory Girl was going to argue. Then she gave me a quick nod, jaw clenched tight, spun around and grabbed Uber and Leet by the back or their pants and hauled them bodily into the air. They yelped and clung to her arm or leg the best they could, and - after I shot down a rogue clone who tried to intercept their escape - they disappeared into the overcast sky, leaving me alone with Oni Lee.
Bring it on you son of a bitch.

This time when he tried to dogpile me, I was able to smash my way free and teleport out of the blast radius before the accumulated clones set off their grenades. I raked the area with beams, catching clones off guard, nearly dancing as I spun around to cover more angles of attack. I was pretty sure I was doing horrendous property damage as my blasts shattered windows and scored brick, setting off a car alarm or seven that hadn't already gone off along with the grenades. Frankly, I couldn't possibly have cared less.

Hurled grenades - because he wasn't able to get as close to me, the way I was darting around the lot - shattered my outer shield repeatedly, shrapnel occasionally smashing my inner shield as well. I may have been bleeding from dozens of small wounds, but with Browbeat's upgraded TK field they didn't penetrate as much as they would have the day before, reducing them to annoyances instead of life-threatening injuries.

The scent of ash and explosives and blood filled my nostrils, flaring to get just a bit more oxygen into the roaring engine of my muscles. The air was thick with smoke and the ground settled with clone residue, eddies of fluttering ash whirling from the passage of beams and the shockwaves from grenades.

Seconds passed by in what felt like hours.

Finally, it happened.

An Oni Lee caught a grazing, arcing beam across the chest and staggered, no new clone appearing an instant later.

Got you.

I flung myself through the courtyard and tackled the son of a bitch with all my strength. I felt as much as heard bones crack under the force of my blow as I smashed him into the trunk of a car, denting metal and shattering the miraculously-unbroken rear window with the impact.

Then I reached out and smashed his skull into paste.

When the body turned to ash a moment later, Oni Lee was nowhere to be found. I spun around, trying to follow his line of sight, but he was gone.

Leaving me in a bloody courtyard surrounded by ash and dozens of corpses when the Protectorate showed up a minute later.

Chapter End Notes

Mood whiplash!
Day 10.30 : Making Plans

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Being foamed was unpleasant.

In retrospect, I couldn't blame them for their caution. I had done quite a lot of property damage, and it wasn't immediately clear that Oni Lee had been the one to slaughter all those gang members. And, presumably, innocent bystanders, although I imagined anyone with a lick of sense would have run when the first gang fight began, long before Uber and Leet, then Glory Girl and I, and then finally that bastard showed up.

That, and I was still green.

It gave me time to think I didn't want, though.

While that bastard was around, I knew what I had to do. I could ignore the screams, the smell of blood filling my nostrils, the burning flesh-

Unbearable heat, skin crackling

-but once the fight was over and the adrenaline gave way to the shakes, I could have used a distraction.

I was really starting to hate this part. The weakness after a fight. Did it get easier? Miss Militia would know.

I'd injured him; that much I was sure of. It would slow him down, the next time I saw him.

Why couldn't I have had an Oni Lee who that stared at a wall until he starved to death without Lung or Bakuda ordering him around?

---

When they sprayed down enough of the foam to uncover my head, I found myself surrounded by Protectorate heroes. Velocity, Battery, Assault and Miss Militia, the last of which was holding a rather large rifle not quite aimed at my face.

I could have teleported out.

Actually, I was pretty sure Gregor had something that might be able to dissolve containment foam, come to think of it.

Instead I stared at Miss Militia. "Does it get easier?"

"Who are you? What happened here?"

I waited, but it didn't seem like she was going to answer.
"Do you know where you are?"

An odd question. Oh - they must be wondering if I was a Case 53. Heh. Not this time.

I supposed I should actually answer what they wanted to know.

"Fax." They shifted, mixed reactions.

"Changer?"

"...Was he is always green?"

"Fax," Miss Militia began. I made the effort of focusing my eyes on her. "Where did we first meet?"

"Gift shop."

"Who debriefed you in the PRT hospital?"

"Armsmaster."

She looked me over, staring intently. Then she must have given some sort of signal, because the PRT agents standing off to the side finished spraying me down. It smelled like vinegar and shoe polish, and I was irrationally grateful I didn't have to wash it out of my beard.

Someone gave me a towel and herded me away from the courtyard, sitting me down on the back of a PRT van, doors hanging open.

Miss Militia met me there. "We just got a call from Glory Girl. She told us part of the story." She must have seen something in my look, because she continued, "She's unhurt."

"Good."

I wondered if she'd called me as well. Then I realized my phone was in my jacket, on a rooftop a block or two away. I hoped it was still there; I hadn't memorized any phone numbers. At least I still had my wallet.

Funny what your mind thinks is important, sometimes.

"Can you tell us what happened after she left? Take your time."

I did.

She didn't take notes.

After asking me all the questions, she paused. "It does get easier, Fax. But it never stops being hard."

I nodded.

"You don't have to do this alone." I looked away, and she added, "This isn't a pitch. I want to help you."

She shifted slightly, meeting my eyes. "I know this may be hard to believe, but do I know how you
feel."

I...

Well. Yeah.

I nodded, jaw clenched tight.

"Don't be afraid to ask for help. Or even just to talk."

"Thank you." She nodded, put an hand on my shoulder - lightly, with no sudden movements, just for a moment - and left.

She had a point.

I had some calls to make.

---

Back at the hotel, I found a message waiting for me on PHO.

TehRealUber: Yo, just wanted to say thanks for covering our escape

TehRealUber: Really saved our bacon

AReasonableFacsimile: No problem

AReasonableFacsimile: Honestly, I'm kind of a fan

TehRealUber: Nice!

TehRealUber: For the record, we're cutting out the fight after we left

TehRealUber: In case you're worried

AReasonableFacsimile: That's fine

AReasonableFacsimile: Actually, I was hoping to get in touch

AReasonableFacsimile: I have a request for L33t

TehRealUber: We don't normally take requests

AReasonableFacsimile: Willing to pay

*TehRealL33t has joined the conversation*

TehRealL33t: D3tails?
"Hey, Faultline."

"Fax."

"Interested in hiring your services in the near future."

"We're currently unavailable for hire."

"Ah." A pause. "Unavailable because you've got another job, or unavailable because you don't want to accept a job from me?"

"Unavailable."

"...Alright. Thanks for your time, then."

---

"Hey! Protectorate said you're ok but I was worried when you didn't call right away."

"It's fine, I'm fine. I just didn't have my phone on me."


"Yeah, sorry. Thanks for taking care of the nerds."

I could almost hear her scowl over the phone. "Slippery jerks."

"Funny, though."

"Heh. Leet screams like a girl."

"You did kick him in the nuts."

"He had armor!"

We bantered for a minute or two, the casual conversation uncoiling the knot in my stomach minutely.

It didn't last long.

"Look, I... if your family is willing to help, I need more of your aunt and cousins."

"...Jesus. You're going after him, aren't you."

"I am."

She blew out a frustrated sigh.

"I'm helping."
Damnit, no.

"You- look, this is personal. I don't want you to-"

"Shut up. I'm helping."

"You know your aura doesn't work over the phone."

"Fuck you I'm helping anyway."

"I'm not about to get you killed-"

"Ditto!"

"I am better equipped-"

"Yeah, with whose powers?"

I pulled out the big guns.

"Don't make me tell your mother."

_Seriously, please don't, she scared me._

"...You wouldn't."

"My relationship with New Wave is strained enough as it is. You really think they'd forgive me if you got hurt?"

"Amy would-"

"She can't fix dead."

I could hear her fuming over the phone. I was suddenly very grateful I wasn't having this conversation in person.

"The whole team, then. You tell us all what you're planning and we'll decide as a whole whether to help and how much."

"...Fine."

"Tomorrow night. I'll arrange the family meeting."

"Alright."

I sighed. That hadn't gone as I'd hoped.

On the other hand, it might end up working out for the best. Miss Militia had a point; I was still working on the assumption I couldn't trust anyone, that I could only rely on my stolen powers. It had nearly gotten me killed several times. Maybe it was suicidal overconfidence, maybe it was not wanting to get anyone else hurt because of my actions and_ wow _had _that _worked out great.
I had to admit, it was nice working towards a concrete goal. Taking steps instead of just reacting.

I would kill that son of a bitch.

Not even for Steve's sake. He wouldn't have given a fuck. Hell, I could imagine him shaking his head at my foolish determination.

But for my sake, Oni Lee had to die.

Chapter End Notes

Look guys! He's learning!
"Move your front foot a bit to the side."

Confession time.

"Tuck your elbow."

I have spent twenty years of my life in Texas.

"Breath out slowly, and squeeze, don't pull."

And this was my first time shooting a gun.

BRAP BRAP BRAP

"Good grouping! Let's try a more distant target now."

I was a bit skeptical when Miss Militia called me up after the events of the day. Especially when she told me what she normally did to relax on a Sunday night.

"Relax your shoulders."

But I had to admit, there was something surprisingly satisfying about going to a shooting range. It was almost meditative. And Miss Militia was an excellent teacher.

Turns out that, while her power provided instinctive knowledge of how to use all of the weapons she could summon, it didn't provide advanced techniques, procedures, reflex drills, or enhanced aim. So this was all the result of her countless of hours of practice.

I, meanwhile, cheated with Uber, Glory Girl and Browbeat's powers.

Not enough to match her - god no - but enough not to make an idiot of myself. I'd only missed the paper twice so far. And I hadn't dropped the gun or smacked myself with the stock, either.

"When you're finished with the M16, we can switch to something a bit heavier."

Of course Brockton Bay, home of Miss Second Amendment herself, would have gun ranges that rented out everything from Hakim rifles to Milkor grenade launchers to Tac-50 anti-material rifles.

Remember that word I thought up? Improusing? Miss Militia casually wielding a gun taller than she was - without enhanced strength! - definitely fit the bill. Especially when she blew out my eardrums because I was being stupid and took off my earmuffs to answer the question "how bad could it really be?".

The answer was "thank god for biokinesis"; I was fairly certain I managed to heal myself before she noticed, because I had no doubt she'd have given me a lecture if she had.
I was smiling when we stopped for a water break, me pulling my scarf down and her reaching up beneath hers with a straw, and she looked more relaxed than I'd ever seen her. Eye crinkles and everything.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation."

"Hell, thanks for inviting me."

"If you don't mind me saying so... I knew that look you had all too well. You've been bouncing from engagement to engagement without giving yourself time to process things."

I blew out a sigh. Couldn't deny it.

"You can only go for so long like that before you need to blow off some steam, or else you'll break down in the field."

"I admit, this is pretty therapeutic."

"I'm glad to hear it."

I waited for the pitch, for the questions about my power. I had been surprised by the Protectorate's soft sell so far, but surely...

"Ready for more?"

"Hell yeah."

She smiled with her eyes.

---

I spent several hours of that night talking with Leet. Dude may have been the nerdiest nerd that ever nerded, but when it came to Tinkertech, he was all business.

In the morning, I went on a quest.

With my enhanced flight speed, it only took me an hour, and I spent that journey in hungry contemplation.

Thankfully, it wasn't as long as it might have been, because there was actually an app - don't ask me how flip phones had apps, Earth Bet had weird schizo-tech - for flyers. An "as the crow flies" GPS navigation app that highlighted landmarks easily visible from the air, complete with notes on government or private no-fly zones and user-submitted parahuman gang tags for avoiding trouble. Apparently it was started by a line-of-sight teleporter that was tired of getting lost on identical-looking coastlines.

Notes like "Accord - AVOID" and "Chain Gang - sometimes binds flyers on a lark, 2/10 would not buzz again" filled in a much-needed niche in the Bet parahuman scene. It never came up in canon, but then again nobody in canon was a legit flyer or really left Brockton Bay, which had surprisingly few flyers; but I was glad it existed.
Hell, some places known to be particularly friendly to flyers, or very centrally located, even had to-go balconies so that flyers could pick up food to go on patrols or without having to stop into a restaurant in full costume, have to deal with crowds, etc.

Weird, minor shit that arose naturally on a world that had known superpowers for thirty years that you didn't really consider.

And I used it to fulfill a need that I had been sorely lacking ever since I'd arrived on Bet.

Authentic Mexican food. From actual Mexican owners and kitchen staff! No chain, no Mexican "inspired" cuisine, no weird fusion shit. Just legit Mexican and Tex/Mex food.

I swore I cried a little when I saw that queso flameado lit on fire tabletop. In-house homemade tortillas, fresh pico, salsa that actually burned, real crumbly white cheese... not an artificial, bland, or whitewashed ingredient to be seen anywhere in the entire family-owned cantina. It was heaven on Bet.

If Purity could have been convinced to leave her responsibilities on a Monday morning, this may have cured her residual xenophobia. It was religion on a platter. 10/10 with rice.

When I had had my fill, I tipped an extra fifty bucks and flew off heavier and infinitely more satisfied than when I woke up that morning.

---

It was with that satisfaction in belly and soul that I called up the least morally ambiguous of my tentative allies.

"Talk to me."

"Hey Skidmark."

"Sheeit. If it ain't the mean, green, demon-hunting machine. I'm guessing you want in?"

"In on what?"

"Surprise surprise, you're not fucking omniscient. Let's talk face to face and I'll give you the skinny."

I met the man at an anonymous house in a lower-middle-class neighborhood, old trees providing cover from the air so I wouldn't draw all that much attention. It had a three-car garage that was almost the size of the rest of the house's floorplan, which led me to believe Squealer did some work there. Not at that particular moment, as far as my power could tell; then again, I had no idea what its exact range was, so who knew for sure. The only itch I felt was Skidmark, which I rejected; I had a plan for my charges for the day.

"Empire's plannin' somethin' big'n'flashy tomorrow morning, all eyes on them. The suicide king can only spray himself over the walls of one joint at a time; dollars to donuts he'll show up at the big fuckoff Nazi parade."
"They're calling him out?"

"Stands 't'reason."

"They don't really have a hard counter for him. Sounds like a trap, something new? Or could just be a distraction."

"Well now ain't that an interestin' idea."

"...And you're pretty sure you know the real target."

He smiles, showing alarmingly rotten teeth.

"And you won't tell me anything else because we've only got a non-aggression pact."

"Our deal don't say shit about snitching to the boys in spandex. S'why I ain't tellin' you shit about our plans. 'Sides, you want Oni Lee, you know where he'll be. The rest ain't none yo fuckin' business, natch."

"Yeah, that's fair. So what else can you tell me?"

---

In the evening, I joined New Wave for a planning session.

Well. Another confession, more like it. I'd tell them my goals and plans, and they'd tell me whether it was worth the time, reputation and risk to help.

"And I have it from a reliable source that they are planning a fight in ABB territory tomorrow morning, with good odds that it's to lure out Oni Lee."

"A reliable source." Brandish was looking at me skeptically.

"Yes." I smiled blandly back at her.

"Purity?" For all the effort she took to keep her voice neutral, I could still hear the distaste leaking through in her tone.

"Haven't talked to her about this, yet, actually."

"Yet? You're planning to?" Sarah, not quite as sharp, but definitely leaning towards Mom-voice.

"Depends on how much firepower I have on hand."

They exchanged glances. It was almost comical how far they had to look up for Manpower, even when we were all sitting down. I had been tempted to grab his power while I met with New Wave... but with a concerted effort my Pelham star reached nine notches. I had the general idea that each notch was indicative of approximately one-tenth of a parahuman's original power. I had absolutely no idea what would happen if I hit ten. Would it reach capacity? Would it reset? Would it spill over into other rings, or even the meta-power ring around my wrist?

Maybe it wasn't the smartest idea to plan on finding out on the way to an attempted ambush, but...
I wanted to know, damnit.

"And the Protectorate?"

"Worried about moles. I was planning on telling them the morning of, with just enough time to show up when the fight starts."

Interestingly enough, only some of them seemed to want to debate me on it. Even more strangely, Carol was on my side for this topic.

"A reliable source?" Sarah asked, more curious than combative.

"A strong intuition, actually."

More looks amongst themselves. A few shrugs. "As long as they have enough time to show up, I think we can live with that."

I nodded, a small smile on my lips. It was a pleasant surprise to get along with New Wave like this, everything out in the open.

Well. Not everything.

"There is one other thing," I said, a bit hesitantly. "Another weapon in our arsenal."

"Oh?"

---

"The Boat Graveyard? Really?"

"Well we weren't about to show you our actual base." Uber's voice was pitched not to carry, but it was still smooth and practiced. It projected confidence.

"Plus it's so cliche nobody actually bothers checking it anymore." Unlike Leet, who was a little reedy, but laser-focused on his work. "Now, stand in front of these sensors and pop over to those." He marked out two spots on the ground with an A and a B.

"Should I try to suppress my defenses?"

"Nah, we're establishing a baseline."

Good, because I had no actual idea how. The outer fields were consciously directed, but between Browbeat's TK field and Glory Girl's inner force-field, I had a permanent layer of automatic defenses millimeters from my skin. Interestingly enough, they overlapped - Browbeat's reached out both in front of and behind Glory Girl's field. Nice synergy there.

"Actually, do you have any Stranger abilities?"

"Not passive ones." Unless fanon was true and Browbeat had an "ignore me" aura so powerful it worked on authors themselves.
"Ok, cool. Ready when you are."

I was ready.

Chapter End Notes

Everything is falling into place.
Dawn broke through the trees lining the Pelham household.

I took a deep breath, cradling my Tinkerfuel-brand energy drink, enjoying the smell of the coffee of the New Wave members sharing the veranda and the view. I liked the smell - it brought back a lot of good memories of early mornings and late late nights - but I couldn't abide the taste. Tinkerfuel seemed to be the Bet equivalent of Red Bull, which goddamn I'd drink just for the flavor. Delicious battery acid. Even if it was making me a bit jittery.

And ow ow ow fucking ITCHY. Note to self - half a dozen parahumans all at once was super uncomfortable.

I shut it up with a choice. Three choices, really.

A sigh of relief. Sarah looked at me curiously.

"Kind of uncomfortable."

She nodded, wincing in sympathy. And a little bit of amusement? Seemed a bit petty, but who was I to complain.

"If you'll excuse me just a moment?"

I skirted past the adults of New Wave - plus Panacea, because while Glory Girl and Shielder had to go to school, the party healer was excused - and closed the bathroom door behind me. Peel off my jacket and shirt, and...

Now there were two rings around the Pelham star, taking the space where one had been. The inner with ten notches, the outer with two, each ring half the width of the original one.

I flushed the toilet, washed my hands and made my way back outside. New Wave looked at me with mixed impatience and... understanding?

"We picked up a report of Empire activity on the police scanner, just like you said. You ready?"

"Let's do it."

Manpower puts a hand on my shoulder - dwarving me, even pumped up for combat - and in a sympathetic tone says "I always used to get an upset stomach before a mission. It'll pass."

Wha- oh! "Heh. Thanks."

And then I was imagining Manpower-sized dumps. Ha! Their poor plumbing.

He climbed into the van and the ground-bound members of the team were on their way. I took off behind Lady Photon, Laserdream and Brandish-in-a-Ball, currently carried by her sister. Over my shoulder was slung a cylinder approximately the size of a rolled-up yoga mat, wrapped in canvas and connected by a strap. It was actually really impressive seeing Leet work; maybe, when things were a little bit less crazy, I'd look into grabbing some Tinker powers.
I was pleasantly surprised to find I had to moderate my speed to stay in formation. Whatever that second ring did, at least it still improved my speed, although that might have just been the tenth charge...

And then I saw the valkyries.

When the Empire went big, they went big.

We descended to a rooftop just out of sight and I immediately called the Protectorate.

"Miss Militia."

"This is Fax with New Wave flyers at 3rd and Camden. The Empire is making a run on First National Bank of China."

"I'm already en route with Armsmaster, Battery, Assault. ETA six minutes."

"Good. We have more New Wave on the way as well. ETA... ten minutes?"

I relayed this information to New Wave - now including Brandish - and they nodded.

"Do we wait for the van? Or for Oni Lee?"

"We can't let the Empire rampage unchecked, but we don't have the firepower to commit to a full-scale assault. We'll attack at range, keep them occupied until reinforcements arrive. When Oni Lee shows up, we'll pull back and let you engage."

I nodded, slipped off the satchel, then took off, Laserdream and Lady Photon following at degrees to split up our profile. Nice to work with professionals. Brandish was left behind on the rooftop, but she moved to flank on the ground when the time was right, turning to a ball mid-jump to land safely several stories below. Cool.

Down at the bank, Menja and Fenja flanked the glass facade to the building, tipped-over cars forming an impromptu barricade against the few cop cars that had the misfortune of showing up early. A few skinhead minions with guns and bats. No sign of Kaiser, but that greasy, shirtless dude was a likely candidate for Hookwolf, and-

-I jinked left as a mailbox arced up to meet me, then stopped in mid-air to abruptly change direction and slam into my shield. Which held! Kickass.

And there was Rune, floating on a slab of cement and orbited by miscellaneous debris. I targeted her first, firing New Wave beams with Purity's power spiraling around them. She shouted something as she intercepted the beams with her flotilla of junk, moving evasively, but I was too high up to tell what.

Shit, I needed more power to punch through her ablative, constantly rotating barriers. As if responding to my unspoken demand, the next beam gathered in my hand as a globe of blue-white energy, slowly gathering in size from a ping-pong ball to a baseball of light. Running with it, I aimed, threw in some solar power for good measure, and after a few more seconds-
-fuck, that had some *recoil*!

Rune squawked indignantly at the disruption to her platform, floating off on one half while the other joined the orbit around her. I'd cracked it down the middle, blackened cement giving testament to the power of my *charged* blast.

Neat.

Elsewhere, Laserdream and Lady Photon forced the unpowered minions to scramble for cover behind the cars, returning fire with the occasional gunshot. They were mobile enough - and had enough shields - that I wasn't worried about them. Not to mention they were probably old hands at this sort of thing.

I'd barely even noticed the bullets pinging off my outer shield. Plus New Wave wasn't the only one dodging in mid-air, either.

And then something was launched at me, trailing streamers of - oh fuck was that tear gas? Seemed like they were using some of their anti-Oni-Lee strategies against me.

I *probably* could have toughed it out, but I sure as hell didn't want to test it. As it arced, glittering in the morning light, I debated catching it and realized, even with Browbeat's power (and possibly Glory Girl's?), I did *not* want that thing too close to my person. If nothing else, I'd have to replace the costume again. I should probably dodge-

Shit, too late. It was about to-

Oh hey.

Did... did I do that?

A shimmering blue sphere of hard light surrounded the canister, floating in the air a few feet in front of me, quickly filling with increasingly thick smoke. I looked at my outstretched hand, then at the second (second!) shield I was projecting, and bared my teeth.

Hell yeah.

I hoped controlling it would be as intuitive as calling into being, because - yeap, there it went, landing amidst the shouting Nazis as they scrabbled for gas masks in front of the bank. Suckers.

And that forced Rune to rise above the growing cloud, putting her right in my sights again. I had shields, and the mobility advantage, but she could redirect her projectiles in mid-air and - once she realized the heavier debris was less effective - started pelting me with dozens of ball bearings whizzing through the air.

Which fucking *stung*, once she popped my outer shield and cracked the inner one, my hasty evasive maneuvers inadequate to the task of dodging the tracking projectiles. Thank god for Browbeat.

I tried trapping her in that second shield, like I had the tear gas canister, but she smashed through it with ease. Not up to the standards of my personal shield, then. I really should have experimented *before* engaging in aerial combat with an experienced parahuman supervillain. But where was the fun in that?
Moving in close was tempting - the urge to slap her across the face *again* was nearly overwhelming, if just for the shock value - but that would have negated my mobility advantage. And may have been a bit misogynistic. And possibly child abuse.

Fortunately, I had the range advantage, too. I retreated further and further up, past the point where she was willing to abandon her allies, but *not* past the point I could annoy her with beams. And when she got complacent, using a whole car for cover, I disabused her of the notion by charging a few blasts and blowing holes through her shield, up until she gave up and took shelter beneath one of the wonder twins' massive shield, which resisted even my charged beams thanks to their Shaker power.

To think, I used to engage in melee.

The only thing that made it less satisfying than shooting metaphorical white-supremacist fish in a barrel was the missing guest of honor.

*Where the fuck was Oni Lee?*
"And he never showed up?"

I shook my head, alcohol softening the edges of my anger. "Not a peep." The gang had disappeared into an increasing cloud of teargas shortly before the Protectorate arrived, mission accomplished. I felt a pang of sympathy for anyone who tried to chase down the Undersiders.

"Too cowardly? We- the Empire *was* out in force."

I shrugged, ignoring her slip. Purity patted me on the shoulder, consoling. Her other hand held a glass of wine; mine cradled a beer, half-empty.

"I even thought that, after the fact, *maybe* he was using the cover of our distractions to attack the Rig. Try to rescue Lung."

She tensed. "He didn't. Did he?"

My scowl deepened. "No. And even if he did, Lung was moved earlier." Apparently with his health not at risk from *all the venom*, he wasn't unable to be moved. I wouldn't have been surprised if he were already on his way to the Birdcage.

Purity gave a little sigh of relief. She probably wasn't too keen on the idea of fighting Lung -

*Relentless flames, skin blackening*

-either. I shuddered slightly - she didn't say anything about it - and moved on.

"Miss Militia said that he'd shown up to fight the Merchants and a few other members of the Empire elsewhere on his territory instead. It was over before I found out." It had taken several hours to give statements, go over the morning's events, and then several more to do the same with New Wave. I had to give them credit, they were professionals.

Another pause. "There was another raid at the same time?"

Her tone was light, but it seemed a bit forced.

"Apparently the bank was just a diversion. On top of, you know, a successful bank robbery."

"I see."

I glanced at her from on the bench we were sharing. "You seem surprised."

She avoided my gaze, instead looking out over the edge of the rooftop garden, where the darkening sky blanketed darker waters. "I shouldn't be. He... Kaiser... is clever. Calculating. Always pursuing multiple goals." A small smile, a bit sad, turning to face me. "Why achieve one victory when you can achieve half a dozen at the same time?"
I snorted. "Xanatos Speed Chess."

"Hmm?"

"Nevermind."

There was a comfortable silence. I finished the beer, grabbed a fourth. She sipped her wine, and I poured her another glass.

"Thanks for meeting me again."

She didn't respond, looking into her wine glass as if for answers, swirling it gently in her hand.

"I'm probably taking time away from your patrols."

"It's fine," she answered quietly, a bit too quickly.

I frowned slightly. "Hey, it's ok to say no. It won't hurt my feelings if you don't have time to hang out and listen to me kvetch."

She made an exasperated sound. "You... you talk casually about blasting Rune and Hookwolf, then invite me out to drinks like it's nothing."

"Ah." I tried to think of what to say, but she wasn't done.

"What do you want from me? Are you trying to get information? Trying to turn me against... people I saw as friends?"

She'd spilled a little bit of wine on her pants, gesturing. It was a dimmer spot against her glowing white everything.

"Honestly?"

Purity watched me intently, bracing herself for an answer she didn't want to hear.

"I needed a friend."

She searched my face, trying to read any lies in what parts she could see. After a moment, she blew out an annoyed huff, took a sip of wine.

"Plus I think you're cute."

She startled, coughing up her drink, then smacked me when I laughed. Her cheeks were flushed, but that could have just been the result of trying to breathe wine.

"I can't believe you!"

I laughed, leaning back, intertwining fingers beneath my head and stretching out my legs. "Have I lied to you yet?"

Her expression warred between different emotions. Finally she decided to speak, voice quiet, unsure.
"So you aren't... a gay?" She whispered the last words like she was afraid of invoking a rainbow Voldemort.

I barked a laugh. "Oh my god Purity, you did not just say 'a gay'. It's twenty-twenty eleven." Caught myself just in time there. "And I thought you were trying to separate yourself from the Empire and its beliefs?"

She had the decency to look conflicted, covering her confusion and embarrassment with a healthy swig of wine.

I decided to give her an out and checked my watch. "Hey, it's getting pretty late." It wasn't. "If you need to go, I can finish my drinks without your help." I would.

Purity took it, emptying her glass and standing. For a moment she stared out at the stars winking to life as the day gave way to night, back turned to me. I saw her shoulders tense, then loosen, standing up straighter as she half-turned towards me.

"See you around?"

I grinned. "Sure."

Following her blazing light as she leaped into the sky, I felt a bit better about my day. I hadn't managed to track down Oni Lee, but perhaps I'd made a friend.

A treacherous part of me whispered, "I hope it turns out better than the last one."

I drowned the voice in more beer.

Chapter End Notes

This is the fourth take on this chapter. First it had Oni Lee attacking the Rig, and Fax showing up but not being able to do much because who the fuck would let an independent hero join up to help in a battle in the deepest levels of the Rig with unknown Tinkertech?

Then it had Oni Lee attacking the Rig, but Fax stayed to fight off a more aggressive Hookwolf and company, prioritizing New Wave over his own revenge. Better, but for fuck's sake they're all flyers. Not like the Empire could or would have chased them.

Then I had Oni Lee just not show up at all, leaving it a mystery, and Fax fighting off the Empire. But I didn't have a good reason Oni Lee wouldn't have shown up anywhere, and the fight against the Empire wouldn't have been terribly exciting. Not with them using tear gas as cover for their escape.

Finally I borrowed a technique from Aberration and just skipped the fighting entirely. Maybe it wasn't the best solution, and I'm pretty bad at all that mood whiplash, but everyone behaved logically and consistently and even if the MC didn't know all the details it made sense. Oni Lee had taken one look at the teargas (which Fax's presence forced the Empire to reveal earlier than intended) and bailed, going for the secondary
attack instead.

So now you get some fluff with Purity instead.

And Fax's super-healthy coping mechanisms.

I'm open to suggestions. If y'all suggest something really good and inspire me to write the actual fight scene, I can always insert it before this chapter.
"Hello?"

"It's been a week. You don't call, you don't write... starting to think you don't like me or something."

Maybe it was the beer, but I was drawing a complete blank. A wrong number? She sounded young, her voice playful, teasing.

"Um."

" Seriously? You message my personal PHO account out of the blue, but you don't recognize my voice? Or are you just that drunk?"

Oh!

Oh shit.

"...Tattletale."

"Give the man a cigar! Nice of you to use my cape name, by the way."

I was suddenly very uncomfortable.

Talking with Tattletale was high on my list of things to avoid at all costs. Even over the phone, the secrets she could pry from me... Hell, even the fact that she was calling me over the phone and not meeting me in person was probably deliberate. I had to assume she had already figured out everything about my power, and could only try not to reveal anything else.

"Oh don't be like that. This is just a friendly chat!"

I resisted the urge to say 'I know how you do friendly chats'. Because then she'd ask 'and how do you know that?' and then...

Yeah. Better to sit in silence.

Or, honestly, just-

"C'mon, don't hang up yet! I promise I'm not just here to get into your head. I've got a business proposition."

My finger hovered over the disconnect button.

Coil had her contact me after a week without accepting his invitation. The phone call was probably the diplomatic first warning. After that it'd probably be mercenaries - unpowered of course - assuming he hadn't been doing that already. I could change my number, but it wasn't like I'd given it to Tattletale in the first place. And, assuming that he still didn't want to give me any additional
powers, I probably wouldn't have to deal with Tattletale face to face.

"Thanks! You won't regret it, promise."

Ugh. The distilled smugness and fake cheer in her voice...

"Jesus, fine, I'll make it quick."

She couldn't have been getting all that just from my breathing, could she? No, she probably had cameras watching me. Watching Purity and me drink and chat. My mind raced over our conversation. Anything incriminating? Any secrets?

...Nothing she hadn't probably already gathered from monitoring PRT databases. Still gave me the heebie-jeebies.

Ugh. Hated to lose such a prime drinking spot. My fault for meeting Purity there twice, I supposed.

I took off, shielding myself from the wind with my outer shield. And possibly my inner shield - its boundaries weren't exactly set in stone, and it sometimes did weird things around carried objects. I also did a little bit of Browbeat magic to process the alcohol a bit quicker; I'd experimented enough to manage that without fear of accidentally my kidneys. Only then did I realize she'd already started talking.

"I-knew you're amenable to non-aggression pacts. Boss is fine with paying you off."

Uh huh. Like it'd be that easy. It'd just give him all the time in the world to dedicate disposable timelines to tearing me apart. Again, assuming he hadn't already.

Tattletale huffed. "The world doesn't revolve around you, you know. You don't think we have more important things to deal with?"

I mean... a little. I was kind of a big deal.

"Oh my god fine." She drew out the last syllable, the very embodiment of a long-suffering teenager. "I was hoping to get you on board before I offered you this, but I'll sweeten the pot: I can point you at Oni Lee."

I forced myself to keep flying, not staying still.

"Yeah, I thought so."

I clenched my fists, hoping I was high enough and indistinct enough whatever eyes she had on me couldn't tell. Not that it seemed to matter.

Still, I didn't need her help. I'd apparently found Oni Lee before on my own; I could do it again. Had been planning on it, in fact.

On the other hand, my "wandering" power wasn't exactly reliable. And it tended to ruin any element of surprise. Knowing where he was so I could set the terms of our engagement to my advantage had its appeal.
And on the gripping hand, accepting the money might put me lower on Coil's "to abduct, imprison and enslave" list.

"He's smarter than he seems. You're not gonna find him through luck; he's wary of traps now; and we both know you want to find him before the Protectorate does. Face it, you need me."

"Maybe."

"Oh good, you're still there! I was starting to wonder if you'd dropped your phone while flying again."

I twitched my hand towards the wrist strap dangling off the phone, but didn't want to give her the satisfaction.

Christ, she was infuriating. Which was probably intentional, trying to get me to say things she could use. Although even my silence was still giving her a lot to go on, apparently.

I was tempted, oh so tempted, to push her buttons and find something I knew that she didn't, to lord it over her... but then she'd know something she didn't know before, wouldn't she?

And if she was as good at reading me as she seemed to be, then she'd know I was thinking of things I knew that she didn't and was knowingly not rising to the bait, effectively telling her I was smarter than her without having to say anything.

"So, what'll it be?"

Or maybe I was reading too much into it and she just thought I was considering the deal.

OR maybe she knew what I was doing and was deliberately playing it off as though it didn't bother her to-

-fuck it this was getting ridiculous. I wasn't going to out-Thinker Inference Engine. And as annoying as she was, the offer wasn't bad. It gave me what I wanted and got Coil off my back for a bit.

Still, as long as I was negotiating...

"I want to meet with Grue."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I don't think you're his type."

"Once a day until you find me Oni Lee, or three days, whichever is longer."

"Hey now, that's not exactly my call to make."

It was my turn to grin, be a little patronizing. "I'm sure you can figure something out."

I bet she loved that.

She made a tch sound. "Fine. Do we have a deal?"

"Deal."
"You'll find the payoff waiting for you at your hotel, and I'll call you in a few days with info on Oni Lee. Grue will get in touch with you himself."

I hung up on her, and it was every bit as satisfying as I imagined it would be.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if I wrote Tattletale alright. Trying to avoid magical exposition fairy/omniscient Sherlock Holmes/impossible-to-know information wheedling, but there's things she could be reasonably expected to pick up from their interactions and observation, both from eyewitness reports and PRT documentation. And she didn't get everything - she wasn't aware of his 'wandering' secondary power because it was inconsistent (didn't work when charges were full, hard to observe) and he'd never spoken of it to anyone. And things like the phone dropping was either because someone got video of him meeting Glory Girl in the sky, or simply because wrist-straps for flyers is a common thing precisely because it's a frequent problem for new flyers and it was a safe assumption to make.

I hate Thinkers. So does Fax.
"Hello?"

"Fax?"

"Speaking." I took a guess. "Grue?"

"Yes."

Ooh, he was doing his voice-distortion thing with his power. So cool.

"I don't know what Tattletale offered you to agree to this, but I want you to know I appreciate it."

A pause. "Where do you want to meet?"

Ah, straight to business. Fair enough.

"I'm guessing you want to meet in costume?"

"...Yes."

"Cool. I know just the place. Won't take very long."

---

Somer's Rock was exactly as dingy and crappy-looking as its description in canon. They didn't even blink when I walked in in costume, though, instead simply leading me to a booth with good visibility to the rest of the restaurant and close proximity to the back door. I signed my order - Uber helped support my fading skills in that area - and they returned shortly with a short stack of pancakes and real maple syrup.

The place smelled of generic cleaning solution and burnt eggs. My pancakes, however, were fluffy and surprisingly decent.

The only other people in the restaurant this early in the morning were a couple hard-looking laborers and one harried-looking Hispanic family. I got a few looks, but my costume wasn't exactly flashy and I wasn't really all that well-known; most of the looks were curiosity instead of fear or respect. Which I was fine with, to be honest. I was just a dude eating breakfast.

Grue got more looks when he strode in, though, but that may have just been his general imposing build combined with the whole skull-helmet thing. He was on time, which meant I was mostly through my breakfast when he came in; he took a second to scan around the restaurant (constant vigilance!) and then made a beeline for my booth.

"Mornin'."
He slipped into the booth, still looking around, and nodded in greeting.

I flagged over the waitress and handed her my card, which she took and then left quickly after. Even deaf, I imagine she didn't want to linger where supervillains might get nervous.

Grue didn't have any questions for me, and I couldn't think of any for him. He was the quiet, cautious type, and any questions I might have would either be things he wouldn't want to talk about or would reveal too much of my external knowledge. Or both.

So just extended a hand to shake. After a moment, he took it, gripped it firmly (but not "let's compare dick sizes" strong) and let go.

"Thanks."

Seeing me go back to eating my breakfast, he tilted his head slightly.

"That's it?"

"I mean, yeah. Didn't Tattletale tell you what to expect?"

I imagined he was giving me a hard look behind his skull-faced helmet visor. "She said you were... talkative."

"And you're a man of few words. I've got no beef with you, but I don't think you've got a lot of reason to be friendly, so I won't waste your time."

He leaned back a bit in the booth, crossing his arms. "So we're good?"

"Sure. Oh, actually, one thing. Could you make some darkness for me? In your hand. Not like it's a threatening use of power." Honestly, I was surprised he didn't come in wreathed in shadow, like he was described as doing in canon. Maybe he was testing me? I might have been paranoid it was a body double if I hadn't felt and turned off an itch on my arm.

Looking at me for a long moment, he relented and turned a hand face-up on the table. In it was... a slightly-opaque cloud of darkness. Not the black hole I'd been expecting. Whether that was because the description wasn't what I remembered, or it was my power providing immunity to his, only more experimentation would tell.

I nodded. "Thanks. Same time tomorrow? You can pick the place."

He seemed to watch me for a few seconds, then nodded. "Alright."

And then he left. I got my check, left a hefty tip (a voluntary villain tax?) and followed suit.

Rather anticlimactic, frankly.

But then not everything had to be explosions and lies and betrayals.

---

Either my power was running out of tattoo space or it had a morbid sense of humor. The former was
slightly worrying; the latter was darkly amusing.

Overlaying Poseidon's face, trident in hand as he was pulled on chariot by watery horses, was a black ring with a white skull and the expected one notch.

It took nearly ten seconds to fill my hotel room with barely-there clouds of shadow, and it faded after only a minute or two without constant renewal, but it was a start. And according to the video recorded on my cell phone (in potato quality), it was completely opaque to outside observers. Which was something of a relief - if the power ended up being nothing more than dimness, even three charges wouldn't have helped me out much against Oni Lee. Instead it seemed to be limited in speed and duration, which I could work with.

I did not account for its signal-blocking effects, however, as once I finished timing the darkness's dispersal I found I had one voicemail waiting for me.

---

I twisted desperately, using shields in quick bursts, altering my momentum in mid-air and kicking off a wall with perfect timing, but it was no use. I was getting the ever-loving shit kicked out of me.

"Aaand short hop fast fall l-cancel into a waveshine infinite. GG EZ."

I dropped my controller in a huff, watching my damage swiftly climb towards 999. Despite the humiliation, even I had to admit it was beautiful to watch.

I just wished it wasn't happening to me. Poor Marth.

"Do you ever feel like you're abusing the potential of your world-altering superpowers?"

Uber fixed me with a flat look, fingers still moving automatically on the controls as the combo continues unceasing, relentless. "Says the guy who used fire breath to make nachos."

"You were going to use fake cheese! That color is like neon on a toad; a warning screaming 'this is not safe for consumption'. Besides, you've got to admit these nachos are fucking awesome." As if to demonstrate this fact, I grabbed a baked tortilla chip piled high with freshly melted monterey and oaxacan cheese, jalapeno slices, diced onion, black beans, with a dab of sour creme or fresh guacamole to top it off, then shoved the whole thing in my mouth with great satisfaction. Could have used fresh tortillas, but the store bought ones in Brockton Bay were more depressing than the local economy.

The screen chimed with my ignominious defeat and he set the controller down before following suit. "They're alright." Over my muttering of 'philistine' he continued, "But we have an oven. My point stands."

I was going to protest that Spitfire's namesake was faster, and - against expectations - did not involve any actual fluid accelerants and so provided heat without adding any contrary smells... but he had a point. If it was cooler and worked better, it only made sense to use superpowers.

And it was nice to actually find some use for three feet of variable-intensity fire-breathing. Last time I called up Faultline, they were out of town on another job, so it wasn't like I had a chance to upgrade it any, or the other two I'd acquired from her team. A damn shame, and it made me feel a bit self-conscious, like I'd committed a faux pas that I couldn't quite recover from.
"Fair enough," I conceded around a mouthful of nachos.

He picked up the controller again after wiping his hands off on his jeans. "Best out of five?"

"Ugh. Pass. Got anything co-op?"

"How are you at FPS?"

"About to get a lot better."

Leet wandered in a few minutes later as I was 360 no-scoping some squealing, racist 12-year-olds. Haggard and drawn, he made a beeline to the nachos, shoved a handful in his mouth and then, coughing, choking and swearing, ran to the kitchen and shoved his mouth under the running sink.

I glanced back over the couch, then gave Uber a judgemental look. "From jalapenos?"

He shrugged. "He gets ulcers. Avoids spicy foods."

I nodded, conceding the point. Over the edge of the couch I called out "Use milk!"

The tap stopped, then I heard the fridge door opening and slamming shut. Uber winced.

"What?"

"He's lactose intolerant, too."

"Oh shit."

"Pretty much, yeah."

"I'm starting to think I should apologize for coming over."

Uber shrugged. "Getting paid to play video games is sort of a life dream. I wasn't about to say no."

The bathroom door slammed shut down the hall.

"Still, maybe I should go."

He held up his controller. "One more round?"

"...Yeah, alright."

---

I followed the directions from the voicemail to an unassuming, if run-down, apartment complex. I had barely knocked on the door before I felt an itch and Skidmark opened the door.

Without a word he stepped aside and let me in, his face unusually somber. I followed and looked around the dimly-lit apartment, a small crowd already gathered on chairs and sofas, no two matching. At the center of the far wall was a small table, and on it sat a photograph surrounded by mementos. A watch, a pair of candles, a scarf, a strap-on, a small glass bottle of unfamiliar cologne, an elaborate
glass bong, and a half-used jar of flavored lube, all arrayed lovingly in memory of the reason we were all gathered together.

The people were also... eclectic. A few well-dressed men and women, looking like they felt out of place, chatted in low tones next to a handful of obvious Merchants, everyone in shades of black and gray. A few teenagers lit up in one corner, eyes red, saying nothing as they passed a lit joint from hand to mouth, mouth to hand. While a few hid their faces with scarves or veils, aside from Skidmark and me, only one other person was in costume; a slim, androgynous figure in motley, leaning against a wall.

I went over to them, Skidmark turning back to man the door. I wasn't sure what to say, and they didn't break the silence, watching me as I leaned against faded wallpaper beside them.

They made a gesture with one hand, two cigarettes appearing as if by magic. Holding them close to their lips, I saw a small spark of light between their cupped hands, and then they flipped one into their mouth, passing the other wordlessly to me.

I took it without comment, that old familiar scent filling my nostrils. Five years without lighting up, but... it seemed appropriate.

Finally they spoke, voice soft, a little husky. "You too?"

I nodded, not quite trusting myself to speak past the lump in my throat.

They reached over a hand, the motion languid, smooth. "Circus."

"Fax." I shook their hand.

On a whim, I accepted their power. I hadn't been sure what to do with my final charge for the day; I wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"He-" my voice trailed off. I cleared my throat. "He was a good man."

"Yeah," they answered quietly. " Didn't judge. Didn't push. Just accepted."

"Gave no fucks," I agreed. They gave a small smile beneath their domino mask, thin lips pressed together.

We smoked together in silence for a minute, smoke curling into the still air.

"Everybody here...?"

Circus shook their head minutely. "Mostly Johns. A few Janes. Coworkers." I looked at the men, wondering which fit into which group. It seemed odd, to see clients attending the wake of a prostitute. But Steve was... well, Steve was Steve.

After a few minutes - Circus and I stubbed the butts into a nearby plastic houseplant, next to others - Skidmark seemed satisfied no one else was coming, because he rejoined the group with two others in tow. A short man, balding, with stick-thin arms and a potbelly stretching an ill-fitting black t-shirt, and a woman, head half-shaved, wearing too much eye makeup and a tight black dress that did little to hide her healthy curves. Her fishnets were torn and her fingertips were smudged black with what might have been grease.
The man slipped into the kitchen, returning with a cooler pulled behind him. Everyone took a beer, or a shot glass of tequila, or a glass of wine, or a tumbler of whiskey, and in a scant few cases a soda, accepted with solemn grace and the occasional word of thanks.

Once everyone was gathered, the woman paused the music - something slow but surprisingly jazzy - and Skidmark raised his bottle of vodka in a toast. Everyone in the room held up their drinks as well.

"To a damn fine fuckboy, recruiter, and friend. Didn't matter if you were white, black, Asian, rich or poor, man or woman or whatever else, he kept them coming and going and always with a smile. He touched all our lives, literally to most, and made us all better for it. Steve, you motherfucker, you will be missed."

"Hear, hear," a few voices echoed. Everyone drank. Skidmark stood there the longest, draining his handle of vodka without pause. Then, a little unsteadily, he hurled the empty bottle into an empty corner, broken glass smashing on cheap carpet with a sense of finality.

"If you got somethin' to say, say it. Drink and smoke and fuck to your heart's content - we're celebrating the man, not dead with him! Fuckin' act like it."

Skidmark collapsed into an overstuffed armchair and the other man went to his side, opening a brown paper bag from somewhere and pulling out things I wasn't really interested in.

For a moment, no one wanted to be the first to speak.

Then, bit by bit, people shared stories. Times when Steve helped them, made them feel loved, gave them a place to stay and food and clothes and support and advice. Some were coworkers, mentioning how he'd helped them get off hard drugs, driven them to clinics, taken care of violent customers, and even once helping one reunite with estranged family. Some were clients, hesitantly but warmly telling stories of crazy weekends or tender moments. There were a lot of sniffles and more than one person openly crying.

Circus spoke fondly of how he found them, sleeping in an alleyway, and gave them what they needed to establish themselves.

"Taught me a few tricks, too," they said with a sly grin, holding up a wallet. I laughed, as did others.

Wait a second-

Then they handed over my wallet with a wink.

I checked it - not that there was much in it, either than a bit of cash, my fake ID and my black card - and decided to appreciate that they hadn't actually taken anything. Still, I was pretty sure I had my back against the wall the whole time. No idea when they might have pickpocketed me.

Then the stories trickled to an end. Skidmark was out of it, slumped in his chair; I was the only one who hadn't spoken.

I cleared my throat, tried not to let my knees shake. I was not a fan of public speaking, even if the group was small and relatively intimate. "I expected a pitch." I got a few nods at that admission. One snort of laughter at the unintended innuendo. "He took me in when I had nothing to my name, gave me a place to stay, food, a couch... a friend. Didn't say anything when I went out heroing. Helped
convince Skidmark not to shoot me in the face when he had the chance."

A couple raised eyebrows, a few quiet laughs. Skidmark, apparently more lucid than he seemed, made finger-guns in my direction and clicked his tongue. A few more laughs.

Actually, come to think of it...

"When I was hospitalized, he waited up all night for me, making sure I got home safe." Several people, especially the one who spoke of working with him, nodded.

I felt my eyes burn, a lead weight sink in my gut. I had to. I had to say it.

"Lung kidnapped him. Held him hostage. I almost... he didn't... Oni Lee..." I swallowed, but it didn't do anything for the knot in my throat. I had ran out of tears, but it was still hard.

After a few long seconds, I gave up. "He will be missed."

"To Steve!" Skidmark called out, raising yet another drink.

"To Steve," we replied.

There was another toast.

And then another.

More stories, as the night wore on. Happier ones, funnier ones, racier ones. I learned that Steve had some interesting hobbies, or at least didn't mind indulging the hobbies of others. Joints were passed around. A few people slipped out, but many stuck around, those closest to him, the ones who knew him best, the ones who cared the most.

Chasing the joints and drinks, literal fistfuls of pills made the rounds. Some were dissolved under tongues, others swallowed down with a mouthful of liquor.

Things got a bit weird after that.

Chapter End Notes

To Steve!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything hurt

Why

Light blinding

Cover eyes - couldn't move arm

Arm, why?

Something's on it

Other arm?

Success!

For a moment, I lay in blissful darkness. Mouth like raw oysters and kale smoothie and turpentine and week-old socks. Extraordinary headache. Had to pee like a racehorse. Shifted my hand, winced in more pain. Was my nose broken?

Save me, Browbeat. You're my only hope.

OW. Yep, it was broken. And... liver and kidneys struggling? Fuckit, one thing at a time. Eyes - make tears. Yes, good. Blink. Less sandpaper.

I shifted my hand, looked down. Yeap, naked again.

Looked right, at what was on my arm. A person. Soft, but definitely athletic. Tall, mostly naked. Mohawk. Was that- yeap, had breasts. Possible stripper.

Looked up. Unfamiliar, but cleanish. TV, window unit, blinds half-closed, light streaming in the gaps. Hotel room?

I missed Steve.

My body reminded me why I woke up, with some urgency. New priority - find bathroom.

Slipped out of bed, arm out from under woman. Stumbled towards nearest open doorway.

Victory felt like sweet relief.

Washed hands, splashed water on face. Nearly fell over from loss of balance. Remembered I could fly. Thank god, the tile was cold as hell.

Looked at reflection.
Damn, I looked like death warmed over.

I ran my mouth under the tap until I felt like I would burst, cleared out some of that horrible taste as well.

Ok. Remaining priorities.

Liver, kidneys, ok. Nose fully fixed. Black eye un-blackened.

Cell phone was-

Oh, hey, in my hand. Neat.

Battery dead, though. A problem for later.

I took a deep breath, then turned around.

Woman passed out face-down and sideways on the bed had a really nice ass. Very athletic build, almost a bodybuilder, maybe six feet tall, covered in... slightly smudged war paint? Mohawk black with red tips, a tiny bit crooked from having slept on it. Had one kneepad and one elbow pad... both with... skulls...

I glanced around the room. Found my pants, both halves of my shirt, my hat - slipped that on - and a weird assortment of what looked like... armor? A shoulder pad here, a spiked brassiere, knee-height boots with heels that could kill someone if swung (or if worn without superhuman balance). A pair of knives as long as my forearms nested in black leather sheaths. The remains of what might have been leggings, although those tears could have been there already. Hard to tell. Several lengths of chain and a pair of handcuffs, broken open.


Ok.

Think.

Any new tattoos?

Dullahan had a circle on its opposite arm, overlaying its sword. A jester hat, black and red, one notch. Probably Circus.

And...

Whew! Ok. That was all. And I wasn't itching.

So... probably ok. For multiple reasons.

I wasn't someone to sneak out the morning after, but... better not risk it, in this case.

Quietly, slowly, I slipped on my pants, trying not to let my belt clink. Wallet intact, although all the cash was gone - fine. I'd had worse mornings.
Just had to make it to the door-

*Knock knock.*

Damnit!

I flung myself down the short hallway and threw open the door, ready to run if I had to.

A young, androgynous person stood there, bleary, eyes drooping and half-lidded. Their collar was half-flipped on their once-white button-up shirt.

They shoved a mug of coffee into my hand and pushed past me into the room, taking a swig of their own mug at the same time.

I- But!

Hey...

"...Don't like coffee," I mumbled out.

"Drink it anyway." They'd made it to the end of the hallway, looking in at the queen-sized bed with its queen-sized occupant. It took me a second to put a name to that voice. Circus?

I did as I was told, making a face at the bitter awfulness. Hm. It did help though.

Making me way behind them, I stood as they bore witness to the chaos that was my hotel room, waiting to see what they made of it all.

When they said nothing, simply standing there and drinking their coffee, I broke the silence. "So. Do we need to run away screaming?"

"Depends," they said after taking a particularly long swig. "Did you pay her?"

"My wallet's empty."

"But did you pay her?"

"I'm afraid to ask."

They looked at me sidelong, raising an eyebrow.

Then, before I could stop them, they leapt forward in one swift movement, landing in a crouch on the bed next to the sleeping woman. They tapped her twice on the shoulder, then backflipped off the bed, landed in the bathroom, and slammed the door shut.

The woman groaned.

*Oh, fuck.*

---
So, as it turned out, I had paid her.

And she was actually a rather sweet lady, once you got past the barbaric death armor and skulls and spikes. And knives. And tendency towards physical violence.

Butcher XXX was a specialty stripper, occasional woman of negotiable virtue, and owner of (figurative) balls of solid steel for plying her trade with that particular theme in Boston.

Which, apparently, was where we were.

And it was Friday. Which was extra surprising, since the wake was on Wednesday.

Circus and Butcher XXX - Alex and Molly when out of costume - helped piece together the preceding 36 hours over lackluster flapjacks and the bitterest of coffee (the best we could expect from a place that let me in without shirt or shoes). Squealer had piled everyone in one of her monster trucks for a road trip after Skidmark had the idea of eating 'some real fucking seafood'. Cops were involved. At one point we had gone for a drive in the Atlantic. It was entirely possible we robbed a bank. Things got a bit fuzzy after that, but Circus woke up a little bit before we did in a neighboring room, no sign of Skidmark or any of the other party-goers in sight.

After we felt a bit more human, I paid for a cab for Molly (after she insisted on giving me her number) and Alex and I stood outside the dingy diner, a bit at a loss. I pulled out my phone from nowhere and stared at it, trying to figure out where the hell I was gonna find a charger.

Alex pulled out a portable battery and a cable from their own nowhere.

"You're a saint, Alex."

They shrugged.

As I plugged it in and turned it on - four missed calls, two voicemails, three texts, jesus - they asked me, "So, split a cab ride back to Brockton?"

I glanced back at them, a small smile on my face, and extended a hand. "Do you trust me?"

---

"Stop singing!"

"-Shining, shimmering splendid!"

"AARGH"

They banged on the inner shell of my secondary force-field bubble, but not too hard. They didn't want to pop it while we were flying over a hundred miles an hour a good quarter mile above the rolling landscape below, after all.

"Tell me, princess, now when did you last let your heart decide!"

"For the love of god, make it stop!"
Chapter End Notes

I imagine the real Butcher is kind of flattered.

And would probably wreak hell on anyone who attacked Molly for using her likeness.

EDIT: Changed Butcher LXIX to Butcher XXX. Thanks The Stormbringer!
"Thanks for meeting me on such short notice. Had some personal stuff to take care of yesterday."

The gelato shop on the Boardwalk that Grue chose for our meeting was decent, if overpriced. Probably had something to do with the private booths in the back, complete with mid-table privacy screens. The cold, creamy smoothness of the pecan praline gelato helped the lingering sense of crap I still felt. Apparently I hadn't upgraded biokinesis enough to deal with the more subtle remnants of a day and a half multi-state alcohol and drug binge.

He leaned back, arms crossed, tone bitingly dry. "Personal stuff. Nothing to do with Schwarz making a run on Eastern Bank in Boston, then?"

I quirked an eyebrow. "Who?"

He pulled out his phone, tapped at it for a few seconds, then turned the screen towards me.

On it I saw... defenseless black man?

Well, at least I'd not done anything stupid openly as Fax. I imagined Miss Militia's concerned call would have had a much different tone.

And I looked pretty awesome in that shot, upside-down mid-flip over the heads of stunned police officers with a broad smile on my face and a pair of burlap sacks with dollar signs on them in each hand.

"I didn't think banks actually used those. Like, from the cartoons."

"They don't. You brought your own."

I raised a spoon at him defensively. "I can neither confirm nor deny that I was in Boston yesterday."

"As Schwarz."

Why was he- oh. Oh.

Schwarz was "black" in German. It... did seem like something I'd call myself, as a subtle jab at the Empire.

On the other hand, what I did could very well be considered blackface. And the name only made it worse.

I shoved a mouthful of gelato in my mouth to give me time to think, which immediately backfired because OW BRAINFREEZE FUCK

His (implied) disapproving stare did not lessen as I flailed about, trying to soothe the sudden spike of pain with a small amount of fire breath. Singed my replacement costume just a tiny bit at the inside of
the collar; I started to understand why Spitfire wore a fireproof costume.

Ok, ok, what to say?

"I'm sure that whatever... that parahuman was doing... was intended as a slight to the Empire... and not intentionally offensive to people of color?"

"Mmhmm."

Not buying it.

Buying- offer money as apology? No, that would only make it worse. Plus I didn't actually walk away with any of those ill-gotten gains. Offer money to a charity of his choosing? No, no, still trying to buy him off. Fuck it, just ask.

"And what could... Schwarz do to apologize if he had... unintentionally done something offensive."

"Sticking to being a hero and pissing off the Empire would be a good start."

"He seems like he would have absolutely no problem with that."

"And change his damn name."

"I'm sure he'd be happy to accept suggestions."

He warmed up to me a little bit more after that, but he was still displeased. Or maybe that was just the kind of impression he gave while in costume, what with the broad shoulders and tallness and skull-face.

In any case, it gave me a chance to pick up something I hadn't noticed in the morning - my powers had changed yet again. It had taken me a bit to find the second notch on my wrist-ring, and longer to determine what it meant. I had finally removed the "itching as parahuman detector" phase of my power and instead moved to something a bit more conceptual: a sort of awareness of nearby parahumans, their direction and distance and which, if any, of my existing powers they would belong to. Range was still pretty small - maybe twenty feet - but that was more than the ten feet or so I had before.

"One other question."

"Oh?"

"My power is recognizable. Do you have any plan for not having people think you're me?" The "and getting me into shit for your actions" bit was unspoken, but understood.

I nodded, opened my mouth, then closed it. How to answer without giving too much information...

"I don't intend to reveal that I have your power in any circumstances where it wouldn't be obvious I was the one using it."

He parsed that for a second, then nodded. "Good."
"What's good, man?"

Browbeat's waiting on the PRT helicopter/flyer landing pad for me when I arrive, looking... well, not happy, but satisfied, perhaps. Content.

"Congrats on formally joining the Wards! Sorry I missed the press conference."

He shrugs, accepts my handshake and easily follows the transition to back-slapping bro-hug. Neither of us mention I wasn't actually invited to the press conference. It was nice enough being invited to the after-party.

"Not that there was any doubt, of course."

He gives me a look as we turn to go inside the building proper. "Yeah, about that."

I pause. "What? Did they give you any shit about joining?" Didn't seem right, but the Protectorate East-North-East had seemed unusually competent so far...

"Nah." Nevermind then. "Wanted to say thanks."

"...For what?"

"They knew I wasn't thrilled to be used like that, right?" As glorified bait for me, a promising Trump?

I shifted uncomfortably. "Right."

"So they actually tried hard to get me on."

It took me a second to catch on to that chain of logic. "So... bennies?"

"Bigger trust fund, more merchandising percentage, moving to a better school, signing bonus for my folks, and a bigger say in my costume."

"Dude, nice! No more spandex?"

"No more spandex."

Fist bump.

It was nice to know I was actually doing some good in Brockton Bay.

---

Miss Militia and Dauntless were waiting just inside the building, chatting idly. I wondered why; then I saw the security gate. Probably wanted to be present so I didn't get foamed for trying to smuggle a weapon into the building. Which, now that I thought about it... I hadn't seen Miss Militia since Sunday, I'd told Browbeat I'd only had one charge left for the day when I'd returned his voicemail, and still having the everweapon would be kind of a giveaway that I hadn't been entirely honest about my limits.
Shit. I really needed to think about things like that. It wasn't like I could hide-

Wait. Could I?

Miss Militia made small talk, eyes crinkling etc., as I went through security. Cell phone, watch and spare change into the bin, then...

No beeps.

I took my stuff back and piled into the elevator. Nobody said anything about my powers, or even raised an eyebrow at my making it through the metal detector. Thanks, Circus! I owe you a beer.

Fancy Tinkertech elevator was fancy, and then we were in the Wards common area. Thirty seconds of beeping and flashing lights later, I joined the party already in full swing. I had to stop for a moment, take it all in.

This was the first time I saw a whole bunch of canon heroes all in one place. It was a little breathtaking. The costumes! The colors! The presence! Seeing all the little details that made a fictional character come to life! The asses barely concealed in spandex!

A banner hung on the wall set up splitting the dome-like Wards base in two, congratulating Browbeat on his formal joining of the team. Couches were arranged around the edges of the room, a table laden high with chips and snacks and punch and a cake in the middle. Heroes of all ages clustered in small groups, ones and twos and a few bigger circles. About half of them looked over when Miss Militia, Dauntless and Browbeat returned with me in tow.

I suddenly felt very self-conscious. Maybe I should have gone for a more elaborate costume?

Miss Militia ushered me to the nearest cluster of Protectorate heroes. "Most generic red costume ever" Assault was as jovial as expected, and when he caught me staring at "Tron lines and daaaaaaamm, that ass" Battery all he did was chuckle and give me an "I know, right?" look. I gave him a nod of respect. We fist-bumped. It was cool.

"I'm gonna regret not wearing a cup someday" Velocity wasn't nearly as animated as I'd have thought a speedster would be, but he was polite and friendly and had thighs that could crush watermelons. I was pretty sure his calves were secretly cantaloupes strapped to the backs of his legs. On that note, we had drifted by the snack tables and I nabbed myself a plate of fruit and a Dixie cup of (ever so slightly spiked) punch. And because I had superpowers, instead of trying to juggle holding a plate, a cup and eating at the same time, I used my secondary shield bubble to grab one or the other so I always had a hand free. The mundanest of mundane utility. Plus it made Assault laugh.

"I make power armor look good" Armsmaster stood a good head taller than me in person, but I consoled myself by noting at least some of that had to be the Tinkertech. I was also relieved to notice he was smiling warmly and even chuckled at Assault's witty banter and clever turn of phrase. Even though I couldn't see his eyes, he gave a very strong impression of having a rather intense gaze; I wondered what he was thinking.

If he ever gave dirty looks to Dauntless, he was damn good about hiding it.

Last but not least was "Needs more lions!" Triumph, who made Dauntless look scrawny. Not quite at "pumped up Browbeat" levels, but jesus christ was everyone here a freakin' part-time model or was I just feeling inadequate?
Maybe it was because I was still expecting a slip-up, but conversation seemed to be carefully avoiding any sort of sales pitch for the Protectorate. Maybe they were hoping their sheer presence would tip the scales in their favor.

"So," Battery asked, "What's it really like shooting with MM? She's invited me to go before, but..."

"It's kind of intimidating?" I ventured a guess.

She grinned. "And I wanted to ask a neutral third party."

The patriot in question only watched with amusement as I tried to give a fair and balanced account of the experience, and graced me with a look of mock surprise and disappointment when I admitted cheating with my powers to not be knocked on my ass by recoil.

Then a hand tapped me on my shoulder, and I turned to see a slightly disconcerting blank white mask that somehow still managed to convey approachable friendliness. Body language classes had to be part of Protectorate PR training. I wondered how his clock hands moved on the rest of his costume.

"Hey there, Fax, right? I'm Clockblocker, heard good things." He reached out a hand, and, smiling, I took it with anticipation.

Then I shook it once. Looked around.

"You alright there, Fax?" I could hear him sound a bit confused, head tilting.

I sighed, let go of his hand. "I was kind of expecting..."

"Freeze prank?"

"...Yeah."

"Well, there's your problem."

"Hmm?"

"You were expecting it."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. "Good point."

I got the impression he was smiling. Nice kid. "Come on, let's introduce you to the other Wards." He put a hand on my back, guiding me through the mingling heroes.

Then I was abruptly blind.

"GAH!" I shouted, only for my instinctive flail to dislodge the loosely-strung paper ribbon looped around my face. And the party hat perched on top of my head. And the other streamers hanging from my arms and shoulders like fringe on a gay cowboy. Around me was a circle of capes, wearing a variety of expressions; mild amusement, slight surprise at my outburst, long-suffering patience, possibly relief I didn't react to my surprise with, well, panicked blasting in all directions. Totally
spilled my punch when my shield dropped, though.

I looked around until I found Clockblocker waiting behind me, half-hidden behind a bemused Browbeat. I jabbed a finger in his direction, arm still trailing paper streamers. "You!"

He flinched a little, but didn't shrink back. I could see the others tense up a tiny bit. Not Gallant, though.

"...Well played, little man. Well played."

He made an exaggerated "whew!" and sweat-wiping motion and accepted my offered high five.

I didn't get frozen again, thankfully.

---

"And this is Vista."

Maintain, man. Maintain.

"Nice to meet you, Vista."

Conceal, don't feel.

We shook hands with some solemnity. "I'm a big fan, actually."

"Oh?" She seemed politely curious. Perhaps a bit wary. So far so good.

"I mean, you're a powerhouse. And, what, have the longest experience in the Wards, right?"

She smiled, surprised, and OH MY GOD SO CUTE

"That's right! Thank you for saying so." She beamed, just a little, trying to keep a straight face.

I nodded, acknowledging her as a peer and not some (FRANKLY ADORABLE) child.

I had to quit while I was ahead before I gave in to the impulse to pat her on her head, undoing all my hard work.

"Fax, right? I'm Gallant." The knight in shining armor came to my rescue, shaking my hand. Thankfully, he led me away, moving back towards the snack table, making a bit of small talk.

"That was nice of you," he said in a low voice, once Vista was out of earshot.

I took a small detour to collapse into an open sofa with a grunt. "That was harder than it should have been."

"It was very thoughtful. Did Browbeat say something?"

"About her wanting to be taken more seriously? Nah, I read it somewhere."

He nodded. "Glory Girl's said good things about you."
I eyed the floating siege engine, chatting with her cousin Eric and a relatively subdued Browbeat across the room. "I'm glad. Sweet girl, but she can be scary as hell when she wants to be."

Gallant chuckled, a bit ruefully. "Don't I know it."

My eyes panned across the crowd until I spotted a cowled, black-clad edgelord leaning against a wall by herself, arms crossed and stern woman's face on her mask conveying a sense of disdainful superiority. I smirked.

Oh, right, empath. Gallant followed my gaze. "Have you and Shadow Stalker met before?"

I supposed I should have been a bit more surprised we hadn't, actually, what with her unlicensed patrols and my own habit of doing the same. "Nah. Just more things I read on the Internet." A lot of people would have taken the opportunity to smack-talk her, or say something about her extracurricular activities, or tried to air out her dirty laundry. It was short-sighted. I just thought ahead, remembered what might have been (and, possibly, might yet happen); a puppet in tangled strings, a conversation between a hero and an inmate, a tense flight high above the ocean, a frustrated encounter on a snowy rooftop.

I turned back to Gallant, who must have had quite the time following all that in my emotions. "I read a lot of things on the Internet."

He huffed a small laugh. "Now I'm kinda curious."

I laughed too, waving him off and rising to my feet with the help of my powers. "Anyway, who else is left?"

Carlos and I spoke in Spanish for a bit, and he only laughed a little at my accent. Kid Win seemed distracted and possibly a little drunk off punch.

In the end, it was a nice little celebration. The party at the Ward's base ended by 10pm; Assault and Dauntless invited me to the adults-only after-after-party, but... I thought it prudent to abstain for the night. I'd had enough partying to last me for a while.

And besides, I had other immediate priorities.

When I made it back to the hotel, Tattletale was waiting for me.

Chapter End Notes

Is it just me or are these chapters getting longer?
I had just closed the door when a floor lamp flickered to life with a quiet *click*.

Whirling to face it, shields up, hands extended, I was a bit surprised (I didn't yelp, shut up) to see Tattletale sitting there. Legs crossed, hands steepled together supervillain style. She arched one eyebrow extravagantly. "Ah, Mr. Fax. I've been expecting you."

"Oh for fuck's sake."

"But you were surprised to see *me*. Which means you can't detect powers, or aren't paying attention all the time. Yet earlier you-"

She paused as I smothered her with Grue's darkness, slowly spreading it to cover the rest of the room.

"-I know you can still hear me."

I floated over to the fridge, grabbed myself a beer. She'd get to the point eventually.

"-Lalala. Yeap, just like Grue's darkness. Interesting."

I cracked open the cold one and hovered in place, sitting cross-legged on nothing at all. I peered out the window through thick shadow, but I didn't exactly think I'd spot a sniper on my own.

"I know you haven't left yet."

She was bluffing; she had no way of knowing that. Frankly, I was tempted. Anything she had to tell me she could have told me over the phone. Was this one of Coil's disposable timelines, seeing how I'd react? If I blasted Tattletale right then, would he close the timeline and I would cease to exist?

I was just about to head out the door when she sighed dramatically. "Christ, you're *such* a prima donna. I have the information I promised you."

Floating until I was inches from her face, I cleared out enough shadow for her to hear me, even though there was still no light for her to see.

"Oni Lee?"

"GAHfuck!" She jumped in her chair, composure momentarily forgotten. I made sure my head was shrouded by shadow again so she couldn't hear me laughing. "Oh, now he thinks he's *funny,*" she grumbled, scowling into the darkness. "Yes, it's about Oni Lee."

She paused, scowl deepening. "Is this really necessary? I feel like I'm talking to myself, here."

Silence was her answer.
Man, Grue's power was handy.

She crossed her arms, pouting.

Yeah, nope.

Finally she blew out a sigh. "Fine. I've figured out where he's staying. 1341 Thistlewood Drive, Unit C. He's active at night so I'd give him an 80% chance of sleeping during the day, and since he hasn't apparently slept in over 24 hours he's probably due to crash sometime tomorrow, probably late morning. Two guards watch nearby, one at each entrance, and they don't know when he comes or goes because he teleports in through the windows. He doesn't sleep with all his gear but I'm 70% sure he keeps his vest with knives and grenades within easy reach, probably a chair next to the mattress. Seems like the type to sleep with a gun under his pillow and has at least one knife stashed somewhere close by. Very light sleeper."

I gave her a moment to add anything else.

"That's it. You're welcome."

I cleared a space to speak, but this time she wasn't surprised, even though I was coming from a different angle than before.

"Thank you." Heh. Grue's voice-echo thing was pretty neat.

"So what's your deal, anyway?" When I didn't reply, she continued, "I don't get it. You message me like you want to help me, like you like me, like you know me, then when we do meet you act like I'm going to betray you at the drop of a hat! You dislike the boss, but then don't do anything about him even though you know what his power does, not even asking me what I want. I can't figure out how you know what you know or why you're doing what you do and it's driving me nuts." She was panting a bit by the end of her spiel, breathless and frustrated.

After a moment, I opened up a space large enough that the lamp provided light between us, an island in an ocean of darkness. I was floating a few feet away, resting my chin on my hand and legs crossed.

"Those are... all good points," I admitted, and she snorted. "I can admit I'm not the best at long-term plans."

"Yeah. If only you had access to a THINKER." Her voice was so dry and scathing, my beer was evaporating.

"It's the other Thinker I'm worried about. Everything you know, he can torture out of you."

"You don't think I know that? For fuck's sake, you think I didn't know his power before you told me? I figured it out the first time he flipped a coin!"

Oh.

"Oh."

"And you didn't know that, but you had a strong impression- what, precog? Sort of? What do you mean, sort of? Someone else's precog? It's-"
I smothered us in darkness again and she grit her teeth in frustration, a high-pitched hiss escaping from her throat like a boiling kettle. She jammed the heels of her hand into her eyes, taking deep, slow, slightly ragged breaths.

"Look," she began, voice quiet in her own sensory-deprivation space. "I give him information, that's true. I have a job to do, expectations to meet. But you think I can't mislead him? He gets what he wants to hear, but never all of it. I've been planning my retirement for some time now under his nose, without your help."

I winced.

I'd sort of forgotten that she'd managed to get out from under Coil's thumb on her own in canon. Expecting to swoop in and save the helpless damsel was pretty fucking paternalistic of me. And my misremembering canon probably came off as underestimating her intelligence; I already knew how she reacted to that sort of thing. Her frustration was... understandable.

On the other hand, I had shit I really didn't want her to read from me. Stuff she was already getting too close to figuring out.

Talking to her was dangerous.

And I did want to take out Coil. It just wasn't on the timetable yet. One thing at a time.

"So. Whatever the hell your other secrets are. Did you actually mean what you said about helping take him out?"

I thought for a minute.

Then, with just enough not-darkness to have her hear my voice, I answered, "Soon."

She blew out a sigh. "Fine. We'll talk."

"Over the phone."

A wordless sound of aggravation was her answer.

Chapter End Notes

Take Two.
Day 16.39 : Ashes to Ashes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was an overcast day as I fell from the sky.

Accelerating towards gravity, I aimed towards one nondescript house with an overgrown yard and a junker permanently parked in the driveway.

I hit the brakes a hundred feet up. Fifty. Twenty. Ten.

Eye level with the window, and-

-I was inside. On my back, the device clicked and started whirring. The sound twisted my insides just remembering what it had felt like during testing, trying to teleport through that interdiction field. Like pulling your lungs out through your asshole.

It didn't make an audible click, however, as I had already started pumping out darkness.

The room was not a large one. I scanned it all in the first few seconds, filling it with shadows and silence. A small dresser, with something like a shrine on it. A mattress on the floor. A duffel bag by the window. A chair, one heavy vest propped up on it, bandoliers strung beside it. A mask, laid on the seat, red, stylized. Ash on every flat surface, a fine dusting.

And on the bed, a man. Smaller than he was in my memories. Asleep fully clothed, one arm at his side, the other laying across his chest.

He did not move, at first.

Perhaps the sudden loss of the background hum of the city tipped him off. In an instant, he was standing, weapon in hand-

Jesus christ, when Tattletale gets it wrong she gets it wrong. He had a fucking grenade in his hand, pin already drawn, spoon still fixed by his grip - a suicide switch for a serial suicide bomber.

I'd had a witty line prepared and everything - not that he would have heard me - but instead I dashed forward and poked the grenade with a finger, sending it nowhere. Oni Lee lashed out with a fist, then a rapid-fire kick, doing nothing more than bruising himself against my shields.

He didn't even try to call out, which was more than a little eerie.

He did try to grab his vest, spinning without stumbling despite being completely blind, but he found only the empty chair and his mask.

He leapt for the window, and I grabbed him by his leg and threw him back to the ground.

He found a knife from somewhere and repeatedly stabbed at me. First stab broke my shield. Second stab vanished his knife.
He did not stop struggling when I squeezed my hand around his throat.

He did not change expression when he finally lost consciousness.

No anger, no rage, no fear. A blank nothingness, just going through the motions.

On the one hand, killing him would still be a little satisfying. He killed Steve. I killed him. It would be right, in a visceral, primal way. I was prepared to kill him; fought to kill at the mall; only planned to maim with the ambush because New Wave had been there.

On the other hand, it wouldn't actually do anything. There was no person there to punish, no mind to comprehend the consequences of his choices. And it wasn't like Steve actually gave a shit about revenge; it was all me.

And on the gripping hand, I stood to lose a lot more than I stood to gain by executing a criminal without a Kill Order. My alliance with New Wave, my hands-off policy with the Protectorate... even Faultline didn't cross that line.

I sighed, unheard in my well of shadows.

Seconds ticked away in darkness and silence as I reached a decision. Not the most satisfying one, but, ultimately, the right one.

That said...

The Protectorate probably wouldn't judge me too much on his condition as long as I brought him in alive.

But first I had to put the mask back on him. I grabbed it off the chair, pulling the knife he used on me out of my nowhere while I was at it.

No sense in flaunting the unwritten rules, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Not nearly as cool as the previous take, but makes a lot more sense for the character. And if I'm going to continue denying I'm having Fax make intentionally stupid decisions, it stands to reason I should actually have him make the obviously smarter choice.
"So. How do you feel?"

I exhaled a thick cloud of smoke, graying out my vision for a moment.

Alex waited patiently on the other end of the couch, half-watching cartoons on his rather impressively-sized television.

In the end I shrugged. "Not sure."

"You didn't kill him."

"Nope."

"You talked about wanting to kill him. For Steve."

"D'you think Steve would've cared?"

A small smile graced his lips. "Not really."

"Yeah." A moment's pause, thoughtful, putting sluggish thoughts in order. "Plus he... hell, there isn't even anyone left in there. Wheel's spinning, but the hamster's dead. He wasn't worth the shit I'd catch from all the Lawful Goods."

He shrugged, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

"Did catching him make you feel better?"

I shrugged again. "A little. And I did blind the sumbitch." I mimed poking his eyes out with two fingers, blew a raspberry for sound effects.

Alex smirked.

I took another long, long inhale and passed the joint back his way.

Apparently I'd already discussed the whole pronoun thing with him, in the lost hours, but they repeated it when I asked again; if they wore a men's watch, use he/him/his. If they wore a woman's watch, she/her/hers. And if they didn't wear a watch, or I couldn't tell, they/them/their was always a safe bet. And on that note...

"So what else did we talk about after the wake, anyway? I can't remember shit."

He shrugged. "You know, normal stuff."

I stared at him for a moment, trying to figure out what that meant.
"Like, you said that you were secretly Aku, shapeshifting master of darkness. And that you traveled back in time to defeat Samurai Jack and ensure the dark future where your evil is law."

"Oh."

"And then you shapeshifted. And covered yourself in shadows. And set your eyebrows on fire. Which, I had to admit, was pretty convincing. Skidmark nearly lived up to his name."

"Uh huh."

"Your evil laugh needs work, though."

"Good to know."

The worst part was, I wasn't sure who was fucking with whom.

And was kind of afraid to ask.

It certainly took my mind off Oni Lee, at least.

My phone buzzed with a text. Which was a SUPER weird feeling in my nowhere. And not just because it somehow got signal in a pocket dimension.

"omg gallant said u got oni lee!?"

"haha yeah"

"...he also said u maimed him"

"haha yeah"

"wtf?"

"no eyes no telprot"

"did u conisder a BLNIDFOLD"

"lolwut"

"...how high r u?"

"7/10"

"omg"

"Oof."

"Hmm?"

"Glory Girl is pissed."
"Oh, that's smart."

"Hmm?"

"Pissing off Alexandria-junior."

"Eh, she'll be fine."

"Right."

"She's just got a... black and white view of the world."

"Uh huh."

"She'll get over it."

"Sure."

"She'd be way more pissed if I'd killed him."

He conceded the point on that one. "Fair enough."

Besides, I was still one behind Queen Bittersnark the Eye-Gouger's track record, so...

"Who?"

Oh shit did I say that out loud?

"Yep."

Fuck.

"Uhhhh."

He raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Someone I read about on the internet."

He shrugged, accepting my answer and turning back to the TV, grabbing another OH MAN

"Are those mini-muffins?"

Alex rolled his eyes, popping another small bag out of thin air and tossing it my way.

"Yissss."

My phone rang again.

After watching me search fruitlessly for it for several seconds, Alex snorted and picked it up the couch next to me, turning it around so he could see who was calling. One eyebrow quirked upwards.

"Miss Militia?"
"Uh. Yeah, I'm in no shape to talk to her. Let it go to voicemail."

He just smirked, flipped it open and, in a disturbingly cheerful voice, said "Thank you for calling the Fax hotline. How may I help you today?"

Damn his agility! His voice didn't even waver as he nimbly dodged my slow, feeble attempts at snatching the phone away. "Mhmm. Sure, I can pass on the message. You have a wonderful day!" He then snapped it shut with a grin and tossed it at me, where it promptly smacked me in the forehead.

"What was that?" I asked him grumpily.

"Miss Militia wanted to know if you were still up for shooting tomorrow."

"Shit, is it almost Sunday already?"

We settled back in on the couch, after flipping it back upright. And the coffee table. And the lamp.

"So." He waggled his eyebrows. "Going 'shooting' tomorrow, eh? Handling guns with Miss Militia?"

I snorted. "Yeah, in my dreams, man."

Chapter End Notes

May replace later with a different hanging-out partner. I mean, Purity would be thrilled. But he kinda already called her after his last attempted ambush of Oni Lee, so why not give someone else a shot?
"Oh god."

"What?" Alex mumbled from the papasan chair he was curled up in. "Lose your hat again?"

"Yes. But more importantly, you know when Purity texted me last night asking if I was up for patrolling?"

"Mmmmm."

"But I was too high to patrol?"

"Right."

"And I was hungry?"

"Ok... so?"

"So I suggested brunch today instead."

They smirked. "Smooth. And today she's probably asking how high you were last night?"

"No." I gave him a pained look. "She's asking where I had in mind."

---

I waited at Café de Pain, a block or two from the Boardwalk. It had a nice rooftop patio, bottomless mimosas and decent sliders, and the day was brisk but sunny enough that I didn't need the jacket. The sun felt glorious and bright on my face, and I had to remind myself that normal people couldn't stare at the sun for very long, and that being caught doing so might draw attention.

I was worried, at first. I probably should have started locking away my phone while not sober, especially considering I'd already drunk-dialed Purity once before. But apparently she'd been comfortable enough with me to just roll with it this time, so the least I could do was go with the flow myself.

My cape-radar pointed her out before I saw her. I'd sat with my back to the stairs, looking out over the street, so that she could keep on eye on people. I'd known enough people who were uncomfortable without a wall to their backs it was pretty much reflex by that point.

She stood there for almost a minute, making it harder and harder to resist the urge to turn around and wave her over. Eventually, though, she moved closer and stood a bit off to the side, so I could glance at her without it being weird.

I took in the white sweater, mousy brown hair and barely-concealed nerves and smiled, standing to greet her. "Hi there. I'm Chris. Chris Reich."
She shook my hand, just firm enough, and returned my smile tentatively. "Kayden Russel."

Oh thank god, I could stop worrying about accidentally blurting out her real name now. My smile widened a bit in relief. "You look nice as a brunette."

"Oh! Thank you." She tUCKED a lock of straight brown hair over one ear, a little self conscious.

She seemed a bit at a loss, so I gestured to the seat, and the two of us sat down. She gave a cursory look over the menu, then her eyes glanced up again.

"I wasn't expecting so much... beard."

"Made it myself."

"Also... Reich?" She seemed to be smirking a little, one eyebrow quirked up.

"Oh, it gets worse. Chris is short for Christian."

"Your name is Christian Reich."

"Unfortunately."

She seemed to be struggling a bit to keep her smile in check. "It's like you're tailor-made for the Empire."

"Shame I hate everything they stand for."

That... was probably not the most diplomatic way of saying that. Purity's expression cooled, tentative smile vanishing, and I could almost feel the distance widening between us.

"...But maybe we can save the philosophical discussions til after a few more drinks. Mimosa?"

I got a refill on mine, she ordered one for herself along with a light snack, and we sat in somewhat awkward silence for a minute or two.

"Every time we see each other, we drink."

"I've always been told as long as you're not drinking alone, you don't have a problem. I always invite someone over when I'm drinking. Therefore, no problem. Fully functioning adult with entirely healthy coping mechanisms."

She looked bemused, despite herself. "That sounded practiced."

"Of course, if you don't want to drink, I can abstain. Because I do not have, as mentioned before, a drinking problem."

"Oh, I don't mind. Just more worried about you. And because getting called at three in the morning woke me up," she corrected herself.

I winced. "I did apologize for that."
"You did," she acknowledged. She seemed amused at that fact.

A slightly more comfortable pause in conversation as our drinks arrived.

"So," Kayden seemed to gather herself, rolling the mimosa between her hands unconsciously. "What did you want to meet for?"

I blinked. Surely we'd hung out enough in costume that she would believe I'd want to share food and drinks without there being some greater reason behind it.

On the other hand, I did suggest our first real daytime meeting. And in civvies, no less. Just because I already knew her background didn't mean unmasking wasn't a big deal.

Admitting it was a whim inspired by munchies seemed like it would have been counterproductive, considering what we'd just talked about...

Oh! Right.

"I'm sure it'll hit the news soon, but yesterday I arrested Oni Lee."

It was her turn to blink, processing. I could almost hear the gears grinding in her head as she dealt with that information.

"That's... great news!"

She was beaming, and I couldn't help but smile with her.

"We have a real chance to clean up the ABB once and for all. Get that scum out of our city, while they are leaderless."

"Between the Merchants, Coil and the Empire, I imagine the violence will only pick up as they rush to grab territory, yes. And a lot of innocent people are going to get caught up in the crossfire."

That dimmed her enthusiasm a little, but she still seemed hopeful. "But all that will settle down, and you can't deny the city will be better without the ABB."

"I'm not exactly a fan of any of the gangs, Kayden."

"That's... fair."

"And I'll probably be doing a lot of work with the Protectorate and New Wave to keep the peace, prevent the worst violence. Particularly supervillains."

After a few seconds she understood what I was getting to. "Including people I used to... work with." She looked conflicted, biting her lip.

"I understand if you don't want to fight them." I had my own non-aggression pacts to deal with, on my end. I still wasn't sure what I was going to do about that. In fact, the only gang I hadn't made a deal with was the one gang she didn't want to touch. Inconvenient, that. "But I'm sure the Protectorate would appreciate your help keeping the worst excesses of the Merchants or Coil from hurting civilians."
"I can... get behind that." She smiled warmly. "It's nice to be treated like a hero. A *real* hero."

I smiled back in response, and we sat and enjoyed the mimosas and sunshine. For someone solar powered, she was awfully pale. I wonder if that was because all the sunlight went to her power instead of her.

Then I remembered, oh, right, space whale magic. Leave your common sense at the door.

"Why is it," she began slowly, picking her words carefully, "that when we meet in costume, we mostly talk about personal things, but when we meet as civilians, we only talk about cape things?"

I huffed a laugh. "Huh." I polished off another (my last, I swear) mimosa and wiped my lips. "Alright, I'll start. I've got one older sister, one ex-wife, and one dog that the ex-wife took that I miss more than her."

She giggled a bit, making her seem much younger. Not that she was much older than me, mind, but I supposed being a mom aged you up a bit. Hopefully, anyway.

"I have no siblings, one ex-husband, and a *beautiful*, perfect baby girl. Oh, and a step-son from my ex-husband."

Poor Theo. Almost forgot to include him at all there.

She seemed to be wrestling with something, biting her lip again and twisting the napkin in her lap. I took a wild guess. "Do you want to show me pictures?"

"Can I?" she asked excitedly.

I gave the tiniest of resigned sighs, tempering it with a grin. "Of course."

**Chapter End Notes**

Ok, so another 'let's drink and talk' scene. But at least they addressed that and will have in-story motivation to change that in the future.

Also, in Purity's interlude she states that she's only 30, and Kaiser is 35. Is anyone else surprised at how young that seems?
"Hey, congrats on nabbing Oni Lee!"

Shielder held out his hand; we fist bumped.

Glory Girl glowered.

Carol and Sarah were surprisingly neutral.

Neil patted my shoulder with unexpected gentleness, both in his manner and his expression, giving me a thin smile. That... did not bode well.

The living room was a little bit crowded with most of New Wave sitting together, but we could mostly all fly and Mark, Crystal, and Amy were elsewhere, so we made it work. Neil, of course, took up an entire loveseat by himself, bless his oversized heart. He must go through a lot of furniture.

Then I looked between him and his wife, and their relative sizes.

Damn, girl.

Thankfully no one in New Wave could read minds.

"I think we have to have a discussion about your methods." Carol said, fixing me with a potent mom-stare. It was intense, but not "light-you-on-fire-with-my-mind" intense, so I resisted the urge to teleport away. I did glance at the nearest window, though. Just in case.

"That's fair." I smiled politely.

Victoria looked like she wanted to say something, righteous indignation bubbling up into accusative words, but her mother interrupted her. "Now, you've told us what happened with Steve. What Oni Lee did."

That took a bit of the wind out of Victoria's sails.

And mine.

"Yeah."

Then Carol's stern expression softened. "With that in mind... I think what you did was not entirely unjustified."

"Mom!"

I wasn't sure which one of us was more surprised.

Sarah was the one who spoke up, the voice of reason. "Victoria, Oni Lee was dangerous. We
couldn't even patrol safely in ABB territory, even with *Lung* gone, because the madman wasn't stingy with the grenades."

"But he *gouged out* his eyes. That's majorly f*cked up!"

"Victoria, language!" Damn, I wasn't even sure the word had gotten out of her mouth before Carol snapped that out.

The teenager in question mumbled something similar to, but entirely not, an apology.

Carol turned from where she was scolding her daughter to fix her gaze back on me. I'd just been staring, too busy trying to wrap my head around the idea that Carol - Carol! - was *defending* my actions. Against her own true, beloved daughter's wishes, no less!

"Fax."

I realized my jaw had been hanging open. "Um. Yes?"

"While I can understand why you did what you did, and I have no technical authority over you... *don't do it again*. You may not be a member of New Wave, but your name and powers are associated with the team, more than it is with the Protectorate. Things you do reflect on our reputation, and if there's something I *will not* tolerate, it's your actions dragging New Wave through the mud. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good. That's the last I want to hear about this, understood?"

I nodded. Carol eye-lasered Victoria until she nodded as well, reluctantly and with jaw clenched tight. The way she glared at me made me believe we were going to have a *conversation* later, away from her mother's watchful gaze.

Well. I wasn't the same wet-behind-the-ears schmuck she terrified into submission above the city anymore.

And I knew for a fact I could outrun her, now.

So yeah. Bring it, you hypocritical brick.

"Hey, it's starting!"

Our attention turned to the TV, volume bars rising as Eric un-muted the screen.

“...*take you now to reporter Stan Vickery.*”

“*Thank you, Nick. I'm pleased to report that the citizens of Brockton Bay can rest easier, thanks to the heroic efforts of local independent parahuman, 'Fax'.*

In the corner next to the talking head was a shot of me as I descended onto the roof of the PRT building, a tightly bound Oni Lee nestled snugly in my secondary force-field floating beside me. Between the upward angle and the glow of the multiple shields, I looked pretty damn heroic, if I did say so myself. They must have grabbed a screencap from the building's security cameras. Figured
with as many flyers as they had that they'd have decent sky-facing surveillance gear.

"Oni Lee, the remaining parahuman member of the pan-Asian gang, the Azn Bad Boys, has led a reign of terror over the last ten days since Lung's capture, teleporting and using knives - and even grenades - to kill over thirty people and injure dozens more. Thankfully, as of yesterday morning Fax ended the threat, single-handedly defeating and incapacitating the supervillain and turning him in to the PRT for trial and likely incarceration. We offer our thanks and congratulations to Fax for his service to the city."

Ooh, a montage. Phone videos, a few shots of me on the Rig, thankfully no scenes of me eating shit while parkouring around rooftops at night. Small blessings.

"For those unfamiliar with this newcomer, Fax exploded onto the scene a few weeks ago, spotted engaging Oni Lee on multiple occasions and directly contributing to the capture and arrest of Lung, former leader of the ABB. While his exact powers are still unconfirmed, our sources within the PRT have assured us he is cooperating fully with the Protectorate and will..."

Eric lowered the volume.

"Hey, they were stroking my ego there!"

"Yeah, yeah, it'll be on YouTube later. Probably show up on your PHO thread."

Oh yeah, I hadn't checked that in ages.

"But what could be more important than me being famous?" It was kinda nice not wearing the mask in the Pelham house; it meant he could see my shit-eating grin in full detail. He rolled his eyes.

"Us discussing how to deal with the repercussions of your actions." Daaamn, I didn't think Sarah's voice could get that dry.

Jesus, these guys were professional killjoys.

"Now." Carol's voice was businesslike, lawyer-y. "You've kicked over an anthill that was already on fire. Even more than they already have been, the Empire, Merchants and possibly Coil are going to be rioting over what's left of ABB territory now that the last of their capes are gone, if they haven't started already. We've got to be prepared."

Damn. This was a lot more proactive than I remembered New Wave being. Not since their Brockton Bay Brigade days and the death of Fleur, as far as I could recall. Although I supposed they were pretty active during the S9 arc.

In the end, though, I couldn't commit to much, and these were still preliminary plans anyway, without the whole team there. I still had to figure out what I was going to do, and that meant making a lot of phone calls.

But before that, I had plans with a certain one-woman army.

Jesus. When did shit get so complicated?
When you decided to faff about in Brockton Bay instead of immediately joining Cauldron, duh.
"There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

I finished firing another three-round burst, then flipped the safety and set the rifle down. "Hmm?"

My accuracy was improving, but I was still kind of a terrible shot. I was better with beams; unless I charged them, they didn't have recoil. But whipping that out at a firing range, even if I was costumed and with another costumed cape, seemed... gauche.

She leaned casually against the divider between firing lanes and seemed about to speak, but then her phone buzzed. "Sorry, one moment." She pulled it out, tapped a few buttons and I saw her eyes narrow. "Damn," she muttered quietly.

"What's up?"

"Empire capes attacking an apartment complex in former ABB territory. Unfortunately, it's on the opposite side of town."

"Need a lift?"

She paused as she was typing a reply, seeming genuinely surprised by the suggestion. "Thanks for offering, but I'm... not sure you can get me there fast enough to make a difference."

"I've been hanging out with New Wave a lot."

After a moment, she nodded. "If you don't mind."

"Got everything you need?"

Her weapon shifted into a rocket launcher for a moment, then back into a pistol. "Ready."

---

Two very windy minutes later, I deposited Miss Militia on a rooftop with a good view of the action. She took a few unsteady steps, then dropped to one knee. I was about to ask if she was alright - I'd done my best to smooth out the acceleration and deceleration, and she hadn't said anything mid-flight (although the wind was pretty loud) - but she played it off by whipping out a sniper rifle and getting into a shooter's crouch. One hand went to her ear, looped in a small radio, while she leaned forward and peered through the scope. I just looked over the edge of the building.

She took an unsteady breath, then spoke. "Miss Militia on site with Fax, have visual of Alabaster, Stormtiger and Cricket, over."

A pause.

"Understood. Miss Militia out." Taking her hand away from her ear, she half-turned towards me.
"PRT and BBPD inbound. I'm a good match for Stormtiger and Cricket," probably why they did this when she was normally outside the city limits, come to think of it, "but Alabaster never stays down and I don't have confoam on me. Can you help?"

I thought for a moment. "Think you can lure him out into the street?"

She replied immediately. "If I draw attention to myself, they'll send him to counter. He's the most bulletproof of the three."

Some mental calculations, a quick glance at sightlines, avenues of approach. I grinned.

"Can you nail him with a flare gun?"

---

I took a deep breath of thin air, letting my body adapt itself to the chill. The sun reappeared as a sliver to the west after having ducked beneath the horizon minutes before; the advantage of perspective. My focus was down below, at the flickering street lights, and...

A shooting star, streaking across a street to come to an abrupt, brilliant stop.

I began my descent. I hit my normal top speed quickly, spent the next few seconds pouring more and more on top with the assistance of gravity, all of my attention focused on that bright, jerky point of light.

Wind howled. My blood roared.

In an instant, the ant-sized miniature world down below exploded into detail, buildings rushing past in the last moments as I curved my flight and the blurs were cars and people and one man in white, lit by a flare, gun pointed at a nearby rooftop and a friend.

He never knew what hit him.

Time seemed to slow down as we collided, the feeling of his bones cracking and body rippling disconcerting beneath my arms. My inner shield cracked, TK field cushioning little, muscles taking the rest, and I winced, but held firm.

With that heartbeat of accelerated reflexes, I wrapped my arms around him and pushed, twisting my path back upwards.

In seconds I had a jellied man with me in the sky.

Seconds after that I had a man, whole and frantic, trying to get his gun to bear on me even as I flew higher and higher. He passed out, going limp.

I shifted, slowed, gripped him by the wrists, holding him suspended a mile above the city. My heartbeat still hammered in my chest, but it had all been over in moments. I took a deep breath and waited, counting seconds.

One, two, three, four-

He restored, struggling and kicking, the gun that appeared in his hand firing at nothing, aimed almost
straight up. I squeezed, and it stopped, bones cracking. He didn't even blink.

One, two, three, four-

Again the gun appeared, pointed at the sky. He almost got a shot off, but I squeezed, and it wouldn't have done anything anyway. I just didn't want innocents to get hit by a stray bullet.

"Oh come on."

"Hey Pasty Pete."

He twisted his head around, trying to see me as I floated behind him, completely out of kicking range (even if he were really flexible). The look on his face was more disgruntled than angry, a man who just found out his car was scratched instead of someone who was dangling a mile over the city, captured and helpless.

"Fucking- you again."

"Yeap." CRACK went his wrists. I thought he'd tried to pull the trigger again, honest. I wasn't remembering the time he shot me at all.

"It doesn't have to be like this."

I started to descend, aiming for PRT headquarters. Miss Militia had reinforcements inbound anyway; she'd be fine. And if not, well, she'd call.

"You did us all a favor luring out Lung and taking out Oni Lee. We have goals in common; we'd make better allies than enemies."

"Ugh. No."

"We have a lot to offer! Money, fame, capes, women!"

"Pass."

The PRT building resolved itself from one speck among many to a clearly marked landing pad, brightly lit and welcoming. Miss Militia must have called ahead; faceless armored agents were swarming out in advance of my arrival, weighed down with foam-sprayer backpacks. He twisted a bit harder in my iron grip, last-minute struggles, fixing me with a glare and a grimace.

"Purity will be disappointed."

"I'll live."

Chapter End Notes

Starting to feel like Hancock. You know, the first half of the movie where it was good, not the second half that was bad fanfic stapled on and taking a steaming shit on the first half.
"Herd you brought in Alabatser"

"I did"

"Good job"

"Thx"

I set down the phone and sniffed; bacon was ready. I grabbed the tongs and pulled a piece from the sizzling pan, placing it on the plate with paper towel laid out.

Then a pair of arms slipped around my waist, a body pressed against my back, chin on my shoulder, warm breath on my neck.

I smiled, grabbed the second piece of bacon, placing it next to-

"I already said I'd introduce you to the glory of breakfast tacos. It won't be the same if you eat all the bacon first."

I heard them smile, and then the sound of chewing, loud next to my ear. Around a mouthful of stolen bacon, in a low voice, "Then cook faster. I'm hungry."

"Using your," I glanced down; they noticed where I was looking, and a small watch appeared on her wrist as I watched, "-feminine wiles to steal bacon won't get you tacos any sooner."

She gave a long, dramatic, put-upon sigh - breath tickling my ear - and withdrew, moving to the side and easily jumping up to park her butt on the counter. On the same side as the bacon plate, I noticed; I moved it over to the other side of the stove and she huffed. And then she was looking at-

Hey, that was my phone...

Meh.

It buzzed at her as I put the rest of the bacon on the plate. She gave a low whistle.

"Hmm?"

"Collateral Damage Barbie is salty."

I gave a small sigh, cracked a few eggs into the cast-iron pan. "And I thought we were doing so well there for a second. What did she say?"

In a high-pitched, slightly valley-girl accent, Alex read aloud. "So, like, did you gouge out his eyes too?" I doubted that was a literal reading, but the tone seemed accurate.
"Text back 'nah, it wouldn't take anyway'."

She gave me a look, one eyebrow raised. When I just stirred the beans, she shook her head a little. "Your funeral. Sent."

A minute or two of peaceful silence, save for the comforting sounds of a kitchen put to good use. Her kitchen was bigger than mine, which was what she contributed in exchange for me bringing ingredients and doing all the cooking. I was just happy to spread the good word of the One True Breakfast; I didn't think Kayden would have been as receptive.

Then the phone buzzed several times in quick succession.

"Oh em gee, double-yew tee eff is wrong with you. The-wrong-kind-of-you're sick. That's 'srsly' fucked up."

I sighed. "Should've asked you to include a wink smiley."

"Do you think that would have helped?"

I shrugged.

Beans were done, time to take them off the heat. Eggs were almost perfect; I grabbed the spatula in preparation.

"She kinda has a point."

"Oh god, not you too."

"I mean, don't get me wrong, he had it coming. If you'd maimed him while fighting I wouldn't say a thing. Don't even care that you attacked him while sleeping. But he was already down and you cut out his eyes out of spite."

I resisted the urge to gesture with the spatula, instead forcing myself to flip the eggs.

Yes. All in one piece. Thank you, enhanced coordination.

"The interdiction field generator only lasted a minute, I had reasons not to show Grue's darkness to the Protectorate, and I didn't want to risk him becoming a recurring villain by escaping or being broken out." I listed off reasons calmly, already having rehearsed them in preparation for a confrontation with New Wave that never really materialized.

"And it wasn't at all motivated because of Steve."

"No."

I may have thrown the tortillas into the pan with a bit more force than necessary. Not that anything happened. They were tortillas.

I grit my teeth, blew out a sigh through my nose. "Maybe."

"Steve wouldn't have-"
"I know."

She didn't say anything else. She didn't have to.

"I wanted to hurt him. Not for Steve's sake. For mine." I looked her in the eye. She met my gaze unflinching, unaffected. "I was this close to killing him. Even knowing it would have screwed me over in the long run."

After a few seconds I dropped my gaze. I flipped the tortillas, watched them brown.

"And you think that's what she's freaking out about. Not that I hurt him, but that I did it because I wanted to hurt him. Even after he was unconscious and defenseless."

It made sense. Even Glory Girl couldn't have been so blind to her own hypocrisy for her issue to be purely the damage I caused. But her transgressions (past and future) were accidental; overenthusiasm, miscalculations. She may have been malicious and indifferent to the suffering of her gang-colored punching bags, but she had a line she didn't cross, and I waltzed over it casually, and with no apparent consequences.

"I don't regret doing it."

I stepped around her to the fridge, grabbing the shredded cheese, salsa - buried in the 'international' section of the grocery store, the savages - and sour cream. In silence I laid out the tortillas, the beans, the eggs, the grilled onions and peppers, and the bacon; a beautiful sight, but one that I could suddenly no longer appreciate.

Well, at least, not as much as it deserved. I'd still eat the hell out of it.

"But... I'll talk to her." It didn't do me any favors to alienate a powerhouse like Glory Girl or her power-donator family.

Alex tossed me my cell, jumping off the counter to see the fruits of my labor. I disappeared the phone, looked upon my delicious bounty, and nodded. "Look upon my works, ye hungry, and feast."

Chapter End Notes

Look, they're sitting around and talking, but they're not drinking OR smoking. Progress!
Day 18.45: A Walk in the Park

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I was an idiot.

Just... god damn.

I'd had Browbeat's powers for weeks. Hell, since my first day.

A week and a half earlier I had regrown my full beard overnight.

And not once - not once - did I think about undoing my premature male pattern baldness.

ARGH

Of course, the first thing I do with my newfound full head of hair?

Turn it all blond, add a few years and pounds, dump it in a suit and walk around Empire territory in the blandest disguise yet. Thankfully my eyes were already blue, because I wasn't sure if my biokinesis had that kind of fine detail yet. And, you know, I didn't want to accidentally blind myself messing around with things I didn't fully understand.

Heh.

I knew that Empire territory was nicer than Merchant or ABB territory, but I didn't expect the city of infinite alleyways to actually have parks. Nice ones, even, if a bit small. Even though it was a weekday, it was full of people: joggers, dog-walkers, cyclists, families with their kids in strollers, and high-pitched screeching from the small playground on the opposite side of the park bench I'd chosen to people-watch from.

There was a kolache cart. I didn't know that was a thing.

My goal had originally been to 'wander' around E88 territory; not picking fights this time, just doing reconnaissance. But with that intent came the discovery of this lovely, lively little pocket of heteronormative, white, middle-to-upper-class bliss. And so I sat on the bench, munching on a sausage and cheese in a bun, soaking up the noonday sun. The grass was somehow green despite the late winter chill, and even the sounds of the city - a street a mere dozen feet away - felt muted, subdued.

I'd almost decided to move on, try to prompt my 'wander' power again (and I still wasn't sure if that was a real thing or just my imagination) when I felt two capes enter my radar.

Ok. Play it cool. Just glance casually, and...

A man and a woman, about my age, maybe a bit younger. The man was lithe, handsome, a bit taller than me, with excellent posture and an air of confidence and purpose. He wore a tailored suit, no tie, fitting him like he was born in it. The woman was petite, cute, in jeans and a white camisole and blue cardigan, leaning against him as they walked arm-in-arm down the paved path through the park.
Cape couple, Empire territory... Victor and Othala?

Victor's power was almost offensive. In the 'to my sensibilities' use of the word. Othala, on the other hand...

I grabbed her power, suppressing a smile, leaning back and closing my eyes as they passed. Just an office worker on lunch break soaking up the sun, nothing to see here.

A moment later they passed by, completely without incident, disappearing from my radar as they slipped out of my range. Through the corner of my eye I saw them walk into a nearby restaurant, out of sight.

I let out a breath, using biokinesis to slow my hammering heartbeat.

A minute after that I picked myself up and got a cab back to my hotel.

Well. I knew where I was going for lunch tomorrow.

---

"Boss wants you off our back and on the Empire's. Figured you'd be sympathetic, what with your nonaggression pacts and all that. Unless you getting close to Purity... nah, you didn't exactly hesitate to snatch and grab Alabaster. And you're more than happy to look for powers in Empire territory, right?"

"Get to the point, Tats."

"Why are you... ugh."

I was using Grue's darkness to shroud my head between speaking so she couldn't pick up anything from my breathing, or from any cameras she may have left in my hotel room. I may have enjoyed taunting her a little bit. Did anyone else call her Tats? Maybe it was just a simple nickname, maybe it was something else I knew that I shouldn't... hah.

"Anyway. I've got a list of Empire locations; safehouses, transfer depots, staging grounds for digging deeper into former ABB territory."

"And if I get ambushed or killed going after those locations, well, it'd be the Empire hurting me, not him."

"Pretty much."

"And your scheme?"

"Using you as cover to funnel more cash from Empire accounts into the 'save a Tattletale' fund."

"And what do I get out of it?"

"Beating up Nazis, for one. More powers. And the boss's... well, not trust, but at least assurance that you'll find him more useful than not. Figure if you're hitting the Empire,
"You're too busy to betray him."

"And in the meanwhile he's trying to get me killed by proxy."

"You're assuming he hasn't been trying that out already."

"No, I'm really not."

"Look, I'm sending you the addresses. Do with them what you will. Personally, I'd appreciate it if you raised more hell for the Hitler Youth..." So she could get more money to pay off Coil's mercenaries, probably.

"I'll consider it."

"Oh, and I wouldn't pass them off to the Protectorate, either. Their security leaks like a sieve."

Obviously.

"Noted."

For a moment, I thought about asking if she'd already figured out all of the Empire capes' identities yet. If I was notably targeting their capes and suddenly their information was leaked, it would be child's play for Coil to pin that on me.

Then I realized asking wouldn't help me in the slightest.

How would she make it clear it was me? Probably do it from my PHO account. I made a note to have my account locked for 30 days at least. Not like I'd actually posted with it yet. Hell, I hadn't even checked messages on it in more than a week.

I didn't realize I'd been quiet for a bit until I heard her asking, "Was there something else?"

I hung up.

I couldn't trust Tattletale. Even if she was acting in her own self interest, with Coil in the picture, betrayal was a numbers game, and he had all the time in the world. Setting me up to get ambushed by the Empire was definitely something he'd do - either the Empire was weakened or I was removed from the game. Win-win. Wouldn't even have to use a timeline for it.

But that info had a good chance of being legit. Because if there was nothing there, I'd know he'd betrayed me; if they were what Tattletale said they were and some Empire capes happened to be in the neighborhood, well, shit, I couldn't even be sure it was him who'd done anything.

Not for the first time I wished Steve...

I didn't know who else to go to. Purity was obviously out. Circus was great, but definitely under Coil's employ, at least some of the time. New Wave would probably have me do the Lawful Good thing and turn the info over to the Protectorate despite how useless that would be in the long run. Same with anyone in the Protectorate, most likely. Skidmark... I couldn't even imagine what he'd suggest, but he wasn't exactly high on my list of people I'd seek advice from in general. Faultline...
wasn't on speaking terms with me.

What do?

Chapter End Notes

Maybe if you made some non-cape friends? No? Nevermind then.
White pages.

Maybe I hadn't been using my meta-knowledge very well. I could admit that.

But when your biggest concern was a man whose name you knew...

Well, it wasn't all that hard to do a flyby. After all, it'd worked for Uber and Oni Lee. I just had to do some sport flying and _happen_ to buzz his house.

And because Coil and Kaiser weren't the only ones who could serve two goals with one plan, I arranged for a patrol with another cape who might come in handy as well. Either way, I'd be getting a damn Thinker power tonight.

I also spent some time on the internet. Along with locking my PHO account, I discovered some _interesting services_ that were rather more developed in a world with Thinkers and Tinkers than in one without them. Tin_Mother got the keys to another dead drop, although she acted a bit confused as to why I would trust an internet moderator with that sort of responsibility. With a dedicated phone and spare batteries tucked safely away in my nowhere space, I just had to make sure I wasn't going to have any more day-and-a-half benders without adequate preparation. One contingency in place, with a second one bringing out the _real_ big guns to guarantee a response after that, if the first one wasn't convincing enough.

Once more I appreciated the sheer usefulness of the Blank perk.

Coil had crossed the line with those "helpful" offers from Tattletale. Put himself on my shit list. I'd been content to leave him on the back burner, but... well, two could play at that game.

---

You know what worked _really_ well together?

Enhanced agility and reflexes with twice-highway-speeds flight.

I must have crossed the entire city three times, zigging and zagging, looping and twirling, doing as sharp turns as my stacked powers allowed.

"Soaring, tumbling, freewheeling!" I sang, laughing, out of breath.

Pretty sure I cracked my inner shield twice with some of those high-g maneuvers. And I definitely had to use biokinesis to keep myself from passing out at least half a dozen times.

I ducked under freeway overpasses, slipped between powerlines, nearly beaned myself dodging through a construction site when I overestimated my turning radius, and crossed the Bay from north to south inches above the water, sending a rooster tail of water a dozen feet high and three times as long in my wake.
Ostensibly, that whole display was to disguise the fact that I passed over one Thomas Calvert's house right around dinnertime.

Realistically, it was fun as fuck and I flew for half an hour longer than I'd intended just for the sheer unadulterated joy of it.

Ultimately, though, I didn't get his power. And although I'd passed by four other powers, I'd been going too quickly to figure out who they were.

And, as I descended near the Boardwalk panting with exertion, pouring sweat, flushed and unexpectedly exhausted... I was pretty ok with that.

I was met with a wave from a young man in medieval-themed Tinkertech armor and a blinding smile from Mister Shiny, aka Dauntless. I angled myself towards Gallant first, to maintain the illusion of uncontrolled power-grabbing, and collapsed bonelessly in a nearby deck chair with a grunt.

"You alright?"

I waved feebly and gave a fair approximation of a nod, still breathing too heavily to attempt to speak.

"Hanging out with New Wave, huh?"

Another weak nod.

I had the impression Gallant was smiling. "Looked like fun."

With some effort, I lifted my head up enough to look at him and saw...

A faint outline around his head, limned in yellow and brown. Not just colors - my vision was unobstructed - but a bizarre synesthetic representation of... amusement and friendliness?

I smiled wide. Neat.

"You want me to take you flying sometime?"

He held his hands out defensively, but I could see he was joking (wow that was handy). "Ohhhh no, I heard what Miss Militia said about flying with you. I'll pass."

I winced. "I tried to take it easy on her. She should have said something."

"I think she said something about 'her high-pitched screaming drowned out by 100 mile-per-hour winds at rooftop height'?"

"Closer to 180 once I got us up to speed."

"I rest my case."

I floated up, smiling, legs still a bit unsteady (which was dumb, I hadn't used them except to kick off the occasional billboard or sidewalk) and joined him and Dauntless for another boring PR stroll around the rich part of town. At least Gallant was a better conversational partner than Browbeat, bless his stoic little heart. Speak of the devil, Gallant said he was much happier with his new, less
form-fitting costume, even if PR was less excited about his demographic appeal.

Between chatting with Gallant, occasionally meeting with fans, and politely ignoring questions about my powers, I got used to this entirely new sense I'd acquired. First Thinker power, and wow, what a trip. To think I'd considered him useless; even at a fraction of his full strength, I had a damn near x-ray perspective on where people were in my sight and the general idea of what they were feeling. He mentioned far more comprehensive displays, whole clouds of emotion with layers of detail and nuance, and I could only imagine what a beautiful, terrible world he saw around him every day.

At least it didn't work with eyes closed, or I imagine we'd be up all night staring at clouds of emotions all around us.

"You get used to it, eventually. Kinda have to ignore it sometimes, before it becomes a violation of privacy. Especially in my civilian life."

I nodded. "I could imagine."

He grinned a bit - or, at least, his aura seemed to tilt towards amusement. "You've got a bit of Glory Girl's effect, actually."

"Oh? What's that like?"

"A second layer of emotion outside your own, tinting the auras of those around you. A little bit of blue, awe-slash-fear."

I stopped in place. A moment later he must have noticed something in my emotions, because he stopped as well, looking-feeling concerned.

"You ok?"

"I... jesus. And I've had this on without realizing it?"

_Accessible-concern-worry-calming._ "Since Friday, at least. It's a pretty minor thing, honest. Like, Victoria when she's asleep. 1 out of 10." He paused. "Ok, 2 out of 10. Are you alright?"

I took a deep breath, a shaky exhale. Looked his way, hoping...

"I can barely see it now. But honestly, why are you so worried? It's a very minor effect, no more than being attractive, or charming, or rich." He patted me on the shoulder reassuringly, aura tinted with _calming-amusement_. I supposed he'd have had some experience seeing how people reacted to things like that. And still managed to be modest about it, the little twerp. "Like a, a celebrity gets respect without powers."

"Master powers kinda freak me out. Especially ones I could be using on accident." A certain feather-haired singer came to mind...

"_Technically_ it's a Shaker effect." I gave him a flat look, and he chuckled. "In any case, your powers fade, right?"

"And if I bumped into her again?" I shook my head. "Never mind. It's fine." I'd just have to make sure I didn't get any more. Only-partially-controlled emotion-manipulation really didn't sit well with me for a variety of reasons.
He looked as if he was going to push the point, but shrugged instead. Dauntless had stopped a bit ahead of us, turned, made a beckoning motion. We followed, continuing our patrol.

In the somewhat awkward silence that followed I tried to change the subject. "Hey, can you use this as a lie detector?"

"Not reliably. I can see when people are nervous, but that could be for any number of reasons."

"Like, 'I'm being interrogated'."

"Exactly."

"Can you detect capes with it? Like, do they have different emotional footprints?"

"No, thankfully. That'd be a nightmare; I worry about respecting privacy enough as it is."

"What about-"

We chatted amiably about different uses for his power while strolling through the Boardwalk and nearby neighborhoods. Dauntless was, well, Dauntless; I was unsurprised to find he was exactly as cheerful and enthusiastic as he appeared to be. Gallant had a good sense of humor, although I supposed at least part of that was having a perfect grasp of the temperature of the audience and instant feedback on how his quips were received. Man, I really underestimated the usefulness of his seemingly unimpressive Thinker/Blaster power.

If nothing else, I no longer had to do a fly-by of Coil's house to see if anyone was inside.

If Gallant noticed my sudden surge of satisfaction at that thought, he didn't say anything about it.

Chapter End Notes

Take two. If we could end the discussion on Glory Girl's aura now, that'd be great. You guys have a habit of enthusiastic derails.
"So are you a dude or a chick?"

I facepalmed, Uber glanced between us curiously, sitting between us on the big couch, and Circus just answered with a faint smile. I could see she was amused.

Leet just looked at her from the other couch, squinting, giving her the up-down. "Seriously, though, you-"

"Which are you?" she asked him, tauntingly.

"I'm a dude!"

"You sure? 'Cause you're going down like a bitch."

"Hey!"

"Leet?" I interrupted. "Think Sheik." I demonstrated onscreen by shifting the princess to her male alter ego in a whirl of sparks and lights. Then I smacked him with the chain whip, setting up a combo where Circus absolutely wrecked him.

He wasn't happy, but he seemed to get it, at least.

Then my phone rang, and I let my controller go to walk away and answer. "Hey, how goes?"

Purity's voice was hesitant, and I kinda wished my new empathy-sight worked over the phone. "I was wondering... if you wanted to patrol? Tonight? If you're not busy."

I glanced back at the couch with the other gamers, the half-eaten pizza, the two-liters of Coke, and the open bags of Doritos. "Nothing important." I'd already spent the last few hours gaming; I could use some fresh air. Thankfully I'd abstained from lighting up this time; it made my Smash game fucking awful, to start, and I didn't have a good track record with Purity while high. "Where do you want to meet?"

"Well, Theo won't be over to watch Aster for another hour, so if you want we can meet at my apartment."

"Sure, gimme your address." She did, and I took mental note. "Should I meet you on the roof, or head straight to your apartment on foot like a pleb?"

She sounded like she was smiling, just a bit. "Like a pleb, if you don't mind. I don't want to leave Aster to fetch you from the roof."

Only after the conversation ended and I hung up did I notice the game had gone silent and Circus was propped up on the back of the couch, watching me with a sly grin. "Meeting the naughty SS officer at her apartment, hmm?"
"Yeah, to patrol."

"Uh huh. Sure you are." I rolled my eyes at her lewd gestures, but I was smiling too. Then we initiated a complex series of daps, claps, claps and shakes; finger guns and clicked tongues with a wink; and for the finale, we each shook a maraca exactly twice and simultaneously disappeared them between our hands as we high-fived "Good luck bruh."

"Thanks, bruh."

Uber and Leet exchanged glances as I made my way out. The last thing I heard one say before I took off was a bitter, disbelieving, "Dude. We're being out-bro'd."

---

I knocked on the door, inexplicably nervous. I took a deep breath, tracking the emotional signature as it approached in the apartment beyond. Probably Purity, if I got the address right; nervous-excited-pleased? It was hard to tell when not up close. At this degree of charge, Gallant's power was only good for pointing out the presence of emotions within a hundred feet, and their contents (more or less) within twenty or so.

The fuzzy lump of emotions around knee height deeper in the apartment was probably Aster.

"Chris! Come in, glad you could make it."

I smiled and entered. It was a little strange, seeing Purity in costume but with her power inactive. Like, I'd seen her one way or the other, but never this middle ground.

Then I was distracted by the apartment. It wasn't ostentatiously large - two bedroom, two bath, somewhere on the fourteenth floor - but it was decorated with tasteful style and a kind of polish one expected from furniture showrooms. Only the occasional sign of human habitation, such as the discarded stuffed animal on the floor by the television or the few dishes in the sink, gave any indication this was the home of a single mom and a human larva.

"Damn Kayden, your place is nice." She smiled, a little shy, but I saw pride-pleased in her aura. "Who is your interior decorator?"

"Oh stop."

I wiped my messy shoes on the mat, realized it was a lost cause, decided I didn't want to track mud on the clean carpet and also didn't want to hover my whole visit, and ultimately just sent them nowhere and padded around in socks. If she noticed my plight, she didn't say anything, although her mild-amusement could have been related.

The spare bedroom was pastel-colored, with tastefully matching furniture sets and unidentifiable fluffy things. Kayden lifted up her sleepy proto-human, cradling her gently in the crook of one arm and softly tickling her nose with a finger, making gentle cooing sounds and smiling almost beatifically. That, plus her shining aura of solid blue love... well, it almost made me forget she was a racist former supervillain.

And for a mewling crotch-spawn... Aster was actually kinda cute.
I may have melted a little bit when she grabbed her mom's finger in one tiny hand and they had a playful little tug of war, *blue-white-pink*. And that giggle!

**Damnit.**

"Do you want to hold her?"

**Damnit.**

"...Ok."

**Damnit.**

At least Uber's power covered how to safely hold a baby, for some reason.

I stared down at this little pseudo-person, wide brown eyes blinking softly, and couldn't help but smile. Just a little.

And then she tugged on my beard, and I laughed. Grinning, Kayden quickly took her back after loosening the kid's kung-fu grip, laid her in her crib, and shushed her farewells and goodnights.

I waited outside the door, and when she closed it quietly behind her, she looked up and I realized how close we were (and also that I was flying, to not make noise walking). Her aura was still simmering in that solid blue, but as I watched it flared out with yellow and orange, pink and red, like ink spreading through water, too fast and muddled for me to make heads or tails of it. And then I realized neither of us had moved apart, and...

And then a key sounded in the lock of the front door.

"Oh! Theo is... do you need to put on your-" She blinked, because I'd already pulled my costume from nowhere. "Ok. I should..."

"Of course."

"Right."

And then she was moving towards the door, waiting for her stepson as he unlocked it and made his way inside.

I floated behind the bar counter of the kitchen, near the entrance to the bedrooms.

Theo took one look at me, then at Kayden's costume...

And said absolutely nothing. Even his emotions were dulled, his expression perfectly blank.

Damn, I did *not* want to play poker with this kid.

"I'm leaving you thirty dollars here on the kitchen table. If you want to use it to order out, please feel free. Otherwise..." And so on. Kinda tuned her out at that point, watching Theo.

His expression only cracked when she mentioned Aster, a burst of affection in his aura, quickly squashed.
And then she introduced us.

We sized each other up. I thought of approaches. Things I'd hate if I were in his shoes. Things that would come across as being patronizing.

"Nice to meet you, sir." First points to Theo, making me deliberately uncomfortable with that opening salvo.

"Likewise." Return volley. "Kayden's spoken highly of you."

Both our eyes flicked towards her, Theo incredulous, Kayden embarrassed as she'd done no such thing (not that she'd said anything bad about him either, in her defense) but trying to play it off with an uneasy smile.

Then I was surprised by the small burst of what might have been *protectiveness-affection* in his aura. "Please take care of her, sir."

I nodded with all the solemnity that gesture required. "I'll do my best."

And then we made our way to the rooftop and the sky beyond.

Chapter End Notes

No sitting on a couch, no drinking, no smoking. Progress!
Day 18.48 : Defied Expectations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Look, just because they're wearing hoodies and hanging out on a street corner doesn't mean-"

She huffed, fixing me with a glare. "I've been doing this a lot longer than you have, Fax."

"They're not wearing colors, not near any graffiti, hell I'm not even sure they're keeping watch-"

"They're not afraid because they're overconfident."

"I'm pretty sure half of them are underage, no guns on display, they aren't even harassing passers by..."

I trailed off and she crossed her arms. We were floating high enough that the alleged thugs hadn't noticed her glowing brightness yet.

"It's not because they're black!"

"I didn't say anything." I held up my hands in mock innocence, but I was smiling, just a bit, beneath my mask.

"I- it's just-" she blew out a sigh and looked away, thinking. I gave her time. "Their location is suspicious. That pawn shop is just down the street," she pointed, and there was indeed a late-night pawn shop with English and Chinese signage. "They could be watching the entrance. It's just inside former ABB territory bordering the Merchants. In fact, this street was a regular hangout for ABB punks; the fact that they're not ch-Asians," she stuttered only slightly, "is enough to warrant a closer look."

"It's not illegal to hang out on street corners. I'm sure they-"

"Look, they're moving."

I followed her gaze and saw them, in fact, moving towards the pawn shop she mentioned. A question had almost left my lips before I saw two of them draw pistols and kick in the door, and a run-down station wagon pull up to the back door, presumably a getaway vehicle.

I sighed.

_Damnit, Brockton Bay, why must you continually disappoint me?_

Purity had the decency not to look smug as she swooped down towards the shouting and the blaring alarm, but I could see it in her aura. God, she'd be lording this over my head all night.

With a muttered curse, I followed.
Two muggings, one attempted rape and another three lootings/smash-and-grabs later, Purity was getting frustrated. None of the thugs we'd helped arrest had any information on the Merchants' greater plans, and there was no sign of any capes, except for a quick glimpse of a pile of garbage that may have been Mush slipping into a storm sewer as soon as we flew overhead.

"Hey, we did good. Got some criminals off the street."

"None of them had anything useful! Even the ones that said they'd heard about Squealer or Mush doing things tonight turned out to be false leads." Yes, and that had nothing to do with the text I'd sent Skidmark when I heard where Purity wanted to patrol, nothing at all.

I shrugged. "If we scared them off, that's a good thing, right?"

"It's just," she sighed, shoulders slumping just a bit in disappointment. "Sometimes I feel like I'm not actually accomplishing anything. When I focused on the ABB, I did surgical strikes against the low level operations of the gang, interrupted shipments, beat up dealers and thugs, attacked their places of business, gathered information... And for what? If you hadn't shown up, I'm not sure I could have..."

"Hey, hey. If you hadn't been there when Lung--" I almost could say his name without flashes of burning pain and terror. Almost. "went down, I'd be toast. Literally. You saved my life, helped put him in the Birdcage where he belongs." She looked unconvinced, brow furrowed, arms crossed, staring out over the city below like it owed her money. "It's one night. I'm sure you'll have more luck tomorrow." Not like I was keeping her patrols with the Protectorate from succeeding, after all.

I floated over, put a reassuring hand on her back. She leaned in, and I put my other arm around her, hers slipping around my back until she had her face pressed against my chest. I ignored the fact that I had to be floating higher than her for that to work, and simply appreciated the warmth of her radiance, trying not to feel guilty at being partially responsible for her frustration.

Then I had an idea.

"Hey, wanna see something cool?"

She pulled her head back slightly and raised an eyebrow. I took that as a yes and started floating higher, pulling her along until she followed, still in my arms.

When we broke through the clouds, countless stars brilliant above us, protected from the light pollution from the city below by the dark fluffy hills and mountains below, she smiled a little. "I don't do this nearly as much as I should. It's beautiful up here."

And then I began to glow, pumping enough power into it that I matched her brilliant, actinic glare. One more star in the endless night sky.

She blinked, pulling back so she could get a better look at me. I disappeared my scarf and jacket so she could see my face smiling mischievously down at her; her arms were still around my lower back, mine nestled behind her shoulders.

"It's... it's like the sun. Warm." I nodded, and her eyes widened in realization, no doubt remembering how I reacted the first few times we met. "Is that what I feel like to you?" Awe-wonder-surprise.

"Mmhmm."
"I can see you," she marveled, noting how her glare-proof vision made seeing me as easy as me seeing her, despite the blinding radiance. Then warmth-surprise-comfort grew tinted with concern-suspicion. "Wait. Have you been able to see my face this whole time?"

Oops.

"Um."

"Oh my god! And you didn't say anything!?"

"I did say you were cute."

She punched me in the chest, not very hard, and I could see her face and aura were more embarrassed than angry, with a bit of amusement at my discomfort.

"You're such a jerk!"

I winced. "So I've been told."

She didn't pull away, though.

Chapter End Notes

Been planning this scene since he ran into Purity on patrol in chapter 5.
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

I ate my sandwich and people-watched, occasionally catching glimpses of the folks behind me when a shadow passed over the cafe's front window.

I had slept in, but still managed to have enough time to hit up the Goodwill for some large women's clothes, shift into my latest disguise and make it to the park I was at for lunch the day before.

As soon as I had set foot there, overweight but in well-fitting business clothes, I had just let my feet lead me. I was starting to gain faith in my 'wander' ability as a real thing, but I was still leery of trusting it too much.

Nonetheless, it led me to the cafe, only a block or two from the park. I'd decided it would be more suspicious to walk into a restaurant and immediately turn around than it would be to simply grab a table, and I was fortunate that there was at least twenty feet and a good dozen or so lunchers between me and the Empire duo. I'd already grabbed her power; I just had to eat and be on my way, with no one the wiser.

I felt them finish their lunch, stand, and make their way to the front of the restaurant. Focus on the sandwich, nothing to see here...

"Excuse me, miss?"

Cursing inwardly, I glanced up at the handsome young man with the woman on his arm, feigning surprise around a mouthful of sandwich. He smiled charmingly as I covered my mouth, chewing and swallowing. "You look familiar. Have we met before?"

I smiled politely, searching their faces as if trying to see if I recognized them. "Ah, I don't believe so." Othala was reading confused-amused-relaxed, but Victor was suspicious-cautious-smug. I extended a hand, giving him a weak grip in exchange for his firm, confident one. "Kristine Ryan. Account manager at Wells Fargo."

"Oh, the one off 38th?"

"15th, actually. I just really like the sandwiches here."

He chuckled good-naturedly, but I just saw his attention sharpen. "They are great, aren't they? Say, do you know a Jeremy Briggson? He's the regional manager, isn't he?" Alert-wary-smug.

Biokinesis kept me from sweating, my heart from pounding. I did my best to match his casual chuckle, apologetic. "I just started this week."

He nodded, giving me that stupid charming smile again. His teeth were as white as Dauntless's and, if anything, even straighter, but his aura was cold-angry-gratified. "My mistake. Congrats on the new job, and have a nice day."

"Thank you! Have a nice day too."
I watched them go with a faint smile.

Inwardly, though, was a completely different reaction.

_Fuck._

---

Once I got home, I slept and watched movies the rest of the afternoon and evening, because I'd been fucking busy lately and needed some honest-to-god downtime. Plus all the interesting shit happened at night anyhow.

After the sun set, however, I found myself staring at the list of locations Tattletale had given me.

I wanted to check them out. Not _necessarily_ to disrupt Empire operations - although I did, because fuck those guys - but to grab the powers of any capes that came to defend them. And, if my suspicions proved true and Coil tipped them off, that would only increase the odds of capes showing up.

It also increased the odds of me getting overwhelmed, outgunned, and/or trapped.

Which would be bad.

I could just sneak past while disguised, but while I don't know if Victor pinged exactly who I was, he was at least aware that a Stranger was involved, judging by the way he put me on the spot at lunch. And if the capes weren't on site, just nearby, then being in disguise wouldn't help at all if I was already blasting. I could have used Schwarz, but I had a feeling I wouldn't be able to keep to non-flashy powers if I was serious about raiding Empire strongholds, and I'd like to try to keep my shapeshifting on the down low... if it wasn't already obvious from my costume during that Uber and Leet episode, anyway. Man, I really wasn't good at this whole 'secret identity, secret powers' shit. It was messy as hell.

In any case, one thing was clear.

I needed backup.

---

The first storehouse was almost anticlimactic. A dozen neo-Nazi thugs of different flavors (well, different flavors of vanilla, I supposed) with packing crates full of handguns, ammo, packing peanuts and suspicious cling-wrapped bricks half-hidden in the back of a body shop. The goons went down easy, BBPD did the rest.

The second safehouse was a bit more interesting. An unassuming apartment, unoccupied when I showed up save for one thug I knocked out right quick. The living room was stacked high with cardboard boxes full of (presumably stolen) electronics. Phones, DVD players, the Bet equivalent of TiVos. Then I got warning that a van across the street did its best impression of a clown car, pouring out heavily armed thugs, so I bailed out the window. While they searched the apartment for me, I blew out the tires in their van. The police weren't too far behind; hopefully some of those stolen goods would actually be returned, some arrests made.
The third warehouse, based out of what looked to be one of the few still-occupied shipping companies left in the city, appeared to have been in the process of being cleared out when I arrived. I blew out the tires on the moving trucks, just in case, but I couldn't sense anyone nearby, except... well. Three emotional signatures inside the building. No fear, just *anger-waiting-anticipation*.

Looks like I got my wish.

I dropped down to the ground level, doubled up my outer shields, and floated in through the nearest loading bay, beams at the ready. As soon as I floated in a few feet, the gate slammed shut behind me, throwing me in near-darkness. I, of course, knew exactly where to look, peering through the dim light filtering through the warehouse's high windows. And thanks to Purity, I didn't even flinch when the lights came on, even though the contrast would have blinded a normal person. Nice theatrics.

"Good evening, Fax."

A man in a gas mask and SS coat, standing at ease between two women in shining valkyrie armor. Two women who, moments later, grew to nearly twenty feet tall, winged helmets scraping against the rafters.

"Krieg. Menja, Fenja."

Although hilariously undersized compared to the giantesses' sword and spear, I nonetheless tensed when Krieg pulled out a rather heavy-looking rifle from behind his back. It looked imposing enough that I wasn't sure how long my shields would hold against it, much less compounded with whatever nebulous effect his power had on his projectiles. My knowledge of his power was a bit spotty, to my dismay. The twins, on the other hand...

As if he hadn't just drawn and aimed a rifle at my center mass, Krieg spoke casually, almost disinterestedly. "You've been quite a pain in our side as of late."

I shrugged.

Unfazed, he continued, "A shame. I had had such hopes for you. You cleared out the filth of the ABB, appeared to be of good stock... I had hoped we could work together."

His words hung in the silence between us for a few moments; he seemed to be waiting for me to respond.

"You're really not my type. Sorry."

Without missing a beat, he replied "But I understand Purity is?* Smug-satisfied-alert."

The giantesses on the other hand were simply shades of *alert-irritated-smug*.

And me...

I felt like I had ice in my veins.

"You should know," I bit out, "that I gouged the eyes out of the last person who hurt my friend."

The motherfucker didn't even flinch. "Perhaps it would be best if you did not cause trouble for our dear Purity, then."
Chapter End Notes

Had to break this chapter into two parts.

Thanks to Reyemile, maroon_sweater, and BlueRose for idea-bouncing and suggestions.
I grit my teeth so hard I heard them start to crack. The twins shifted, the subtle movement magnified by their sheer size.

Krieg, that smug son of a bitch, didn't even look nervous.

Gradually, I calmed myself down enough to speak.

*Think it through.*

"What do you want?"

"To pass on a warning, nothing more."

"I'm listening."

"Stay out of Empire territory, or we will make you regret it."

My fists clenched, and the giantesses leaned forward fractionally. When I could make myself speak, my voice was a low rasp, almost a growl.

"I will treat your warning with all the respect it deserves."

"Well! I'm glad you can be reasonable. Next time we meet, I will not be so merciful."

"Next time we meet, *I'll kick your ass*. You may have the advantage now, but you won't always have a BFG and the Wonder Twins at your side."

"...That's actually a good point." He pulled back the slide with a *clack*. "Girls?"

And then a spear twice as long as I was tall lanced out towards me, shattering my outermost shield.

*Fuck me, why am I giving the supervillain ideas?*

I dodged to the side, but not fast enough to avoid the crack of thunder and hammerblow smashing through my secondary shield, the combined attacks sending a spike of pain between my temples. Before I could even concentrate enough to call out, glass shattered as a rapidfire trio of tear gas canisters lobbed their way into the warehouse through the high windows, quickly filling the space with thick, white smoke.

Reaching out for my newest power, I felt the warehouse grow smaller, and despite my fury I couldn't help but laugh.

A loud, rolling laugh, booming and larger than life.

Because - *finally*! - I was a fucking *giant*. 
Granted, I was only ten feet tall to the twins’ twenty, but I was also a *lot* stronger than they were at base size. And, more importantly, between all my flight powers, Circus’s acrobatics and Uber’s gymnastics, *I was maneuverable as all hell.*

Even in the relatively enclosed space (smaller after I transformed, haha!) I still flipped over the second twin’s sword-swope, summoned a pair of goggles against the smoke, kicked off the wall, then punched one of the giant bitches in the face, sending her reeling, heavy feet stomping on concrete as she fought to keep her balance. Krieg, who had been attempting to use her as cover as he tried to get a bead on me, was forced to stagger over to the other coughing giantess. She quickly covered him with her shield, still taller than I was, and tried to swipe at me again with her sword. The angle was awkward between the enclosed space - working against them thanks to my speed - and she was being careful not to strike her sister, so I was able to brush aside the giant blade and kick-flip behind the shield, blast already charging in one hand-

And was promptly shot three times in the chest, each shot hitting me like the fist of an angry god as Krieg tried to crouch behind his useless cover. I gasped, staggered, but still trained my open hand to point-

For a moment, my charging blast was aimed right at his heart. His power was useless against mine; whatever space whale magic did to melee and projectiles in his reach, I imagined it would do exactly jack and shit against my beams. The giantesses were too busy trying not to cough their lungs out to interfere; I could have blown a hole right through him.

In that instant, I saw *fear.*

With my free hand I lunged and grabbed the gun, crushing it and a few of his fingers in my massive grip, eliciting a pained gasp. *See how you like it, fucker.*

With the other, I aimed straight up, sending a charged beam lancing upwards through the flimsy sheet metal roof and several girders. Then I reached out, anger overwhelming the pain, grabbed him by his fucking neck, and launched us both skyward.

His hands scrabbled and struck against my forearm, each punch feeling like someone took a jackhammer to my arm. Every breath was a struggle, and my biokinesis - what little attention I could focus on it - was intent on keeping the fist-sized holes in my chest and stomach from taking me out. My vision grew black at the edges, but still I flew upward, and still I held tight to his throat, not *quite* enough to snap his neck.

It was a race to see who could stay conscious longest.

Spoiler warning: I won.

The instant I felt him go slack in my grip, and the crushing pressure lifted from my lungs, I gasped a deep, blissful breath of air. It tasted like victory.

*Take that, you smug son of a bitch.*

For a moment I just floated there, bastard in hand, one part of my attention focused on patching up my wounds, the rest still too pumped up on adrenaline and triumph to think actual thoughts. Eventually I remembered to loosen my grip enough to let the little shit actually *breathe.*
Down below, I heard sirens. The twins had probably escaped, but I didn't care. They'd served their purpose; I was certain I'd get the chance to fight them again.

I flew down to the rooftop where my partner waited, then dumped my fallen opponent at her feet, triumphant.

Miss Militia looked up (haha!) at me, then down at Krieg, concern-satisfaction-alert. Keeping her priorities straight, she checked his pulse, his breathing, and - finding him sufficiently alive - bound his wrists and ankles in heavy-duty cuffs.

"Trap?"

"Trap."

"And you went in anyway?"

I gestured at all ten feet of my power-enhanced body, as if to challenge her to say it wasn't worth it. She was amused-exasperated-alert.

Honestly, she pretty much always had alert in her aura. Whether that was training or powers, I didn't care to ask.

"It was still reckless. You asked for off-the-books; there wasn't any backup coming if things had gone wrong."

I conceded the point, shrinking down - only somewhat reluctantly - so we could talk face to face. "I appreciate your help. That teargas really evened the odds."

She gave me a look that would have been hard to read a few days before; now it was fond-amused-alert. "So, what happened after he told Menja and Fenja to attack?" She gestured towards the ragged holes in my jacket (damnit, again!) and the mostly-closed wounds behind them.

I scowled. "The duplicitous fuck led me to believe he'd let the twins take me on, but then he shot me anyway!"

"And you did Nazi that coming?"

...was I confused by her accent, or was that a terrible pun?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to Reyemile for wording. Nothing like spending an hour on four lines of dialogue to make you feel like a real writer.
This time when I followed my feet to Othala and Victor, they were in the private dining section of the French bistro. Fortunately, they had a roof, and I was nothing if not a persistent stalker.

One more charge for Othala, woo!

Once in privacy, I checked my tattoos. Tucked in the coils of the world serpent on my right arm was an 'othala' fish-shaped nordic rune in red, with a red ring, and a spear crossed with a shield in dark gray. The first now had three notches, while the second had two. On my left arm, tucked in the writhing limbs of the Kraken alongside Miss Militia and Dauntless was a silver medieval helm in a rainbow circle. It was actually getting kind of crowded. I wondered what would happen if I ran out of room. Would they get denser? Would the tattoos creep across my chest and back until I ended up the Illustrated Man?

Meh. Future me's problem.

---

"Hey, guess who I fought last night?"

Neil gave me a thoughtful look, one hand rubbing his chin. After giving it some thought, he said, "You know, I'm going to go out on a limb here and say Menja and Fenja?"

"Man! For a short guy you sure are clever." I smiled generously down at him from my three foot height advantage.

He laughed, booming, and we high-fived, the sound a loud crack. Giants represent!

"Oh god, there's two of them."

I grinned at Sarah, amused-patient-playful, and she rolled her eyes.

"So what brings you to dinner? Celebrating capturing Krieg?"

"Yep! Also, I wanted to speak with Amy for a bit."

The girl in question looked up from the couch where she was watching TV with Victoria, caution-suspicion-worry. The chat with Victoria had gone... ok. She appreciated that I'd understood her concern and was willing to discuss the issue, and while she still wasn't happy, she was mollified by my nearly-injury-free capture of the Empire supervillain the night before.

Amy and I had barely exchanged half a dozen words since my first invasion into the Pelham-Dallon clan, and I could see why she might have reason to worry, knowing what I did about her powers.

Nonetheless, she still agreed to meet with me in private before dinner - apparently Aunt Sarah was the sibling with all the cooking skills in the family - and we slipped into the dining room, closing the
French doors behind us. I'd shrunk down so I could better fit inside their house, although the tall ceilings and arched doorways suddenly made more sense with Neil's... well, not disability. Handicap? Unique architectural needs. Yeah.

"What's this about?"

"Well, I've been picking up Othala's powers and wanted your help testing the regeneration."

She looked conflicted, her aura relieved-cautious-suspicious. "And you needed to ask me in private why, exactly?"

"Well, I didn't want to pressure you into agreeing to help."

Amy crossed her arms, raising one eyebrow, irritated-suspicious. "And what makes you think you could pressure me to help?"

Um.

"More that... you're a world-famous healer and... I imagine you get a lot of people bothering you for things?"

She gave me a look, then abruptly swung the topic.

"You've never asked to copy my powers. Why?"

"Shit girl, that's a lot of responsibility."

Her eyes widened slightly, then narrowed. "You don't say?" I didn't need Gallant's power to hear the suspicion in her voice. Or the sarcasm.

"I mean, yeah. You show the world you can cure cancer with a touch, you'll never sleep guilt-free again. There's always more sick people than there are seconds in a day."

"And you don't think that's your responsibility? Even being capable of having the power to help people like that?"

"...Maybe? Doesn't mean I'm gonna do it, though."

Oh wow, that was a lot of frustration-irritation-disgust.

"You! Just... argh!" She took a deep breath, visibly calming, and seemed ready to just drop the subject. "Never mind. Forget it."

I ruined it immediately. "Do you want me to copy your power?"

"No!" Spike of fear with that one. "It's just... you're just..." She caught her tone before it got loud enough to alert her family in the other room, if they hadn't noticed it already. She took another calming breath, but now her aura was flickering disgust-jealousy-guilt-hate-fear-guilt...

"Wasting my potential?"

"You don't give a shit!" She almost hissed that last word, hands balled into fists. "You have this
stupidly broken power and you don't do anything with it." I held up a finger to protest, but she kept going, too angry to care. "You fuck around, you get high, you treat it all like a joke, you even maim a man in cold blood and nothing! Nobody cares! You don't even care! You break rules and-and just get away with everything!"

Meanwhile she was always afraid one miss-step would lead to her being branded a villain for all time, if not by the public at large, then at least by her adoptive mother.

Eesh.

For a moment I wanted to point out the lack of ABB in the city, the two Empire supervillains I'd arrested... the consequences I'd already faced for my actions... but right then I got the feeling she just needed to let it all out. Pent-up Amy was dangerous Amy.

"So sure, I'll help you test yet another power. Fine. No big deal. And you'll use it to, to beat up hookers with Uber and Leet, or piss on the Mayor and call it rain, no one cares! Just do what you want."

A tense pause.

"Shit, Amy, I didn't know you felt that way."

She scoffed, scathing, dismissive. The "you didn't ask" and "no one does" went unspoken. Amy seemed to catch herself for a moment, then jabbed a finger at my chest. "You won't repeat a word of this."

I nodded.

She fumed for a moment longer, then nodded back, averting her eyes, embarrassment-guilt-frustration.

After a few beats, I hazarded a "So..."

"What," she snapped, irritation flaring and followed by guilt.

"...The other reason I asked you is because there are more powers in the Othala package. You want to be a Brute? Or a speedster? Maybe play with fire?"

She scowled, but I could see the hope-anticipation-jealousy-guilt flickering in her aura. "Flight?"

"Not yet." Amy tried to conceal her slight disappointment. "But maybe in a few more weeks?"

"You're still a selfish, arrogant prick."

"That's fair."

She stewed on it for a few moments, then held out a hand. "Gimme."

I smiled.
Oh hey Pan-Pan!

I'm not entirely happy with her characterization, but... meh.
"Hey"

"Sup?"

"Whatchu up to?"

"Panacea just lit the drapes on fire"

"Ok?"

"Yeah her mom is super pissed"

"...

"Earlier I stalked a nice caucasian couple as a black woman"

"Your life is so fucking weird"

"¯\_(ツ)_/¯"

Instead of another text, I got a call. I ducked out before Carol turned her attention my way and answered.

"What did you wear?"

"Hi Alex. No, I'm fine, angry-lady-with-lightsabers hasn't noticed me yet, thanks for your concern."

"Yeah yeah whatever. What did you wear? As a woman?"

"Just some stuff I picked out from the Goodwill."

"Yeah no that shit won't fly."

"I mean, it's a temporary disguise."

"A shitty one. Come on loser, we're going shopping."

"Ugggghhhhh."

"Quit yer bitchin' and make yourself pretty. Meet me at my place in 20 minutes."
I was greeted by a low whistle, which I answered with a smirk, a flounce, and a toss of my hair.

"You said 'make myself pretty'." 

"Attaboy."

5'10, flawless complexion, golden brown skin in a way that left my supposed ethnicity somewhere between Greek and Middle Eastern, 36-24-36 and shoulder-length jet-black hair with just enough curl, shine and bounce to give a shampoo commercial a run for its money. Let no one say I did things by half measures (except for all the times I did).

All I could find that fit was a poorly-fitting button up shirt, a very baggy sweater, and a pair of sweatpants that ran out mid-calf. I did a little pirouette on point (which was a lot easier if you could fly) and Alex nodded.

"Oh yeah, I can work with this."

---

"Ok, I expected I'd get a lot of attention but this is making me seriously uncomfortable."

"Wait til we get you in some well-fitting clothes."

I shifted closer to Alex as we passed by another open-air cafe on the Boardwalk where a group of college-aged men literally stopped mid-conversation to watch me pass. I slipped my arm into Alex's and the reactions changed just enough to make me wonder if they were checking me out or being racist and/or homophobic. Was it weird I almost preferred the latter?

It was a relief to enter a store (sorry, boutique) where instead of hungry men staring I got sharp-eyed salespeople stalking me like savanna predators. Mainly because they actually took a smile and "no thanks!" as reason enough to leave me alone. I almost had to deck a dude on the way to the Boardwalk when he wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Hey, these look good."


She ignored my pout and continued piling things into my arms. Underwear, tops, shorts, cardigans, jackets, jeans, dresses, skirts - if I didn't have enhanced strength and coordination I probably would have fallen over. Then she ushered me into a changing room, grabbed six items from the pile, flashed me a quick, smug grin, and closed the curtain behind her.

A few moment later they stuck their head back in. "You need help with-"

I already had the bra backwards around my stomach, mid-clasp. I smirked, finished clasping it, spun it around the right way, then stuck my arms through the straps and shrugged it up into place, adjusting the straps with only some fumbling.

To her raised eyebrow I replied, "Rocky Horror Picture Show."

"Ah."
"Yeah ok, that is a great dress, but there's no way it'll fit."

"Biokinetic."

"I hate you so much."

"It's ok, but it really doesn't match your complexion. Or your hair. Gimme a blonde, no! A redhead, with freckles. Mmm, yeah."

"I get that I'm buying clothes for multiple disguises, but I can't help but feel objectified here."

"You know you love it."

"...Kinda."

"Ok, ass bigger or smaller?"

"Yes."

"Not helping!"

"You know, using superpowers to cheat at wearing heels is..."

"Awesome?"

"Yeah, ok."

"You need to make a completely separate persona in your mind. Body language, verbal tics, the way you walk, word choice, everything."

"How the hell do you make it look so easy?"

"I'm just that good."

"You need a hand in there?"

"Where the hell do I even put my arms in this thing!?"
"Really? Apple Bottom jeans, boots with the fur? The whole club is... Nothing?"

Alex just gave me a questioning look.

"Hold on, I'll look it up." A moment later, "Huh. Weird."

Sometimes I forgot I was in a different universe. Poor Flo Rida. I bought some Reeboks with the strap in his honor.

And the jeans and boots, too, because it was winter in the northeast and I was only willing to suffer so much for art.

---

One of the many things I appreciated about Circus's power was that we didn't have to worry about carrying around a dozen bags full of clothes. And I had Browbeat to thank for not being fucking exhausted after three straight hours of clothes shopping. Didn't do anything for the mental wear and tear, unfortunately.

So when we saw the puppet show, I was quick to suggest sitting down and taking a breather. Especially when I saw the puppets were animated stuffed animals.

Alex indulged me with a grin. I had no idea how she wasn't dead on her feet, but I took the blessing without question. It didn't help that the clothes she'd put me in were tight-fitting and uncomfortable.

Damn if I didn't feel sexy, though. And these heels made my calves look amazing.

Unexpected benefit of my feminine disguise; I could sit around a whole bunch of families and their kids without anything giving me a second look. Which was good, because the puppet show was surprisingly engaging. Lots of colorful animals and cartoonish action with a few more subtle jokes for the parents in the audience, pre-recorded voices adding variety and polish, the puppeteer herself standing in the back of the stage but occasionally serving as a narrator; by the end of the show the crowd was enraptured, and the artist received a well-deserved standing ovation when it was done.

I applauded with the rest of them, but when I turned to leave Alex grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the stage.

"What are you-"

"Trust me."

I followed, curiosity piqued, as she led me through the crowd to the stage, where she waved over the doll-like artist.

"Oh, hey, Alex! Glad you could make one of my shows!"

"Hey Parian. Great show as always. Loved the magic tricks you put in the second act."

"You were right, the kids love it!" Then she turned her attention towards me and gave me an up-down so subtle I would have missed it if her aura didn't flare with interest-embarrassment-arousal.

Wait, what-
"Parian, this is my friend Chris. She's a huge fan."

I could do nothing but shake her gloved hand, fumbling for a smile.

"Uh, hi!" Smooth.

"Nice to meet you, Chris. I hope you enjoyed the show?"

"I, uh, yeah, it was really great." And she was still holding my hand.

"Also, she's single. I've got to go, bye!"

"Wait-!" Damnit Alex! 'Trust me' my ass!

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by my inability to focus on a much more serious conversation with Piggot or any complex discussion between Purity and Fax.
"So, before this goes any further, there's something I should tell you."

And there was the *worry-concern-fear* in her aura already, damnit. "Oh?"

"I'm actually a shapeshifter."

"...Ok."

"And a man."

"...Huh."

I twiddled my perfectly-manicured thumbs, watching the colors flash through her aura. The disbelief and curiosity were fine, but the *hurt-rejection-embarrassment-shame* just hurt to see.

"If you aren't interested in... in women, you could just-"

"Oh, no, that's not the issue." I saw her about to say something, took a guess. "And it's not you. I'm sure you're beautiful beneath your costume! I legit am a shapeshifter. Check it out."

Her eyes grew wide behind her mask as I grew taller, then shorter, then back to my original disguised height. She flicked her gaze around the cafe, but it was in a private section anyway. "Should you be coming out to me like that? You don't even know me!"

"Um. Shapeshifter."

"Oh. Right."

I let her gather her thoughts, sipping at my cocoa. It was pretty good, if overpriced. I missed Mexican hot chocolate, though. A bit of cinnamon, some cayenne...

"So you're a man? Like... Alex, sometimes?"

I made a so-so gesture with a hand. "Except I was born in the right body, and I've always been male. I'm just in this body for disguise."

"It's... a very nice disguise."

"I know, right? It's like," I thrust out my chest. "Bam!"

She averted her gaze, but there was definitely some amusement in her aura, in her voice. "Ok, I can believe you're a man now."
"Hey BB."

"Fax."

"Thanks for topping me off."

"Mmhmm."

"Digging the new costume!"

"Thanks."

"Alright, see you later."

"Later."

Ah, Browbeat. Thank you for being the stable rock in the stormy seas of my life.

---

I let myself regrow my beard when I got home. Breasts were nice, but I missed comfortable clothes and the warm embrace of my glorious face badger.

The next morning (ok afternoon), though, it was back once more into the breach. I had a bunch of new clothes, and an excuse to wear them.

Time to be a creeper.

So my wandering feet led me to... another nearby restaurant? Really? If these two were any more creatures of habit I'd be worried I'd grabbed Night and Fog instead.

This one didn't have a convenient nearby fire escape, though. It did, however, have a building close enough next to it that I could wall-jump onto a ledge, then hop onto the roof proper. A few more steps, and... ah, there she was. Othala charge number four. Now that that was done, I should go check out that French bistro they went to yesterday, it looked pretty good-

"HEY ASSHOLE."

Shit.

"Ready for round two?"

I looked up at the floating chunk of concrete and its robed, pissed-looking rider. Should I play dumb? Couldn't hurt.

"Whoah whoah whoah, I'm just here to smoke. I don't-"

"Don't want any trouble? Didn't buy it last time either, Schwarz."

Welp. The jig was up. I wondered if I could get another slap in before I bailed...

At least this time I definitely grabbed her power. Couldn't wait to try that out.
I tensed, flexing my knees, grinding the toes of my high heels into the rooftop, ready to lunge. My lips peeled back in an eager smile...

Then a rather familiar-looking blast struck the roof by my feet, knocking me off balance and sending me reeling back a few steps.

Oh.

Oh no.

I looked up and stared at the brilliant humanoid shape that was Purity.

"Oh fuckbaskets."

"Don't move."

I bolted.

---

OH GOD PURITY WAS WAY MORE INTIMIDATING ON THIS END OF HER BLASTS

Although the way her lips curled back in a snarl was kinda hot-

FOCUS!

"Gahfuck!" That last shot was **way** too close for comfort.

The two flying supervillainesses tag-teamed me in the worst way. Rune chased me through alleyways, cutting off avenues of escape, while Purity stayed up as an eye in the sky, pinpointing my position with piercing double-helix blasts whenever I managed to lose Sabrina the Teenage Nazi.

Fire-engine red four-inch pumps splashed through puddles of water and worse as I skid around corners and wall-ran over and around parked cars. Rune just tapped it as she zoomed past, lifting ponderously to smash **WHAM CRUNCH** into the wall where I'd jumped off a moment earlier. I was staying ahead of them by inches. Breathing heavy but even. Pumping my lungs like bellows. Fine-tuning my metabolism like a sports car engine **ZOOM** mid-slide beneath a hurled dumpster.

It was getting increasingly difficult to resist the urge to use any of my other powers to escape. I could fly faster than Purity, far faster than Rune; one quick teleport would let me duck into any number of hiding places; a blast or a shield would have put them on the back foot; going giant would have soaked up enough damage to let me bring the fight to them; even a quick costume change to disguise this form had to be done while absolutely sure neither of them had me in their sights. Hell, even Skidmark's powers could have knocked Rune off her platform for long enough to escape. Maybe.

I was boned.

I couldn't even duck into a storm drain like I did the first time because of these **stupid breasts and hips!**

In the end I had to tank a direct hit from Purity to slip into a parking garage, hiding long enough to
pull every long coat and jacket from my nowhere until I was more clothes than person, then throwing myself in a dark corner and pretending I was asleep. Even pulled out a few bottles of beer for authenticity, spilling one on purpose to add to the effect. Aww, man, I was totally ruining that peacoat.

Only Browbeat’s power let me control my breathing enough to fool Rune when she floated past.

Ten, twenty minutes passed. Eventually the shifting shadows told me Purity finally gave up. Rune cursed like a sailor, but finally quit as well.

I reached for the now-warm beer and drank it in one swallow.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Well that was fun.
As shitty as that was, I did get what I'd come for, and then some. Another notch for Othala, and also nestled in the clutches of the world serpent, a series of dots and rings resembling a model of an atom, except multiple bigger dots orbited the one smaller one, all in dark, forest green.

As for the rest of it, I just... well. I had calls to make, people to see.

---

"What."

"It's a fruit basket."

He just looked at me.

"I just wanted to say thanks."

"..."

"I can return it. And by return it I mean eat it myself." Still looking at me funny. "Would you prefer flowers?"

"There's probably some sort of regulation against this."

"I mean, it's not much of a bribe. And if it's poisoned, I picked the wrong member of the Wards to try that on."

It wasn't that Browbeat didn't have emotions, or that they were suppressed; it was just that nothing seemed to really get to him. This was no exception. I could barely tell when his aura shifted from reluctance-indifference to acceptance-indifference.

"If anyone asks, I bought this myself."

"Deal."

"...It was nice of me to treat myself like this."

I give him double-finger pistols, a wink, and a tongue-click. "Self-care is important."

Alright, one more social encounter taken care of. I could only hope the next would go as smoothly.

---

Purity's smile was tight when she walked up the hill, and her emotions were a mess. Anger-fear-guilt-anticipation-loss-affection-determination. I hadn't talked to her since I arrested Krieg, and I was worried about that conversation; her interaction with "Schwarz" earlier in the day probably hadn't
helped her mood. The least I could do was offer a nice picnic, some wine, and a gorgeous view of the sunset to offset the circumstances.

"Hey, glad you could make it." I gave her my best charming smile.

"Hi." Aaaaand sadness-loss-betrayal-fear was not what I was hoping for as a reaction. Trying to keep my own expression calm, I gestured for her to sit opposite the tablecloth, some cheeses, crackers, cold cuts, olives, hummus and grapes laid out between us. She sat, looking over the spread, tight smile softening slightly.

"This is nice."

"Thanks! It's a good night for it. Not so many clouds. Wine?"

After a moment she nodded, and I poured us both a glass. I didn't much enjoy wine on my own, but it felt right. We were out of costume, so she could see me smile and tilt the glass her way. "Cheers."

"Cheers." We drank.

Well, I drank. She drained her glass in one go. I poured her some more.

"You seem pretty upset. If it's about Krieg-"

"I had a rough day today." I accepted her interruption without comment, nodding in sympathy. If she didn't want to talk about me arresting her former teammates, I'd follow her lead. She had enough determination in her aura to make me wonder if I could stop her if I tried.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Do you remember that bank robbery a week ago, in Boston?"

Oh crap.

"Not particularly. Anyone famous?"

"Apparently he's called Schwarz. Been causing trouble in Brockton Bay, attacking people in the street, stalking people."

"Schwarz? Isn't that German?" I kept my voice light, refilling her wine glass. She threw it back immediately, which was... a bad sign.

"Mmhmm. Thing is, I've got it on good authority that he's a Stranger. Can change what he looks like. Even look like a woman."

"How do you know it's the same person?"

I resisted the urge to push when she didn't answer at first. As far as I knew, there wasn't anything tying "Schwarz" to the nameless forms I used to stalk Othalaz. After a moment, though, she seemed to skip over the question entirely, ignoring the attempted tangent.

"...I fought him today."
"Oh? Did you get him?"

"No." There was no inflection in her voice when she said that, as though I'd asked if it had rained that day. But her aura was still a roiling mess. I... wasn't sure what to do. Was she just expressing her frustration? Did it have something to do with Kreig and Alabaster? Did she want my help?

When in doubt, default to sympathy. "I'm sorry. That must be frustrating."

"It is. It IS frustrating."

When sympathy wasn't enough, default to alcohol. "More wine?"

"I also noticed something interesting."

She looked me in the eye then, as I refilled her glass, and flared her actinic glare to life, dazzling and bright, her hair writhing with the barely-restrained energies of her alternate form. I could only stare.

"He didn't squint when he looked at me."

Oh.

Oh shit.

I just froze, wine overflowing the glass, aura overflowing with emotion. Shock-dismay-sadness-fear-anger-anguish-rage-hurt.

"Um."

"How long."

"I."

"How long did you stalk me before we 'ran into each other' on patrol? With you saying all the right things to gain my trust? Doing all the right things? How long?"

"I, I never-"

"I trusted you! Jesus Christ, I let you into my home! I let you hold my Aster!"

"I would never hurt your baby!"

"You lied to me!" She floated to her feet, and I scrambled to stand, hands held between us.

"Purity! I never stalked you. I-"

"You used me. Distracted me with your, your fake vulnerability and bullshit hopes all while picking apart my friends piece by piece. Are you even named Chris? Is that even your real face? God, I was almost going to let you get away with it, too! Just, ignore the fact that two people I worked and fought with are in jail because of you."

"I was going to talk with you about that-"
"Right, because a candlelit picnic is where you were planning on- how did you even know I've dreamed of- *Fuck!*

*Jesus, I really fucked the dog on this one.*

Hitting her with a Gallant-blast of calm would probably only make things worse, wouldn't it. Besides, even if she did give me a chance to speak, what could I say? "I swear I only trolled the Empire as a shapeshifting black man for funsies"? "I didn't stalk you, and I only stalked Othala so I could copy her powers"? "I know I didn't tell you about being a shapeshifter but that was only so you could trust me"?

Fuck it. Go all out.

"Ok. Cards on the table."

"*I'm listening.*" Wow that was still a lot of anger.

"I'm a power copier."

"Ok." I noted her complete lack of surprise. "*So?*" Shit, she was practically hissing.

"I met you the second night of my life with powers. I'd never even been in Brockton Bay before then."

"I have absolutely no way of verifying that." Ok, that was fair, if not what I wanted to hear. "And the things you've said-"

"What, like 'I'm opposed to everything the Empire stands for'? Shit, you told me yourself not to get involved with them. The vulnerability was real, and I still appreciate you being there for me when I was going through hard shit." I spread my arms wide, as if to bare it all. "I *like* you, Purity. Aster is fucking adorable. And, hell, I am clearly not good enough at long-term plans to plot the sort of conspiracy shit I am being accused of!"

I could see her doubt in her expression and her aura, but it was quickly smothered by determination and righteous anger. "The stalking?"

"I want Othala's power." Before she could react, I poked her in the arm. She looked ready to blast me, so I took a step back, hands raised. "Surprise! Pyrokinesis," I said, giving off a nervous chuckle.

Her mouth a flat line, she held a hand up and generated a small fireball hovering over the palm of her hand. She scowled at it as if it had personally offended her, suspicion-doubt-frustration. "Is *that* why you got close to-"

"I didn't have very good control over it at first! Grabbed the first powers I was exposed to. I haven't gotten any new charges in your power in, like, a week."

"Again, I have no way of verifying any of this."

Then I disappeared my shirt and jacket.

"Wha-!"
Okay, so maybe I panicked.

"My tattoos reflect my powers." I quickly held up my wrist, and she had to tear her gaze from my chest to look at her symbol.

Heh. She blushed a little, despite herself. And I think the surprise knocked some of the anger off her aura.

"See? This is you. Three notches. Three charges." I pointed at another symbol. "Othala, four charges, one for the last four days." Then another. "Rune, picked her up today."

"...Are all those circles powers?"

"It's weird, but yeah. I can give you the full rundown later."

"You're assuming there is a later."

"Well, you haven't shot me yet."

"Don't tempt me."

I gave her a rueful grin at that, and she kept a straight face, but I could see some amusement in her aura. Much better than homicidal rage, and pretty much the only thing keeping me calm at this point.

I reappeared my shirt and jacket. As much as I enjoyed distracting her, I was also cold.

"Point is, I was just trying to get her power without being obvious about it. I don't know how Victor made me, and I have absolutely no idea how Schwarz got roped into all this. I only made him up to troll skinheads and make bad decisions with while drunk!"

"You robbed a bank in Boston because you were drunk?"

"Very drunk."

Ok, a bit of air through the nose that was almost a laugh. Progress.

My grin faded. "I think someone is trying to set me up."

"And that's more likely than you being a... a liar?"

"I mean, it's more likely than me being a hypercompetent mastermind."

"There is that."

"Exactly." Wait... "Hey!"

That was definitely a smile. I could work with that.

"So... do you want to eat? I'm starving."

Chapter End Notes
Some of y'all made very convincing points. Some of y'all were encouraging. Thank you all for the feedback.

Either way, here's take two.

Thanks in particular to BlueRose, Awesomesauce12, LacksCreativity, Twei, and Assembler here and on the Cauldron Discord for your help and encouragement.
Day 21.55 : Harmless Pranks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We talked long after the sun set, the food eaten. It was a cool, clear night, and the stars were out in full force.

Eventually, though, the conversation quieted, energy spent, and we sat in comfortable silence.

"Cold?"

"I'm fine." Yeah, no, she was shivering. I pulled out a coat - not the one I'd covered in beer, although that did remind me I still needed to wash that - and draped it over her shoulders. She wrapped it tighter around herself, staring out over the city.

I cupped my hands together, blew some flame into it, then pressed it into a sphere, rolling it around my hands like a contact-juggler with a crystal ball. I caught Kayden glancing at it and smiled a bit, adding a few small flourishes. Firespinning meets fidget toy.

Then I held it out to her, watching her glance between it and me as if to ask if it was ok. I nodded, gesturing with the tiny fireball, then as she reached out a tentative hand to take it I made it explode into a swirl of sparkling embers, beautiful but harmless.

She gasped, gave me a quick dirty look, but then watched the sparks fall and flicker out as they hit the grass, like sun-lit snow.

"Showoff."

I laughed. "Guilty. But I almost never get a chance to use most of my powers." I gave her a warm smile. "Thanks."

Her answering smile was small, heavy with mixed emotions. Even her aura was muted, tired. "It's late. I should go check on Aster."

"Yeah."

She picked herself up off the ground while I swept a hand over the remains of the picnic, pocketing everything into nowhere. Man that was a handy power.

Then I stood, and we hugged, leaning into each other.

"Goodnight, Kayden."

"Goodnight, Chris."

---

"Good mornin', cumstain!"

It was - I glanced at the alarm clock - five in the fucking morning, I swore if this wasn't
an emergency...

"Skidmark?"

"Yeah, you know who dis is."

Oh for fuck's sake. "What do you want?"

"Sheeit, that's the kinda greetin' I get? And here I thought we got all close and shit after Boston. But apparently mister 'wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am' ain't much one for morning after texts, hmm?"

"Fuckin' A, Skidmark, it's five in the morning and I had a really long night..." A thought struck me. "And you ditched me in a hotel in Boston without a ride!"

"You here now, aintcha? 'Sides, you were hittin' it off pretty nice with that butch bitch with the knives 'n shit."

"Butcher XXX."

"Yeah, that's the one. Shit, I thought you and me spitroasting Squealer would've tired yo ass out, but you were up and at 'em like a-

"Wait, what?"

"-fat kid on cake. Anyway, this ain't just a social call."

"Hold on a sec."

"I told you we'd pay you if shit came up, and shit came up. We need some backup for a job. Gimme a call back tonight, we'll talk."

He hung up before I could say anything else.

He was just fucking with me, right?

Right?

---

"Hey Amy! Got a second?"

"Mnrgh."

At least I wasn't the only not-a-morning-person.

"You got a few minutes to give me a medical consult before you go to school?"

There was the sound of some shuffling, and a jaw-splitting yawn. I could almost hear her considering things over the phone, brain still turning over. I'd never asked her for her power, I'd never asked for her to check my health before, and despite a few setbacks she was still pretty happy with testing
Othala's powers.

"Mmyeah ok."

"You're the best, thanks!"

I was waiting for her downstairs in her house, having said good mornings to the adults in the household. They were curious, but when I said it was an Amy thing, they just made me assure them I wouldn't let her be late to school.

Her hair was wet, she had a coffee mug in hand and she was nominally awake, but I still saw bags under her eyes and her expression was bleary as she shuffled in to meet me in the privacy of the dining room.

I held out a hand and she took it automatically. "Need a boost?"

A few seconds of a blank stare, then a shrug. I gave her a dose of Othala's power and she perked up a bit, some light entering her eyes.

But that may also have been the half-empty mug in her hand.

"You're healthy. Is that all?"

"No diseases?" A beat later I hastily added, "Or, like, poisons? Anything at all." Smooth.

"Just some lingering traces of alcohol, marijuana." If someone else had been in the room, it might have been accusatory, but I was fairly certain Amy gave no fucks.

I blew out a sigh. Thank god.

"Thanks, Amy." Biokinesis was great, but I didn't know how fine the resolution was, and, well... it was a relief.

Maybe it had been a mistake to give her a boost, because her eyes were a bit sharper when she looked at me, one eyebrow raised, curiosity-amusement-schadenfreude. I didn't know schadenfreude had a color.

"You're nervous." I laughed not-at-all-nervously and tried to pull my hand back, but she gripped my wrist, a mischievous glint in her eye. "You think this is the first emergency 'medical consult' I've had to do?"

"I don't know what you're talking about haha just had a bit of an upset stomach and got worried probably just me drinking anyway you need to get to class-"

She released her hold with a knowing smirk. "Well, you're STI free, anyway. Try to stay that way." I winced.

"Um. Doctor-patient confidentiality?"

She snorted. "Yeah, yeah. I won't say anything. Just don't make a habit of it."

*Whew.* "You're the best, Amy."
"I know."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to long-time beta and idea-bouncer Hussr for helping me out with the story. Also maroon_sweater for listening despite being jetlagged as fuck.
Day 22.56 : Twinnings

I was awake (and healthy, thank fuck) far earlier than I normally got up.

Purity was probably working, and we'd talked for a long time about heavy stuff. Giving her some space would be good. Plus she said she'd look into whatever their source was that claimed Schwarz was a shapeshifter; she'd let me know when she found anything.

Skidmark wasn't expecting a call back til later. I had to admit, I was concerned. Things had a tendency to get out of hand when he was involved.

Circus was off doing something. Gotta pay the bills somehow.

Uber and Leet were probably still sleeping. Hell, if I'd had a choice in the matter, I would have been too.

Faultline's Crew were still out of town, and it was a bit early to drink anyway. (See? I didn't have a problem. Shut up.)

New Wave was either at work or class, Wards were in school, Protectorate were... heroing. I had no idea how they spent their days, to be frank. It was all a little absurd.

Ugh. Everyone with day jobs and school and shit. I was still too wired from my brief bout of sheer panic to go back to sleep, or patrol really, but that left nothing to do.

Well. There was always shitposting on PHO.

---

Well, searching for "Cauldron", "Cauldr*n", "C******n" and such turned up some rather amusing conspiracy theories. The best were the ones that were amazingly accurate yet completely dismissed by everyone responding. How much of that was just the Internet being the same no matter what dimension you were in, and how much was deliberate Cauldron information warfare? And I supposed any of it lingering around to be found at all was to lead people who were interested in buying vials to Cauldron oh shit time to stop searching.

Quickly turning to other topics, it took some digging, but I found a thread for Jack Slash.

But when I posted (from a dummy account, of course) the theory that he had a secondary Thinker power...

I got a bunch of responses pointing me to previous threads suggesting exactly that, and the general reply of "It gets submitted every year or so. It's not a bad theory but there's too little evidence and nobody is crazy enough to test it."

Damnit. Fucking killjoys.
What else?

So, apparently Case 53 porn was real and actually... kinda hot? Ok! Time to get off the Internet.

And maybe burn my phone.

---

I stood in front of an ordinary, slightly rundown home in the southwest end of the city. A newspaper lay on the front lawn, wrapped in plastic and wet with morning dew. In the driveway sat an older model Prius, and across the street, a family was walking their kids to the bus stop. I checked my phone - yeap, right address - and stepped forward.

To my surprise, I felt a power there.

Half shocked, half paranoid, I paused for a second at the front door, then knocked once, twice.

A thin, tall, dark-skinned man opened the door. Close cropped, coarse hair, trimmed eyebrows, thin lips and a cleft chin. He didn't seem super thin, but then again he wasn't in a bodysuit, he was dressed in a button-up shirt, khakis and a silk tie.

"Ah, Chris. I've been wondering when you were going to stop by." His expression couldn't be more casual, and even his aura was calm-controlled-focused.

"Thomas. I passed by a few days ago, but it seems you weren't home."

"At work, I'm afraid. But please, come in. Coffee?"

I followed him in, noting how he turned his back on me without any noticeable spike or anxiety or fear. "No, thank you."

I grabbed his power.

The world split.

In one timeline I stepped forward, reached out, and dope-slapped him in the back of the head, sending him sprawling.

The look on his face!

In the other timeline I stifled a chortle. He paused, half-turned, one eyebrow raised. Then he gave me a smile that was far more natural and warm-looking than I had ever imagined a man like him could make. "I know, right?"

Damnit, don't make me sympathize with you, Coil. You're still a steaming pile of shit.

His house was nice, if a bit messy. Few personal touches, a bit of dust, a few dishes piled up in the sink, no real sense of style or personality. He led me into the kitchen, gesturing at the kitchen table while he refilled his coffee mug. I sat, and he sat across from me.

He seemed content to let me speak first. That, or he was leading the conversation in another timeline. No weird emotional swings to indicate they were going any better or worse than this timeline,
though.

I might have done the same, except my secondary timeline vanished after about ten seconds. Which
was either because he somehow killed me so abruptly I didn't notice how, or 10% of his power was
way less than I'd anticipated. Still, we would see if it could still prove useful.

I waited til he was mid-sip of coffee. "So, I'm guessing you found my deadman's switch?"

He finished drinking, swallowed, and smacked his lips before replying. "Quite clever. As you
apparently guessed, while I was already considering discarding my civilian identity, the second
deadman's switch was quite a bit more... interesting."

"I thought you'd think so."

"All things considered, I think we would both be happier for her not to get involved."

There was that spike of fear I was expecting, although he suppressed it quite neatly.

"Oh, definitely." In fact, I'd like to put that off as long as possible.

"So, then. Let's talk, as adults. I'm sure we can reach some sort of accord."

I split timelines. "I'm a stupid doodoo butt."

He reacted with alarm. So he had kidnapped me already.

Close, split off again. "I'm the legendary fartmaster."

Alarm again. Attempted torture, eh?

Another timeline closed down, opened up again. "I am the law!"

Surprise, but not alarm. Miss Militia was apparently safe.

I went down the list, checking for the secret passwords I'd decided to give him in timelines I'd
decided were simulations depending on the circumstances.

"Rubber baby buggy bumpers." Oh, that was some fear. It also meant he'd kidnapped Aster. "You
cock!"

In the one true timeline he watched me in silence, occasionally sipping his coffee.

"You know, when you sit there making faces for a straight minute, it's hard not to figure out what
you're doing."

"Oh." Oops.

He waved it off. "Took me some time to get used to it too. Damnit, stop being good-natured about
things, it's freaking me the fuck out."

"So, Chris, what is it you want?" I opened my mouth, and he added "Besides a toilet made of solid
gold."
I scowled, and he covered his smug grin by taking another sip of coffee. So this wasn't the first time we'd had this conversation, either.

Or he was a really good guesser.

"I'm guessing you already know."

"Of course, but one can never be too sure. Please, go ahead." confident-smug-indulgent.

"Well, the things I really dislike you for haven't quite happened yet. So there's plenty of time for you to not do them."

"So you're a precog?"

"Nope. And I'm certain Lisa has told you as much already."

He smirked, not bothering to hide it that time. "Yes, you're quite the source of frustration for her." Oh hey, there was schadenfreude again. If I had to describe it, I'd say it was the color of baby puke on someone you didn't like.

Well. At least we had that much in common.

---

"So. Don't kidnap a powerful precognitive who hasn't triggered yet, don't invite the Travelers to Brockton Bay when they pass through Boston in a few weeks, and do my best to keep the Undersiders, New Wave, Purity and her family, Circus, and Parian alive and happy?"

"Yeap."

"...That's all?" He sounded skeptical, but there was none of it in his aura.

"I mean, I'm not thrilled about your plans to take over Piggot's job, but eh. She needs a vacation anyway. And, now that I remember it, I'll probably try to get that precog into the Wards anyway, so... here's hoping. Oh, and if you do release the Empire's identities, leave out Purity." A thought crossed my mind. "Kaiser, too. I'll take him out myself if I have to, but I don't want Purity caught up in it, even secondhand." Another thought. "And don't pin it on me. Or anyone else on the list."

Finally, "and if I want to add anyone to that list, I'll let you know, and we can hash things out then."

"And Tattletale?"

"What about her?"

"Her plots to kill me?" Amused-confident-smug.

"I mean, I figured you knew."

"Obviously. I just wonder if you have any... input on how I handle it."

"I did say keep the Undersiders alive and happy. And she's far more useful to you not drugged up in your basement."
"I'll take that under consideration. And in exchange, you and I continue our non-aggression pact?"

"Without the attacks-by-proxy, either." He nodded.

Timeline split. "Like telling the Empire where I was going to attack." Concealed but still detectable amusement.

Discard, split. "Like telling the Empire Schwarz was a shapeshifter." He actually fucking smiled, the bastard.

Well. I could tell Purity to stop digging, at least.

"You're doing it again."

"Damnit."

"You'll get better with practice," he said reassuringly. "If you can, arrange visits half an hour apart in different timelines. It's much safer that way."

Well, at least he wasn't aware the limits of my power quite yet. That was good to know.

He led me to his front door, opening it for me then standing to the side. "A pleasure doing business with you, Chris."

"Surprisingly, likewise." He was still a creepy piece of shit, but most of the terrible things he would still probably do in his timelines were just simulations. Like someone playing a particularly vile game of the Sims; fucked up, but not as bad as the real thing.

He grinned.

In one timeline, I kneed him in the junk.

In the other, we shook hands.

His smile widened. "I'd try to conceal what you're doing in other timelines a bit better, while you're at it."

"Damnit."

Chapter End Notes

Has... has anybody just tried talking things out with him before?

Thanks to Husr, BlueRose, maroon_sweater, DasStan, and the lovely fact-checkers in the Cauldron Discord for all their help.
I walked back to the bus stop and processed that conversation for a bit.

Was Coil actually gonna stop trying to kill me in simulated timelines?

Probably not.

Trying to get leverage on me so he can safely disable my deadman's switches?

Definitely not.

So what did I actually accomplish?

Well, hopefully I would get fewer attack-by-proxies. I could always ask Tattletale in a disposable timeline to check...

Oh. Speaking of Tattletale, once I got home, I had some calls to make.

But first a shower. A really long shower.

---

"What."

Oh hey, yet another not-a-morning person.

"Good morning, sunshine."

"Ugh. You sound pleased with yourself. What did you..."

"I'll save you the trouble. I talked with your boss, expanded the terms of our non-aggression pact."

Silence for a moment.

"So you're not interested in helping me out." I opened my mouth to speak, but she interrupted. "Not directly, anyway. You can still tell me things. Your not-precog thing. Because you know how it happened... the first time?" Her voice grew louder as I pulled the phone away, shrouded myself in Grue's darkness. "No no come on I was getting somewhere! Just tell me, in this alternate timeline, this crazy-ass precog, did I at least pull it off?"

I considered it for a moment. "Barely. Mostly. You missed some important details that I hopefully took out of the picture."

"But I got him?"
Technically Skitter did, but... "Yeah. Coil died."

"...Coil?" She sounded genuinely confused. "Coil's not my boss."

...

WAT.

But... but even Coil said... Was this some weird-ass alternate universe? Or was she just-

"Pffft!"

And then she burst into laughter.

"Oh you bitch."

She continued laughing, out of breath.

Alright, it was a little funny.

After a minute, she settled down enough to speak again. "Ah, that was great, thanks. I needed that. Anyway, from someone whose power you apparently already know can lead down unhelpful tangents, let this be a lesson to you - don't rely on your powers too much."

Yeah, ok, that was fair.

"Thanks."

"Anytime. Except when I'm sleeping. Like now. Thanks for the news, now fuck off."

" Fucking off. Bye Tats."

Actually, sleep sounded pretty good. Still a bit too wired, though. How did Noctis capes deal with this? Come to think of it, I knew exactly who to ask - and I might as will kill two birds with one mortar.

"Hello Fax."

"Hey MM. You busy?"

I can hear shuffling papers. "Not particularly. What's on your mind?"

"Ehh, couple things. Like, how do Protectorate heroes spend all their time? Tell me you don't spend most of your day in meetings. I don't think my heart could take that sort of disappointment."

I swore I could hear her smile over the phone. "I'm sorry to say that meetings are a large part of it. Paperwork, too."

"You poor bastards."
She chuckled. "It's not so bad. There's also patrolling, of course. Console duty. PR, Image, public engagement events, training, exercise, drills, planning, Tinkering for the Tinkers... there are opportunities for advanced education, as well, usually online courses. I'm learning French, and JavaScript."

"Which one's worse?"

"French. JavaScript actually makes sense."

"Ha!"

"So, any particular reason you're asking?" Her voice was carefully neutral, and I tried to figure out- oh. Oh.

"Nah, just got woken up way too early and everybody was busy. Work or school I understood, but... yeah. Just curious."

"That's understandable. If you have any other questions about the Protectorate, I'd be happy to answer them, of course." I'm sure.

"Actually, I read something that might be of interest to you."

"Oh?"

"The mayor's niece Dinah is, or will be in the near future, a powerful precog."

"Um." I could hear her shifting in her seat, her attention sharpened. "Where did you - you said you read this?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss my sources. Suffice to say, someone should keep an eye out for her."

She pressed for more information; I gave none. Eventually she gave up, told me she'd look into it, and the call ended.

Welp. That was taken care-

Nope, not tempting fate like that. Gonna check in on that every once in a while.

Who said I couldn't learn?

---

Ugh. So many phone calls.

I'd just send a text.

"So I've been looking into that suspicious rumor business."
And then she called me.

DAMNIT KAYDEN.

"Good morning Kayden."

"Good morning... I wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon."

"Yeah, well, you know me, early worm and bright and eager and ugh I got woken up at five am and couldn't go back to sleep."

"Oof. You poor thing."

"It's not great. Anyway, I've been digging around and might have a suspect. Are you somewhere private?"

A pause, then I heard a door close. "I am."

"Pretty sure it's Coil."

"Oh?"

"He's got spies everywhere, he's a scheming fuck, and setting the Empire against me is win-win in his book. Either I take-" wow, almost said you "-them out, or they take me out. Either way he's down an enemy."

"...Why does he see you as an enemy?"

Um. Think fast!

"...Remember at brunch when I said I was opposed to everything the Empire stood for?"

She huffed a bit. "Yes."

"Same deal with Coil."

"I haven't heard of you- does he even employ capes?"

"Yyyyyeah, but it's complicated. We've got a thing."

"A thing."

"Yeah."

"Chris."

"Ok, ok, it's just..." How to explain. "He's got spies, he's got Thinkers, he IS a Thinker, and he plays dirty. He's not afraid to use secret identities against someone."

Silence for a moment. "He'd risk that?"

"His powers minimize risk."
"What *are* his powers? Some people aren't sure he *has* any."

"A kind of precog. But the more you know the more at risk you are."

She considered that for a moment. "And you think he'd... what, he'd out people in the Empire?"

Did it before. Would do it. Did it before in the future... fucking tenses. "It's something I think he would do."

"That's... really bad."

"Yeah."

"I... I can't let anything happen to Aster..."

"Kayden. I'll do what I can to protect you both, ok? Theo, too."

A pause. She didn't say she didn't trust me. She didn't say she could protect herself. She didn't say that she didn't think I could keep them safe. She didn't say she was afraid.

"Thank you." She sighed, sounding exhausted. "Is... is there anything else?"

"Not right now. We'll talk more later?"

"Ok."

And then she hung up.

Chapter End Notes

So much YAPPING.

Thanks to BlueRose and Technetium43 for idea-bouncing.
I sat in a coffee shop and dreamed.

Wrapped around my bicep - hidden by my disguise - was the snake forever consuming itself. On its head, now, was a white snake head on black, in a white ring.

Between scrolling through PHO, I took a bite from an overpriced (but delicious) salted caramel toffee coffee cake. Crumbs fell down my blouse, ending up right between my cleavage, *just* where it'd be really awkward to fish out in public. I sighed.

I blasted through the glass to race towards an office building. First floor. Screams, more shattered glass, shocked secretary, a few banked corners, nothing.

I shifted uncomfortably, trying to get the crumbs to fall out of my bra without being obvious about it. I could feel them stuck to my skin.

I blasted through the glass to race towards an office building. Second floor. Screams, more shattered glass, terrified office workers, cubicles, a few banked corners, nothing.

I picked up my phone, placed it in my purse, then shifted it over my shoulder and walked to the bathroom.

I blasted through the glass to race towards an office building. Third floor. Screams, more shattered glass, terrified office workers, cubicles, conference rooms, a few banked corners, nothing.

I closed the door behind me, reached under my bra, fished out the crumbs, and flicked them angrily at the trash can. Man these clothes were uncomfortable.

I blasted through the door, hurtling through the coffee shop and smashing through the glass to race towards an office building. Fourth floor. Screams, more shattered glass, terrified office workers, private offices, conference rooms, a few banked corners, nothing.

I returned to my seat, flashed a slightly-embarrassed smile at the barista who witnessed the whole series of events while cleaning the cappuccino machine. She nodded in sympathy, but her aura spoke slightly of... *jealousy-schadenfreude*? I supposed I was somewhat better endowed than she was... kind of amusing, though. When it came to breasts, *this wasn't even my final form*.

I blasted through the glass to race towards an office building. Fifth floor. Screams, more shattered glass, terrified office workers, yet more cubicles, conference rooms, a few banked corners, nothing.
I sighed. Ten seconds was really not a long time. This wasn't working.

Resisting the urge to look in my main timeline, I instead focused on my phone, where a flame war was developing on whether Mouse Protector was ripping of Deadmau5 or vice-versa. In another timeline, I stared out the window at the Medhall main office building.

Maybe... my presumptions were interfering with my 'wander' ability? I had assumed after their trap failed that they would keep Othala and Victor in a safe location, where they could better monitor the ins and outs of possible shapeshifters. On the other hand, I had no idea where they actually lived; for all I knew they could be miles away, sitting in their red-and-black-themed living room sipping virgin-blood from inferior-skull-shaped goblets, laughing at my attempts to track them down.

The problem was, Medhall looked entirely legit. Because it was, for the most part. I didn't expect to see secret swastika-marked switches leading to hidden torture chambers and an elevator down to the underground Hitler shrine. I was sure that most of the employees had no idea their CEO was a manipulative, egotistical, emotionally abusive bastard.

Ok, they probably suspected as much - he was a CEO after all - but they probably didn't know he led the Empire 88 as well.

They even had multiple office buildings in the city. This was just their main one. And I was starting to feel bad about all the times I made the barista scream when I smashed the coffee shop's front window.

With a sigh, I polished off the last of the coffee cake and stood, making my way towards the front door. Back to the drawing board, I supposed-

And then two cars emerged from the underground parking garage. Big black SUVs with tinted windows. They paused to let traffic pass, then zoomed past, engines rumbling heartily.

As they passed, I sensed and reflexively grabbed a very familiar power.

Welp. There was charge five for Othala. Suckers!

I licked my fingers clean of remaining coffee cake crumbs with a smile, causing a nearby cyclist to hit a parked car. Oops. Had to be careful with that. She didn't seem injured, though, so it was fine.

So. Who was next?

---

Next was a nap.

It was a good nap. The sun was low in the sky by the time I woke up.

Fuck, this was gonna throw off my whole sleep cycle, wasn't it?

*Dammit, Skidmark.*

Speaking of which...
I put off calling him by meeting with Browbeat.

But absolutely nothing exciting happened there, so...

---

I put off calling him by stopping by the Dallon home, where New Wave was planning patrols for the night and weekend. Friday nights were, understandably, busy nights for crime and people on the street. They were also, understandably, mostly the responsibility of the adults, as the kids had plans. Or at least better things to do on a Friday night than patrol in costume.

"Giant patrol?"

Neil looked at me with some amusement. "Normally I get partnered with a flyer, for versatility. I suppose you qualify."

"Plus this is my last day I can use Menja and Fenja's powers without advertising the fact I can keep powers for more than four days."

He nodded. "Ok. Carol, Sarah?"

They exchanged glances, concerned-focused-cautious. "I think we can manage patrols like that," Sarah answered after a few moments. "Neil, keep an eye on Chris. Chris," she turned her patented mom-glare my way, "you will be representing New Wave while patrolling together. Please behave accordingly."

"Understood." I was tempted to crack a joke or otherwise let my sarcasm flow, but I held my tongue. Better to keep good relations with New Wave than indulge my sense of humor. They wouldn't appreciate my wit while they were all 'srs bsnss' anyway.

Mollified, they altered the remaining patrol routes to adjust.

Giant patrol started in an hour.

In the meanwhile...

*Sigh.*

I stopped by my motel, took a deep breath, and called Skidmark.

Chapter End Notes

He really doesn't want to make that call.
Day 22.59 : Surprise!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Skidmark."

"Motherfaxer."

*Sigh. Let's get this over with. "What do you need?"

"Yeah, that's what I like to hear."

"Not a promise!" I interrupted. "Just hearing you out."

"Yeah yeah I got it." There was some shuffling on the line, like he was moving elsewhere. A door slammed. "So here's the fuckin' deal. You know Accord?"

Shit.

"I've heard of him."

"Right. Well, apparently he's looking to make the city his bitch. Talkin' big game, gettin' her nice an' drunk, then-"

"Following!"

"The shitnugget is making a run on my fucking ops."

I thought about that for a moment. Why would Accord want anything of Skidmark's? The prime territory would be, dunno, Empire?

Wait, he said ops. His legitimate businesses?

"What kind of ops?"

"He's buying out my goddamn cab companies!" He practically hissed out the words; I could almost see his rage aura over the phone.

That... *did* sound like something Accord would do.

"That sucks, but what do you want me to do about it?"

"A cocksucker like that has paperwork. A trail. I've sent people, but they lock their shit up tighter than a virgin's twat. You do your 'Apu the master shapechanger' bullshit and sneak in. I'll tell you what to look for."

*Ehhhh.*

While I had to admit it was a lot more subtle than I'd expected to come from Skidmark, I didn't
exactly want to put my head in Accord's crosshairs. Everything Coil would do, Accord would do just as bad, except I didn't think I could get the latter off my ass by sitting down over coffee. He'd probably kill me the first time I put down a drink without a coaster, never mind the kind of death traps I could expect if I tried to knock on his front door.

Plus I kinda respected the guy. For being an anal retentive madman, he did put together a good scheme. Even after his death his contingencies and plans were still used by the good guys to keep the world from falling apart. And he had style.

I didn't want anything to do with this.

Skidmark must have noticed my reticence. "I'll give you a grand for trying, another if you come back with the shit I'm asking for. Easy money."

"I'm gonna have to pass on this one, Skidmark."

"Fucking- two kay on delivery."

"It's not about the money, it's about making enemies I don't need."

"You're a motherfucking shape changer!"

"And someone's already got the Empire after me for that! Schwarz is blown, man. I'm lucky if they don't figure out that's me, too." Shit, one already had.

I could practically hear him chewing on his anger for a minute, breathing harsh and ragged on the other end of the line. Making an enemy of Skidmark wasn't on my to-do list either.

I had an idea.

"What about rideshare?"

"Fuckin' what."

I tried to think if I'd seen any sort of Uber (the non-cape kind) or Lyft since I'd arrived. Nothing rang a bell.

"It's an app, for your phone. Lets you request drivers..."

Skidmark listened with surprisingly thoughtful silence as I tried to convey the concept of a crowd-sourced cab company from first principles.

"...Of course you'll need some developers, but the concept itself isn't too difficult-"

"I know people," he snapped out, but there was no anger in his voice anymore. "And I've got the drivers already... could work."

"And it'd be a big 'fuck you' to the cab industry."

"It would be. The fuck did you get this shit from?"

"Hey, you have your secrets, I have mine."
In the end I managed to avoid actively pissing off Accord or Skidmark. Who said I couldn't diplomacy?

Of course, I may have just set off an underground economic arms race between two supervillains, but that was future-me's problem.

I mean, fuck that guy. What had he ever done for me?

---

"So what sports do you follow? You seem like a soccer fan."

Oh no.

"Ah, can't say I follow any, really."

"Really?"

"Really."

Here it comes.

"Thank god."

Wait, what?

"Huh?"

Manpower gave me a sidelong look as we strolled down a relatively peaceful street. Less activity than I'd expect for a Friday night. "You know how tall I was before I got my powers?"

"Five foot six?"

He snorted. "Six foot six."

You bastard. "So?"

"So everyone always expected me to play basketball. Or join the swimteam. Or do cross-country."

I looked down at him, one eyebrow raised, curiosity piqued. "What did you do?"

"AV Club."

"...Really?"

He shrugged. It was an expansive gesture. "I've always been a fan of movies. Wanted to be a screenwriter. You know I got one of the first Radio-Television-Film degrees Brockton Bay University offered?"

"Huh."
"But because of my size, the only thing anyone ever wanted to talk to me about was sports. I mean, I went to Victoria's basketball games, and I can fake it to be polite, but otherwise I've never even been to a Boomers game, and they practically give those tickets out for free."

I grinned behind my mask. "Glad I didn't try to fake it for your benefit or we would've been trapped in a conversation neither of us wanted."

He chuckled, then sighed a bit. "Never enough time to write, though."

"I know the feeling."

His head perked up slightly. Well, he had to to look at me. "You write?"

I made a so-so gesture with a hand. "Eh, I dabble. Actually, I-"

"Sorry, hold that thought," he said, holding up a hand and pausing. I slowed to a stop beside him. "Does it seem quiet to you?"

Ok, I couldn't resist. "Too quiet?"

"Normally this street has at least some gang presence. Even if the ABB have been cleared out, this is still contested territory. Someone should be here, even just as a token representation."

Suddenly alert, I looked around as well. "Yeah, I can't see anyone at all."

The streets were dark, few streetlamps on, and few business still up to illuminate the streets. It was a normal mixed-usage neighborhood, some apartments, some small mom-and-pop restaurants and niche stores. Even the 24-hour laundromat lights were off, but there were still a few lights on in the homes, so there wasn't a power outage... And then I heard it.

Giggling.

Creepy-ass grown man giggling, emerging from an alleyway. A figure stepped out from the darkness, covered in random pieces of armor, assorted pieces of scrap. Spikes, blades, spines, unidentifiable pieces of metal. Teeth, eyes, dessicated body parts and bones could just be seen in the dim light, woven into his costume. He stopped, slightly hunched over as if bracing himself against recoil, glee-anticipation-bloodlust.

Oh fuck.

And then there were many.

Chapter End Notes

Time to fight a crime spree!

Thanks to BlueRose, Kittius, and the fine folks at #fact-checking on the Cauldron Discord for idea-bouncing.
"Save yourself!" I called out, up to my elbows in Spree. "I'll hold him off!" I gestured, facing away from the member of the Teeth.

Manpower just turned and ran, long legs eating up the distance.

I could see Spree's malicious glee and satisfaction in his aura and manic smile - what I could tell of it between rapid-fire clone launches, the man-sized idiots stumbling over each other to swarm me like a malevolent horde of giant toddlers. Or, relative to me, just toddlers.

Visibly struggling, I threw a few of them back with slow, broad swings, most of them too stupid by that point to climb back to their feet. Instead they were trampled by further clones, each slightly different; some wielded guns, although any gunfire seems accidental; others had clubs, axes and knives.

"Argh!" I called out, one of the clones having accidentally headbutted me in the crotch. "There's too many of them!" That one got stomped, rather viciously. Maybe I needed to add a cup to my costume. I mean, biokinesis, but still.

It was weird seeing all of those clones with less emotions than Theo watching WWII documentaries with his dad. It had only been a few days with my new empathy-sight, but I'd grown accustomed to it; the way the ever-growing crowd thronged and rushed like the tide seemed surreal without the accompanying glow of emotion surrounding all those faces. Spree himself, though, shone with confidence-amusement-satisfaction as I took staggering step after step backwards, overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

When he seemed to reach the point where satisfaction caught up to caution, and looked to be ready to turn and leave me to the meat-pile, I called out again, "No! It's not over yet!" Grunting and groaning, I made some headway against the waist-high flood of idiots and gave belated chase. The originator grinned, vicious-glee-smug, and threw out another machine-gun-spray of idiots-

-which was abruptly cut off as Manpower slammed the dumpster over him from behind, sealing him in an impromptu cell.

Rapid-fire thumps tapered off quickly as the clones smashed into the metal walls inches in front of Spree, not quite quickly enough to do more than dent the metal but enough to fill the available space rather quickly.

Grinning, I floated up, letting the infinite idiot works slide off my shields like water off a duck. "Nice job!"

Manpower answered my grin and returned my thumbs-up, one elbow leaning heavily on the dumpster to keep it pinned. "Thanks! You're a pretty good distraction!"

I landed past the worst of the slowly-writhing meat pile and helped him flip the dumpster upright, quickly slamming the lid shut before more than two or three high-velocity morons sprayed out. It
looked kinda cramped in there; Spree hadn't been crushed yet, but I was a bit worried he'd asphyxiate. "I'm just glad you got the plan from that quick gesture."

He shrugged modestly. "Experience." Then he gestured at the bowed-out dumpster, still thumping. "We should get him to the PRT quickly."

"Yeah. Magic carpet ride?"

"...Ok."

I surrounded him in a force bubble, hauled the dumpster over my shoulder with one hand firmly keeping the lid closed, and took off into the air.

As we left the street behind, I spared a glance backwards. "So..."

"Hmm?"

"Do we just leave them there to rot, or...?"

"PRT's problem, not ours."

"Nice."

I was glad. That was a lot of corpses.

---

"Fax."

"Director."

I stood at ease, hands tucked behind my back, back straight, feet shoulder width apart and firmly fixed on the ground. Director Piggot seemed to inspect me, face blank, but her aura read intent-suspicious-distrusting.

Standing in a much more polished at-ease beside her desk was Miss Militia, emotions muted.

Piggot asked me questions about the patrol, about Spree, about the area he was in. I answered honestly, trying to keep my responses short, informative and to-the-point. After that was done, however, we sat (well, I stood) in a somewhat tense silence. I didn't get the impression I was dismissed, but it wasn't quite a power play, either. Judging from her aura, she was simply deciding on something. I could be patient. Sometimes.

After a long moment, she spoke.

"You've gone on joint patrols and missions. You've asked for help from Miss Militia off-duty, which I approved. You've even encouraged Purity, a known criminal, to cooperate with the Protectorate. Why have you refused invitations to join?"

"Personal reasons, ma'am." I had wondered about Miss Militia agreeing to my 'off the books' mission.
She steepled her fingers together on her desk, displeased with my answer, yet showing nothing on her expression.

"I hope you understand we have extended you a great deal of trust."

It was hard saying nothing under her gimlet stare.

It was also hard realizing that, despite my respect for the woman, I was largely what she hated in parahumans. Someone with power but no responsibility or accountability, answering to no one, and more or less taking advantage of my abilities to do whatever I wanted.

Refusing to answer questions about my powers probably didn't help. The fact that, despite all of that, she still had what was apparently a hands-off, low-pressure policy towards me, even indulging my requests to borrow powers or capes themselves... well, I already knew she was willing and capable of making hard decisions.

"We have no record of villains matching your description, but with your alleged powerset it seems unlikely we would. I will inform you that a questionable past is not a hard bar against joining the Protectorate, although considering your efforts in turning Purity, I'm sure you're already aware of this."

"I am."

"Which leads me to wonder what those personal reasons could be."

"They're personal, ma'am."

She stared at me for a few more moments, my attention fixed on her aura. Disappointment—distrust—acceptance.

"You've done good things, Fax. On behalf of the Protectorate East-North-East, I want to thank you for your service to the community. We may ask for your help in the near future in dealing with the Teeth. I hope that you will continue fighting alongside us."

I gave her a curt nod. After a short pause, she returned it.

Miss Militia escorted me out. Neil was waiting for me, greeting her with a warm smile, which she returned. "How was the debrief?"

"Could've been worse."

"With Director Piggot? I believe it."

I gave him a rueful grin, and if I didn't have empathic vision I would have missed Miss Militia's slightly rolled eyes.

---

"Yo, Fax."

Alex only called me by my cape name in mixed company, and judging from the sounds of explosions in the background...
"Hey Circus. Video games with the nerds?"

"Yeah. I was with them for work stuff anyway, figured I might as well."

"Work stuff?"

"Yeah, work stuff."

_Pfft. Fine then, keep your secrets. And by keep your secrets, I mean SPILL._

"Remaking It? Silent Hill? Are you a bad guy for their next Ninja Gaiden video?"

"I don't know half the things you're referring to."

"And I'm sure they'd be sorely disappointed to hear that."

"Anyway, you coming or not?"

_Ugh, fine. I'll just keep bothering you in person til you satisfy my curiosity. "Yeah, yeah, I'm heading over."_

They didn't bother to say goodbye, simply hanging up instead.

I grinned, pivoted in mid-air and set course for the nerd-lair.

...Maybe they were gonna be Harley Quinn for a Batman video?

Catwoman? Spiderman?

_I had to know._

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience, y'all. Had a long, long weekend, but I'm happy to get back into writing again.

Thanks to Kittius, BlueRose, Twei and profdeadpool for idea-bouncing and support. And to all y'all readers who keep coming back for more, and not pressuring me about it even when I miss a few days. I appreciate it.
I looked east, over the water, where the sky was just starting to lighten with the first hints of dawn. Pink light filtered down to give the rusted hulks of ships a rosy tint. The air was cool, the breeze refreshing, and all I could think was "Goddamnit Skidmark."

Fucker threw off my sleep schedule something awful.

It was times like this I wished I drank coffee.

I sighed, descending, aiming for nowhere in particular. Circus didn't end up telling me what she was working on, and Uber and Leet weren't any help either. They were also confused by some of my guesses - games that never came out on Bet, I supposed, and either didn't happen on Aleph or weren't imported. Yet another reminder that this wasn't my universe.

It was with some small surprise that I sensed a power beneath me when I landed. I supposed that counted as wandering, didn't it? Good morning Othala!

I grabbed her power and was surprised to notice that I still felt their power available. Impulsively, I grabbed two more charges in it. Hell yeah. Maybe I'd grabbed more charges in my meta-power when I wasn't paying attention? I'd have to check my tattoos once in privacy to be sure.

Looking around, I was also surprised to see them hiding in this unassuming apartment complex I found myself on top of. Tar roof, dotted with vents. There were a few Empire tags, so I was presumably still in their territory - perhaps this was a safehouse? Safety in obscurity? Heh. Didn't do her much good. Still, it wasn't a good idea to linger. I needed to separate Fax from the nameless stalker. If I moved quickly enough, it could just seem like a coincidence.

Still, I felt uneasy. Something was off about that rooftop; maybe it was the lack of posted guards? But if they were trying to lay low, it would have drawn attention. Maybe it was just how early it was, the silence eerie; even traffic had yet to pick up for the morning, although that might have just been because it was a Saturday... Regardless, I took off towards my hotel, taking a circuitous route to throw off any followers.

---

Panacea glared at me blearily over the rim of her coffee cup. That sort of chemical dependency was probably unhealthy, but who was I to criticize her for that?

She took my offered hand, accepting my Othala boost readily, perking up slightly.

"Still disease free."

I licked my lips, and she raised an eyebrow, sensing my nervousness. "What?"

"Look, I know you don't do brains, but you can still scan them, right?"
She tensed, giving me a hard look.

"Just... check, please. Anything new. Anything weird."

She withdrew her hand, and I was tempted to hold my grip, but relented.

"What's this about?"

Then Vicky opened the door, floating into the dining room. She took one glance at my face, then at her sister's, and broke out in a smug grin. "Emergency physical?"

"Yeah." Amy was still eyeing me suspiciously.

I blew out a sigh.

"Geeze Fax, keep it in your pants why don't you."

"It... it was an accident."

"Uh huh. Suuuure." Her grin only grew wider. "I hear that happens to men when they get older."

"It not like-! Oh for fuck's sake."

I rolled up my right sleeve, revealing the new tattoo.

Not all of them were creatures of myth and legend. Some were more... modern. In this case, the illithid, mouth-tentacles curling and grasping, had a new symbol on its forehead. A black spiral, expanding as it curved outward, wrapped in a dark green ring with three notches.

Amy and Victoria looked at it curiously. "What's that?"

"I'm not sure-"

"You don't know your own tattoos?" Victoria interrupted, still smirking.

I rolled my eyes. "It's an illithid. A mindflayer. From-"

"Dungeons and Dragons?"

Victoria and I both looked at Amy. She flushed, crossed her arms.

"I don't have to explain myself to you."

I shrugged slightly. "Yeah. It is." A conversation for later, maybe. "But the circle, that's new."

"Whose power is it?" Victoria reached out as if to poke the spiral with a finger.

"...I think it's the Butcher."

Her hand yanked back as if stung. Even Amy pulled back, Victoria shifting to put herself between us. I groaned, rolled down my sleeve, one hand on my forehead.
"You think?"

"I was wandering around like I do for Othala and I thought I'd found her. I didn't realize I was wrong till I checked my ink!"

"So you didn't see them?"

I shook my head. "But I know the Teeth are in town."

"It might not be them, though?" Amy sounded hopeful, for my sake. Both of them were a blur of fear-anxiety-dread-worry. Victoria was tinted with anger as well.

"Maybe."

"Get to the point. Are you hearing voices?" Victoria, asking the hard questions.

I shook my head. "No. But I don't know how immediate it would be."

"You're sure?"

I stopped, quirking my head to listen. No voices. "I'm sure."

"Did you get any new powers?"

"Um."

"Chris."

"I don't exactly want to test dying!"

"Did you get any of the other powers?"

"Not... that I'm aware of?" No vein-vision, no ability to create weapons out of miscellaneous materials... I touched the table, but nothing jumped out at me, figuratively or literally. I was relieved, both because it was a sign I wasn't doomed to insanity, and because Carol would have killed me for ruining the polished mahogany.

Amy spoke up, a bit hesitantly. "The first Butcher had... what, a rage aura?"

Victoria was already pulling it up on her phone. We spent a tense minute in silence before she shook her head. "Pain projection. And apparently a Brute power."

We stood there for a moment, thinking.

"Well, the Brute power's gonna be hard to test."

Victoria looked a little disappointed she couldn't justify punching me.

We exchanged glances. "Um," I began hesitantly, "do I have permission to..."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Give me your best shot- OW! Fuck, that stung." Her arms folded around herself protectively, floating a few inches up and back on reflex. Amy backed up behind her, eyes
alert, calculating.

I looked at my hand where I had held it up, gesturing at her. My fingers tingled, like I'd just banged my elbow, a skittering charge that had leapt from my outstretched fingertips to Victoria.

Shit.

Shit shit shìt.

Chapter End Notes

Oops.

Thanks to Kittius for idea-bouncing.
"Good morning Fax." Miss Militia always sounded completely awake, no matter what time I called. Freakin' Noctis capes.

"Hey MM." I opened my mouth, then closed it.

"...Is everything alright?" Bah, hesitated too long. I just had to go and say it.

"I may have accidentally ran into the Butcher today."

I could almost hear her attention sharpening over the phone. "Are you hurt? Do you need -"

"I'm fine, they never even saw me. But my power..."

"...Oh."

"Yeah."

A tense silence.

"Are you experiencing any -"

"No voices. I think I got Butcher One's power. The pain projection and... well. I can only assume." That was an awkward conversation with the Dallon matriarch, once the kids left for school. Victoria had tried to be optimistic, and Carol seemed resolute, but I was just... wobbly. Uncertain.

"I see." A slight shifting sound. "Fax, I know you've resisted coming in for power testing before, but I really think under the circumstances it would be... prudent. To have Protectorate analysts take a look at your power."

"Panacea checked me out. And Brandish and the rest of New Wave have already agreed to keep a close eye on my personality and behaviors in case any... new influences..."

"I really think it would be a good idea to come in. We could keep you safe for a few days until the power faded, make sure you aren't a danger to yourself or others."

The idea of four days in M/S confinement was... unappealing. Pretending I'd lost all my powers at the end of that was both too much work and unlikely to succeed, considering how closely I'd be watched. And then the fact that I kept powers would come out, and then I'd catch official interest, and then shit would escalate.

Of course, that's assuming a parahuman potentially becoming the next Butcher wouldn't be enough to draw the eyes of the larger organization already.

Ugh. Stupid Butcher.
"I have people keeping a close eye on me. If I start showing signs of behavioral changes, hear voices, get weird impulses, then I'll come in, and welcome the help."

I half-expected her to continue arguing, but perhaps she heard the finality in my tone. Or maybe she'd just have people watch me covertly, PRT squad on standby. Well, not MM, but I could see Piggot doing as much, for sure.

She sighed slightly, the sound muffled. "Alright. I trust you to take care of yourself." Huh. Why did that sound so strange? "But please keep your PRT phone on you and call us if you need anything at all."

"I will."

A smaller pause. "I will have to inform-"

"Oh yeah, of course. I wouldn't have called you and asked you to keep this a secret. Just... maybe keep it on the down low?"

"I'll do what I can." No promises, but I trusted Miss Militia to at least try to be discreet so not every mole in the PRT would have it in their reports by lunchtime.

"Thanks."

"Of course. Good luck, Fax."

---

"You've reached the voicemail box of..." I sighed. "Hey Kayden, it's me. Give me a call back."

---

I wondered who else to call. Circus? Too likely they'd just pass it on to Coil. Same reason I couldn't ask Tattletale to confirm... well, anything ever, really. Coil would figure it out next time they had me killed anyway; I'd let that be a fun surprise. Uber and Leet? Nah. Parian? Pfft. I guess I'd just try to reach Purity again later.

God, this was giving me flashbacks to my HIV scare. Stupid false positives. 'I can still live a full, healthy life. I just need to be more careful. Remember kids, practice safe power-siphoning, otherwise you never know what you might pick up.'

I had the urge to go flying. Boston wasn't too far away, was it?

...Was that me thinking, or the Butcher's influence?

...Maybe I'd just stay put.

I didn't feel the urge to start wearing skulls, at least.

---
The bottom of Brockton Bay was dark, cold, and quiet. Glory Girl's shield made me waterproof; who knew? And here I was looking forward to trying to figure out gills with Browbeat's power. I just... didn't have any trouble breathing, and I wasn't sure which power was responsible. Yet another thing I wasn't sure about with my power.

Maybe I needed to grab more Meta charges. Just... chill for a bit.

Heh. Chill. It was cold as hell down here.

Oh hey, a fish.

...

Ok, I wasn't good at this quiet reflection thing. I was already itching to pull out my phone, check PHO.

The relative silence was nice; I hadn't realized just how much noise I was surrounded by in my day-to-day life, and the distant rumble of boat engines was more like rushing waves than traffic. But with nothing to do but listen to my own thoughts, I got restless. At least I was still fairly confident I was alone in my head. No strange impulses, no voices. Even at 30%, I'd probably hear something.

I'd stay down for a bit longer, just to be sure.

---

It was dark.

There were distant noises, muffled words. Talking? A sense of movement.

I tried to move, to surface...

Nothing happened.

I couldn't move my body.

Taking a deep breath did nothing. No sound came out of my mouth.

I had no mouth.

I couldn't even feel my heart beat, even though it should have been racing.


Distant screams.

I couldn't move.

I couldn't breathe.

* I couldn't scream.*
I woke up screaming, bubbles streaming out of my mouth. Rocketing upwards, I broke through the surface like a missile, reaching towards the sun.

Gasping, I spun around, seeing the Rig, seeing the city, staring at the sun low over the skyline to the west. I flexed my fists, heart pounding, the taste of salt and copper in my mouth. I could... I could feel my body, inside and out. Powers answered my call. I was alive.

I was alive.

Chapter End Notes

A solipsistic nightmare.

Thanks to Kittius for inspiration.
Day 23.63 : Dancing Queen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dinner was awkward.

I didn't know whether to be appreciative Carol trusted me around her family or accepting that she did it to keep a closer eye on me and my behaviors. Victoria bounced back quickest, keeping conversation from dying completely. Amy was quiet, as was... Flashbang. The fuck was his name? Right! Mark.

That was expected, at least. Poor dude. I hoped he took his meds. Maybe I'd talk to him about it; depression was a soul-killing disease. Surely they could afford counseling for him?

Not something to bring up at dinner, of course. Maybe I could take him aside afterward.

Still, it was something of a relief when my phone buzzed.

---

"Why did I agree to this?"

Alex grinned, pearly white teeth flashing in the dark. "Because you were being a moody little shit, and you like being pretty."

I frowned at him, then looked over at Sabah, who quickly moved her eyes back up to my face. Well. At least half of what he said was true. Sabah smiled, a little uncertainly, clutching her... clutch. Tiny purse thing. Almost wringing it in her hands. Nervous-excited-aroused.

My frown deepened, concerned. "Should I be frumpier?"

"What? No! I mean..."

"She means she knows you're not what you look like but you're also not the only one who enjoys you being pretty," Alex chimed in, smug-amused-excited. Then, in a lower voice, "Or the only one being a moody little shit."

Sabah grumbled something I couldn't hear, but her aura flared slightly with embarrassment.

"Come on ladies, the night awaits." He held out his arms and Sabah and I slipped our hands through his, flanking him with cheesecake. He looked dapper, well-fitting button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a smart bowtie at his neck.

Sabah wore a little black dress, matching patterned tights and modest heels. I wore a slinky little red number with completely unnecessary pushup and four inch matching pumps, both just dark enough not to stand out too much against my ebony skin. My hair was short, spiky, and styled with the combined talents of Alex and Uber's power. I was tall, lithe, imposing, but between Alex's easy confidence and Sabah's quiet presence we sort of balanced out.
Together, the three of us were determined to have a good time.

By whatever means necessary.

---

"Fuck off," I sneered, and the fratboys got the message, although not without some muttered curses and dark looks. Sabah just stood there, frozen, eyes wide, upset-terrified-angry. I gently reached for her hand and she gripped it, white-knuckled, as I led her back to the relative safety of the bar.

I murmured reassuringly in her ear, keeping myself between her and the direction the offending douchebags retreated to. "I'm sorry, I should have paid more attention. You're safe, ok? We've got you."

She just nodded, fear giving way more to anger, some of it directed towards herself. "I thought I could..." She sighed. "I thought I was over this."

I rubbed her back reassuringly, spotting Alex coming back from the bathroom out of the corner of my eye, waving him over with my free hand. He picked up the pace, easy smile vanishing.

"This stuff doesn't go away easily." I thought we'd avoid the worst of the college crowd at this club; I supposed I should have just counted my blessings she hadn't seen her ex. "Come on, let's have one more drink then bounce. Music here sucks anyway."

Alex frowned when he caught up to us, and I filled him in. He looked in the direction I indicated, where the gaggle of assholes still lingered in the darker corner of the club, and we shared an unspoken agreement. He took over Sabah-reassuring duty, herding her towards the exit.

I watched them leave, then headed towards the popped-collar cuntwaffles, a plastic smile on my face.

---

Ten minutes later I wiped the blood off my knuckles, disappeared the hand-towel, and stepped calmly out of the dark, unmonitored alleyway, now occupied with four groaning, battered man-children who would hopefully wake up a little bit wiser.

Apparently pushy arse-biscuits were the same no matter what universe I was in. At least here I could beat them up without fear of their numbers. Or consequences. Or breaking a- oh, I did break a nail. Oh well. Easy enough to fix.

Smirking, I made my way the half-block to the open-air cafe where Alex and Sabah were waiting. The latter was staring intently at her hot chocolate, while the former watched me approach knowingly. He raised one eyebrow; I nodded fractionally; he grinned slightly.

"Feel better?"

It took me a moment to realize Alex was talking to me. I slipped into the third chair at their table and my grin widened. "Yeah. A bit."

He nodded.

Sabah looked up, trying to return my smile. She took a shaky breath. "You ready to keep going?"
I looked at her with concern. "You sure? We can call it a night."

She shook her head, determination-anger-pride. "I'm sure."

We danced til the bars closed.

---

Another nice thing about Circus's power? It was great for getting rid of vomit-stained clothes.

Alex had already helped Sabah change into one of his oversized sleep shirts while I showered; she was curled up on the bed around one of his pillows, softly groaning. She looked up at me blearily as I emerged from the bathroom, towel wrapped around my torso (that had taken some getting used to) and I gave her a warm smile. Even without seeing her emotions, I knew exactly how she felt.

I placed a pair of painkillers and a cold glass of water next to the bed, and she made a wordless sound of thanks. I think. She may have been begging for death; hard to tell.

I joined Alex on the patio, still wearing only a towel. He was in boxer-briefs and a different button-up shirt, the previous one having suffered the wrath of Sabah-plus-tequila.

Taking the proffered cigarette, I joined him, watching the sky lighten in the east, salmon and robins-egg dueling it out against the under-lit clouds.

We smoked in silence, and he said nothing about the unladylike way I sprawled out on the surprisingly comfortable wicker deck chair. I'd made it all night with proper body language for my alternate form - I'd earned a break. Being a woman was hard work.

"Thanks," I said quietly. For taking my mind off my problems. For reminding me how fun it was to dance with friends. For giving me someone else to take care of, so I felt less absorbed by my own woes. Less... unstable.

He just nodded, smoke curling from his lips, understanding everything that went unspoken, and gave me a ghost of a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Alex is the best.

Thanks again to Kittius for idea-bouncing and shamelessly ripping off some of their lines.
"5212 Washington, Opera Terrace."

I pulled back my sleeve slightly; six notches.

My phone buzzed; I pulled it back out of nowhere and slipped the wrist strap on, then realized it wasn't a reply text, but a call. Damnit, did no one in this city answer texts with texts?

"Hey MM."

"Fax, tell me you're not still there."

"Good morning to you too."

"Fax."

I sighed. "No, I flew off immediately."

"Were you seen?"

"No. Well. I don't think so. I just did a flyby."

"And you're sure it's the Butcher?"

"Yeah."

A pause, what might have been a sigh. "That's useful information, Fax. Thank you."

"You're wel-"

"But that was incredibly stupid. What were you thinking?"

"Ah..."

"Fax. Tell me you know why that was stupid."

Oh- come on. "Because I risked being caught by the Butcher, or the Teeth. Her killing me, or me becoming the Butcher."

"And why did you risk that?"

I thought for a moment, dodging clouds to keep the phone from getting wet. Miss Militia waited, possibly patiently, probably impatiently.

"If I get more than ten charges in a power, I gain additional effects."

"What additional effects? Be specific."
"Urgh. Damn that voice of authority.

"After I spent enough time with New Wave, I could charge my blasts, create a second shield."

"And what do you think would happen if you spent enough time around the Butcher?"

"I..." I sighed. "I had a bad dream."

She didn't interrupt. I took the opportunity to gather my thoughts, try to put it into words.

"I was... trapped in someone else's head. Half-blind, paralyzed, not even able to scream."

A sharp exhale through the nose. "And you think if you get enough of Butcher's power, you will... what? Be more in control?"

"...Pretty much, yeah."

"Do you have any evidence your power would work this way?"

"...No."

"And you're risking getting killed, or becoming the next Butcher, on this guess?"

Well when you put it that way, it sounds stupid.

"...Yes?"

"Fax-"

"I just have a feeling, ok?"

"Why can't you just let the power fade away?"

I opened my mouth, closed it. Damnit.

For a moment I wondered if I should just come clean. She probably suspected anyway; she wasn't a stupid woman, and I haven't always been perfectly careful. If not her, then someone else in the Protectorate had probably figured it out.

"...Some powers last longer than four days."

"Explain."

Damnit. This was a shitty compromise.

"Like... you've noticed I'm still a pretty fast flier."

"I have." Was that a sharp intake of breath? No. I was imagining it.
"I'm worried I might be stuck with Butcher for a while."

"I see."

There was a pause. Maybe even an ominous pause.

For a moment I was afraid she was going to call me on my half-truth. Instead, she shifted tacks.

"How did you track her down?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss my sources." The lie rolled smoothly, and not at all because I'd practiced saying it after our last phone call.

"Fax."

Don't voice-of-authority me, damnit, I'm a grown man.

Two could play at the shifting-tacks game. "Speaking of which, how's Dinah?"

You can't hear someone grinding their teeth over the phone, right? Probably just signal interference.

"I'm not at liberty to provide any information on that at this time."

Oh, touché. On the other hand, that was probably a good sign the Protectorate was taking it seriously, if they swore her to operational secrecy. Good.

"I hope my tip proved useful."

"Any information you give us is always appreciated."

"Aww, I knew you liked me. Anyway, that's all I wanted to say. Next time just answer my text with a text, would you? It's the civilized thing to do."

"...I'll take it under consideration, Fax."

Judging by how carefully she was enunciating, and how her voice was just a tiny bit strained, I had the feeling I'd need to be careful next time we went shooting. She wasn't the type to have friendly fire accidents, right?

Wait, didn't she shove a gun into Tattletale's mouth during the Echidna fight?

...I was suddenly grateful this conversation was happening miles apart.

I disappeared the phone and moved into a cloud bank just in case.

Maybe I'd skip the shooting range tonight, too.

---
Time passed, hidden in the sky. The cloud moved; I didn't, and the sun warmed me, drying my slightly-damp clothes. Stupid space whale magic - I could go under the bay and come out dry, but flying through a cloud left me feeling like I spent a day in Houston?

Bah.

I didn't know where to go, what to do.

Brockton Bay was moving along without me. New Wave had put a moratorium on my patrolling til the Butcher was out of town (not like they could stop me, but... I didn't entirely disagree). Sabah was probably gonna be sleeping off her hangover for a while, Alex was just sleeping, Uber and Leet were probably asleep as well, Kayden hadn't returned my call, I wasn't about to call up Coil for friendly conversation, much less Skidmark...

I was pretty fast. Maybe I could travel for a bit?

Not Boston. No temptation to go there at all. Even if Blasto seemed like he'd be a cool dude to smoke and chill with.

After checking my phone's map app, I flipped a coin. New York or Chicago?

---

I called Miss Militia back. She picked up on the first ring.

"Yes?"

"Hey, could you let the Chicago Protectorate know I'm gonna be in the neighborhood? I kinda want to meet Myrddin."

"I... suppose so?"

"Great, thanks!"

Chapter End Notes

A short chapter, but Fax's adventures in Chicago wouldn't fit in here.

Thanks to Kittius for idea-bouncing and several directly-lifted quotes.
F*ck me, Chicago was *cold*. 

I didn’t want to stop and get gloves, or ear-muffs, so I just jammed my hands in my coat pockets and used my shield to block the frigid winds. Browbeat's power helped a bit, so at least I didn’t have to worry about frostbite, but it wasn't gonna be comfortable unless I covered myself in fur and that wasn't really my kink. Better to just suck it up and hurry.

It was a much bigger city than I was used to. Real skyscrapers, not just the occasional tall buildings clustered together as if for warmth. Snow fell lightly, turning the ground and rooftops white in places, a slushy grey-brown everywhere else. I never thought I'd miss Brockton Bay's weather... or at all, really.

I circled around, turning my phone this way and that, trying to match the landmarks in the app to the slush-covered mounds I saw before me.

Then I almost ate shit when a whole goddamn murder of crows smacked into my shield, cawing indignantly at the affront.

*Are crows even native to Chicago? What the hell?*

I flew a bit more cautiously after that, keeping an eye on my surroundings. If Brockton Bay was a city of endless alleyways, Chicago was the city of too many shadows. Dark things moved in the corners of my eyes.

The Butcher had never been to Chicago, right? Probably should have looked that up...

Eventually I found one of the two PRT headquarters in the city. It was squat, broad, and not terribly pretty, but it sported a statue on the roof of some caped figure I didn't recognize, even if I could identify details through its winter coat.

I was late. Not the best first impression. As I imagined, the leader of the local Protectorate was a busy man, and the fact that he allowed me twenty minutes of his time at all was a kindness I'm sure was entirely due to Miss Militia wanting to get me the hell out of Brockton Bay (and possibly make a favorable impression of the Protectorate in the process).

A quick security check later, I was ushered into an office by a harried-looking PRT agent to stand face-to-face with Myrddin, the wizard of Chicago himself.

He wore a brown cloak-and-robe combination that might have been burlap, but with a heavier material beneath. If the raised metal collar around his neck was any indication, he had some kind of armor or protective gear beneath the robe. It looked heavy, but he bore it without any apparent difficulty. His staff was a gnarled stick of dense wood, worn by weather. The upper half of his face was hidden behind a metal visor that served more to cast his face in shadow than to be actual *armor*. Finally, he sported a thick, well trimmed beard. Brown, not white.
He looked tired. Not stooped, not worn, just... weary. Like the weight of responsibility was heavy, but borne with dignity and gravitas.

That's what it was. Myrddin had gravitas.

"You must be Fax. Welcome to Chicago."

"Nice to meet you, Myrddin. Thanks for taking the time; sorry I was late."

He waved off my apology in a very wizardly fashion. "Think nothing of it. Have a seat." He followed suit, sinking into a rather elaborate high-backed chair.

I sat across his desk, heavy oak, matching the dark wood bookshelves and deep brown leather furnishings. Leather-bound books lined the shelves, along with the occasional weird-looking crystal, old maps, a stuffed (I presume stuffed, or else exceptionally well-trained) crow, jars of various colored liquids, and one section devoted to some rather expensive-looking bottles of wine.

And on the bookshelf behind his desk, a skull.

With little lights in its eyes.

Myrddin must have followed my gaze, or read something on my face, because he sighed, suddenly seeming ten years older. Bitter-irritated-resigned.

"It's plastic. With LEDs. One of my Wards gave it to me as a gift. Please, don't..."

I couldn't keep myself from smiling. Even with the scarf covering the bottom half of my face, he could tell. Probably my eye crinkles.

"...Emily hasn't been talking about those blasted books again, has she? I never should have gifted her that signed box set."

"She hasn't said a word, sir." But oh would I be bugging her about it when I saw her again.

See, on Earth Bet, there were no Dresden Files.

There were the Murphy Files. About an unpowered, badass normal detective thrust into a world of magic and parahumans, struggling to make sense of a world gone mad, always saving the day through human ingenuity and cleverness and sheer grit. Harry Dresden was still a character, though, even if his description had changed slightly. Like, say, having a full beard.

I'd looked it up on the flight over, before the Winds of the North made the proposition not worth losing a few fingers to frostbite. They'd definitely ended up on my reading list for the future, though. Figured Director Piggot would be a fan.

Myrddin eyed me suspiciously, one hand tapping the whorls on his staff as it lay across the desk in front of him.

"So, Fax. What brings you to Chicago? And to meet me specifically?"

"I wanted to travel. And I'm a fan of yours, sir."
His eyes narrowed. "A fan."

I shrugged, playing at nonchalance and failing. "I like your aesthetic. You've got style."

"You're not here to laugh at the mad parahuman who claims he's a wizard, are you? Because I assure you, I get enough of that from the public as it is."

"Oh, not at all. I have superpowers. Stranger things have happened than magic being real."

He harrumphed. Rather well, I might add. "Very well. We have ten minutes. Ask what you will."

I took a deep breath, let it out, suddenly feeling put on the spot. "Have you met any other magic users?"

No matter what I asked, he answered curtly, with distaste from long practice barely covered by dignified civility. Clearly I hadn't asked any questions he hadn't been asked a thousand times before, and more than once he gestured me towards the actual goddamn book he wrote covering most of those topics. Available in the gift shop downstairs, of course. He even made me feel like a cad for not having done the research before pestering him with repetitive questions.

As our time ran out - or perhaps a little past that, I wasn't sure - Myrddin interrupted my next question with a sharp gesture.

"Fax."

"Hmm?"

"I would have you answer a question of my own."

I leaned forward, curious. "Shoot."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Ah, I mean, I'm curious."

"Not this. Not here, now. I mean in the larger picture. What drives you? What fills you with purpose?"

"That's... kind of a big question."

He nodded sagely. "Yes. Yes it is."

I mean, I had long, long-term goals. Destroy Scion. Save the world. Carve my initials on the Moon. Woo at least one member of the Triumvirate. Shipping. Some goals were higher priority than others, but none of them were things I planned on doing in the next few weeks, maybe not even months. My power would grow in the meanwhile, until I could be one big great ball of fuck that rolled over all of my problems. A tidy solution.

"From what I've heard," Myrddin continued as I pondered in silence, "you have some issues with long-term planning. You avoid responsibility at every turn, indulge your baser impulses, make foolish decisions because you're powerful enough to ignore the consequences."
Fair.

"It's unsustainable."

Also fair.

"I can see that you have the heart of a hero, Fax. You show great potential, great promise. But short term solutions can cause longer term problems. Think on that."

Damn. Heavy words of wisdom from a man dressed in burlap.

In the end, the same stressed-looking PRT agent ushered me out of the office. I swore that plastic skull winked at me before I left, though.

As I was being escorted out of the building, I turned the corner to face a small mountain of a man. His crotch, more specifically. My eyes went up, up, up the skintight suit to the eight foot tall man, putting even Manpower to shame. I felt a sudden urge to pull out Menja and Fenja's power, but no. I resisted.

"Ah, you must be Fax. I'm Campanile. I was hoping to say hello before you left; Myrddin is a good man and a great leader, but sometimes his public relations is... lacking, in certain departments." He extended a hamhock of a hand, shaking mine with exaggerated care. "He's normally fine as long as you avoid a few... trouble topics."

"Like, say, magic, or the Murphy Files?"

"Ah."

"Yeah. I don't hold it against him, though. I didn't do enough research, apparently."

"We do sell-"

"Oh yeah, I'm grabbing one on my way out, believe me."

"I'll see about getting him to autograph it before you leave."

"Heh. Neat."

"So are there any questions about Chicago or the Protectorate I could answer for you?"

_Ehh. I didn't fly all this way for a pitch._

That did remind me of one thing, though. "What the hell is the deal with all those crows?"

Campanile blinked. "Crows?"

Chapter End Notes

_Hello Chicago! Goodbye Chicago!_
Thanks to Kittius, profdeadpool and BlueRose for idea-bouncing, pseudo-beta-ing and quotes directly stolen and shoved into the chapter.
Victoria stared at the book - bound in fake leather, of course - with a raised eyebrow. "Myrddin's Tome of Modern Magic?" She glanced up at me, and I didn't need her boyfriend's power to see the skepticism written all over her face. "That weird guy who thinks he's a wizard?"

"Autographed!" I confirmed cheerfully. She flipped open the cover to see the inside page did, indeed, contain elaborate calligraphy that may have resembled a signature. "I got half a dozen just to make him sign them all for me. Gonna keep me in Christmas presents for a while."

"So that's what you did in Chicago?" She tossed the book back at me; I disappeared it on contact, and we continued flying high over the city, only nominally staying on the lookout for trouble down below.

New Wave still didn't want to risk me running into the Butcher, but they also recognized that if I was going to leave the city at the drop of a hat that it would make more sense to have me where they could keep an eye on me than otherwise. Hence Victoria's assigned responsibility of pulling me the hell away at the first sign of Teeth.

"Get condescended to by a man dressed in a potato sack? Yeap."

I'd told her what he'd told me - the stuff that wasn't already covered in the semi-autobiographical reference guide, anyway - including his parting advice.

Victoria wasn't impressed. "Kind of obvious, you know? 'Try to think ahead sometimes, stupid' isn't exactly deep, wizardly advice."

"You're just jealous because you don't have 'the soul of a hero'."

"Pfft."

"Did a wizard tell you you showed great potential? I didn't think so."

"Amy dresses in wizard robes and she tells me I'm awesome all the time."

"Heh." So many things to say to that, but I wasn't touching that with a ten foot pole. Thankfully, she changed the topic first.

"Oh hey! Is that a mugging?"

I peered down. Some scuffling in an alleyway - either two people fighting for fun, or a mugging. "Looks like it. Any spikes, skulls, or warpaint?"

"Don't think so."

"Sweet. Try to keep up."
"Hey!"

Heh. I didn't think she'd ever forgive me for flying faster than her.

---

Dawn broke.

I took a bite of my bagel, hot and fresh. Some damn fine kosher delis in this part of town, surprisingly enough.

I leapt into the air, racing towards the apartment across the street. I smashed through the window, and then my world was fire and pain.

Ok. Butcher found.

I leapt into the air, racing towards the apartment across the street. I flew overhead, but she was too deep in the building, and caught nothing.

I frowned into my Tinkerfuel. Should I just wait, or...

I leapt into the air, racing towards the apartment across the street. Skimming the side of the building, I nearly ate shit on an unexpected fire escape, but didn't feel her power.

I took another bite of the bagel. Mouthful of lox and cream cheese, the juicy tomatoes contrasting with the crisp onions and savory capers. I chewed, relishing the taste, swallowed.

I leapt into the air, racing towards the apartment across the street. The other side of the building had capes, but not- oh, there- owfuck, arrow through the neck. Eesh.

I sighed, putting down the now-coppery-tasting bagel, feeling a lump in my throat. It was just in my head, but... well, it felt real. Very real. How did Coil deal with some of the things in his simulated timelines? Getting shot, getting killed...

Well. I'd just have to learn to deal. Not like I'd call him up and ask. Probably.

Boxing up the rest of the bagel and chips, I left the deli with a wave to the folks behind the counter. Shame to let it go to waste - maybe I'd eat it later. The Tinkerfuel didn't help with the taste at all, despite its delicious acidity.

I'd try again for the Butcher when she wasn't awake and kicking.

Miss Militia got a text saying that the Butcher had changed apartments, but was still in the same neighborhood, and that I'd not engaged or grabbed her power further. She sent back thanks (in a text, thank god!) and her appreciation for my good judgement. Heh.

In the meanwhile, I was awake and unhappy about it.

Fuck early mornings.
Fuck Monday mornings.

I took a cab ride home, since I had nowhere to go in any particular hurry.

As I watched buildings pass by, I stewed on my thoughts, not a bit faster because of all the caffeine. Having a partial Butcher was more terrifying than a full set... but could I really be sure pushing her power past 10 charges would solve anything? Hell, it could just make things worse, for all I knew. Not that it'd happened yet, but my power wasn't exactly transparent in its machinations.

My eyes drifted over signs and billboards. A new River Phoenix movie was out, and it looked terrible. Tops on sale at the local department store, this weekend only - too late now. As we idled at a stoplight, my eyes rested on a standalone emergency clinic, the kind that billed itself as a cheaper, faster alternative to hospitals for minor issues and ailments. On a whim, I told the driver to let me out.

I adjusted my clothes, a pencil skirt and padded-shoulders-jacket over a modest blouse. Not everything I had to wear was designed to draw attention, after all. Even my face was merely plain, instead of striking. I would have changed before flying past the Butcher as Fax in the one true timeline, of course, but while I was doing recon I figured it would be to my benefit to be a bit more... discreet.

Oh hey, they offered B12 shots. I wondered if that would help my sleep schedule stabilize any. Also on-site STI testing. Not that I didn't trust Panacea's expert opinion, of course, but I approved in general principle.

I gave the very blond woman behind the counter a friendly smile, which she returned with the plastic smile haggard nurses and medical staff seemed to be born with. "Can I help you?"

"Hi, I saw you offered B12 shots?"

"We do. Would you like to wait for an available nurse, or make an appointment and come back later?" It was subtle, but she seemed to be pushing the latter option. Were they busy? Not that strange for a Monday morning, but there was no one else in the waiting room.

I shrugged. "I have some time before work today. Canceled meeting."

She flashed me another brittle smile and gave me a form to sign in. I gave the fake name of the day, Karen Muller, and waited, playing games on my phone til my name was called. I missed playing 2048. Apparently that hadn't come out yet.

When she led me back, I was surprised to hear a bit of a ruckus deeper in the clinic. Men's voices, some swearing. We turned the last corner to the available room and I paused to peek my head around the next hallway, seeing a good dozen men in various states of disrepair, bloody clothing and leather jackets and a good number of shaved heads. The nurse pulled me back by my shoulder, fake smile wide and tight-lipped. "This way, please."

"Are... you guys being robbed?"

"No, nothing of the sort. Please ignore them. There was some fighting earlier this morning, nothing serious, and we're a very capable clinic." Her words were rushed, with forced cheer. "Have you gotten a B12 shot before?"
She kept a running stream of inane commentary and mild medical babble - not that it was necessary, B12 shots were pretty much definitively harmless - overriding any attempts of mine to pursue any details. I let her; I wasn't about to ask.

After all, as soon as I set foot in the examination room, I felt a familiar presence enter my range.

*Good morning, Othala. For real, this time.*

The nurse - physician's assistant? I didn't ask, but she was in scrubs - rolled up my sleeve to administer the shot, and I was glad that I'd figured out the trick of hiding my tattoos back when I cosplayed as a Namekian. A brief moment of concern when I remembered Glory Girl's shield, but when the needle slipped in with only the slightest bit of hesitation, I breathed a sigh of relief the woman probably took as pain, judging from the false sympathy she gave me. "Just another moment and we're done." Made sense, though; it was selectively permeable, after all, or else she'd never be able to take a shower.

Forty dollars later I was back on the street, one charge improved.

While I was glad I hadn't been shot for my efforts, I had to wonder if the Empire thugs in the back of the clinic getting Othala's tender care had something to do with why the Butcher was all riled up a few blocks away.

Would it make me vain to be surprised that the Empire and the Butcher were fighting offscreen without my knowledge? Not like I was the *actual* center of the universe, after all.

Although it did make me wonder... What else happened in Brockton Bay I wasn't aware of?

Chapter End Notes

An SI not being the only person with agency in a fictional world? Perish the thought.
"Eyy, BB. Refresher later?"

I set the phone down and dug into my lo mein. It was rich, noodles that weren't too rubbery and plate overloaded with chicken, pork, shrimp and scallops. Fuckin' great stuff. I made a note to check out this small family restaurant again sometime.

It was cozy. The mom was the waitress, the dad was the cook, the four-year-old daughter was asleep in one of the booths, and the grandfather was sitting at a table commenting loudly in broken English and rapid-fire Mandarin at the news playing on the small TV on the counter.

"Can't."

I frowned at the phone.

"Busy?"

On the TV, the bored-looking newscaster read off an honest-to-god gang-watch segment, listing off recent Empire, Merchant and remnants-of-ABB activity like weather patterns. Twenty percent chance of lead rain in the morning, with a scattering of light racially-motivated beatings and sunny skies in the afternoon. Great weather for a picnic or a drive-by.

"Orders."

My frown deepened. I... supposed it made sense. Even if they hadn't told everyone everywhere all the details, it was probably just simple caution to keep Wards away from the next possible Butcher.

Still felt like ass, though. Couldn't hurt to ask, just to be sure.

"Orders?"

"Yeah."

Damnit man, could you be a little less laconic for once?

"Confidential orders?"

"I'd tell you, but that's confidential."

Browbeat, you snarky little shit.

The grandpa exploded in a flurry of angry Mandarin, gesturing enthusiastically at the television, where Purity was shown blasting at... were those the Undersiders? I hadn't actually seen Bitch's dogs in person yet, but jesus, those things looked way more terrifying than I'd imagined. And that was just glimpses of them as they disappeared into a cloud of darkness, dodging Purity's attacks.

Speaking of which, Purity herself was just a splotch of white in a dark sky, seriously messing with the video's contrast settings. So that's what she looked like to normal people? Pretty intimidating, actually.
"Hey, you're on the news!"

I finished lunch. Kayden didn't respond. Did I get her number wrong somehow? Pretty sure I hadn't changed it in my address book. Had I done something to offend her? More than usual, I mean. The last time we'd spoken was... what, Friday? After Coil? It wasn't great news, but she seemed to have taken it well, and she'd given no indication she was upset at me about anything.

And if she was on the news - I checked the timestamp, apparently this was last night - then at least she wasn't hurt or anything. Still, I was a bit worried.

The door dinged, and five... callow? Let's say callow youth entered, full of swagger and poor fashion choices and yellow and blue bandannas. As I watched, they approached the waitress and held a low conversation with her. She was radiating fear-anger-fear, they were broadcasting greed-satisfaction-anxiety-anticipation.

A phrase one of my old bosses used to use sprang to mind. "Not my monkeys, not my circus."

Then slightly raised voices. "But we paid you last week!"

"Bitch, you pay when we tell you to pay."

I glanced over. Ringleader dude, bearing actual frosted tips - I mean, really? - was nervous. Moreso than demanding protection money from a tiny little hole-in-the-wall restaurant would seem to require. And his fear spiked, too. Was this a legit protection scam or was he trying to milk them for more profits?

And then he slapped her.

Well. Maybe this was my circus after all.

"Fuck off," I called out, standing up from my booth.

"Mind your own business, old man." One of them marched himself right over to me, getting in my face, fear barely concealed by forced aggression. He jabbed a finger in my chest, trying to be menacing. "This don't concern you. Sit down, shut up, and go back to your fucking noodles."

"Does Skidmark know you're double-dipping?" I ignored the moron attempting to hold my attention, talking to the ringleader. He glanced a bit nervously at the others, who had spread out a bit, hands in pockets, preparing for a fight.

"What's it to you, bitch?"

"You know he might take offense to that sort of thing, right? Even if you did give him his cut." The lead douchebag's emotions told me the answer to that particular question.

"Oi! Don't you fuckin' ignore me, short stack." Oh, the thug was trying to intimidate me again. I looked up at him - alright, yeah, he was at least 6'4", but he had less muscle on him than the waitress - and smiled politely.

"I think you should go home and rethink your life choices."

"Yeah, well I think you should- MODDERFUCKER!"
The last part was said reeling and clutching his nose, as I'd grabbed him by his unfashionable neckerchief, yanked him down and rammed my forehead into his face. Didn't even pop my forcefield, but judging from the blood gushing down his mouth and shirt I'd hit him pretty hard.

Note to self - test strength before engaging morons in melee again.

Well. After taking out the trash, anyway.

---

Two minutes later they were running and/or staggering away, I was pocketing their knives and one poorly-maintained pistol, and the family was peeking out from behind the window to the kitchen.

"Sorry about the mess." I proceeded to right knocked-over tables and pick up scattered napkin dispensers and chopstick holders as the husband and wife emerged, old man presumably staying behind to keep an eye on the little girl.

"Why did you do that?" Huh. That wasn't gratitude or relief in her aura. Just fear-dread-worry.

"Like I said, sorry about the mess. I just didn't want those shitheads to rob my new favorite noodle shop." I gave her my best friendly smile.

"We would have paid them. Now they'll come back. You just made things worse." I searched her face, wrought with worry lines, and my heart sank.

"They were just trying to rob you guys."

"Obviously! We get them or people just like them every week or two. Merchants, Empire - it's all gotten worse since the ABB fell. We've been doing fine on our own - you've just drawn their attention to us." She crossed her arms, gracing me with a rather impressive glare. "I'm going to ask you to leave and not come back."

I sighed, ran a hand over my face. She was afraid. Afraid of what I'd done, what it would mean for their future. Afraid of me, of my reaction to being asked to leave. That last one hurt the worst.

"I understand. I'll go." I took it back - the sheer relief in her aura when I agreed to go was the worst.

---

"Hey, Skidmark."

"Shit, if it ain't the idea man. Paperwork's in progress; look for billboards and flyers for "EasyRider" to come out in the next week."

Damn, he moved fast. "Nice. But that's not why I called."

"Sup?"

"You know the Red Dragon restaurant? Off 24th?"

"Yeah, yeah, good lo mein."
"I know, right?"

"What about it?"

"Just beat up a half-dozen dudes in your colors trying to shake it down for protection money."

Silence.

The sound of rustling paper.

Skidmark's voice took on a harder tone. "Did one of them have really stupid fucking hair?"

"Frosted tips."

Oh wow that was some colorful profanity.

When he settled down a bit, he assured me he would "take care of it".

"Actually, what's their monthly dues?"

"What, the restaurant? Depends on percentage."

"Ballpark it."

I could almost see his eyes narrow over the phone. "Three kay. Why?"

"I want to cover their protection fees."

"That's a stupid fucking investment. Really stupid. No returns at all."

"Call me a bleeding heart."

"Five kay."

"Not that bleeding. The fuck is that price bump?"

"Convenience fee. People notice they ain't paying, aren't getting a cut, could raise questions. Get cocky. Shit happens."

"Three and a half."

"Bitch, I said five."

"Four and you try to keep the Empire off their ass too."

"You are absolute shit at negotiating."

"Come on dude, cut me a break here." I liked the place, but I wasn't about to stand watch over it twenty-four/seven. And I had no idea the fees were so high. Christ, Brockton Bay was a shithole.

"You know they're not gonna last two months as the Empire fucks the place. Gonna get run out, if
they aren't burned down. Ain't shit I can do about it either, not without way more ass-beatin' than you're willing to pay for. Ain't shit for free."

Fuck, he was right. I needed to step up and take out the goddamn Empire sooner rather than later.

"One problem at a time."

Another thoughtful silence before he finally answered.

"Four kay and I look into investing into the place. Give me reason to give a shit. No promises, but I'll take a fuckin' look. Food's decent enough."

I sighed. "Deal."

"Done. And shit boy, take some goddamn business classes at community college or someshit, it's embarrassin'."

"Go fuck yourself," I answered, but without real malice.

"If I had a dime..."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to BlueRose, profdeadpool, and Kittius for idea-bouncing.
Day 25.68 : Could Have Gone Worse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I knocked on the door, shifting the insulated bag-o-pizzas in one hand, a smudged receipt in the other, wearing a bored, slightly irritated expression on my face.

Silence at first, then shuffling. Emotional auras - a good dozen of them, far too many for the small, crappy apartment - shifted from alarm to concern to indifference to malice. That last one was a bit concerning, but I let none of it show in my expression, and my heartbeat was maintained at a steady, slow rhythm.

After a good minute, nobody answered. "Papa's Pizza," I called out as I knocked again, sounding slightly put out.

Only then did someone answer the door. A tall man, with a shock of black hair, a stained wife-beater and ragged shorts, stared at me with suspicion. "We didn't order any."

I met his gaze impassively, then looked down at the deliberately-grease-stained receipt. I squinted. "Five ninety-one?"

He snatched the receipt from my hand, turned it sideways. "That says five ninety-seven."

"Aww man." I reached out for the receipt, and he handed it back. "Thanks."

He didn't let go. I looked up, bleary-eyed, my acne-ridden face devoid of expression. I shifted my head slightly, letting my greasy hair out of my eyes.

Man, being a teenager was gross.

"Give you twenty bucks for the lot."

Deeper in the apartment, I heard someone swearing from the direction of the kitchen. Dinner already being prepared, I guessed... but not one everyone enjoyed, apparently. I risked a glance behind him. Three people on the couch, muscular to scrawny, none well kept or clean. Emotional auras were significantly subdued compared to when I first arrived, and one in particular was a riot of different colors all layered on top of one another, coming from the bedroom, off by itself.

"Thirty."

He fished out a twenty and two crinkled fives from his pocket and I tucked them into my own. Slipping out the boxes from the bag, still piping hot, I muttered "Two pepperonis and an olive-anchovy" with a complete lack of enthusiasm. "Enjoy."

He slammed the door in my face before I even finished the last word.

I waited till I was out the building and halfway down the block before I let myself smile.

Two more charges in Butcher, and no screaming death! And all it took was a Goodwill-purchased
delivery-person shirt, a second-hand pizza-bag and $16.99 in mediocre local chain goods. And biokinesis, of course.

*Who said I couldn't be clever?*

---

Despite my sense of accomplishment, I found myself at a bit of a loss.

Purity wasn't answering my calls, the Wards were off-limits, I doubted the Protectorate would be any more eager to spend time with me...

I didn't know what was up with Kayden, but for the rest, the Butcher was really crimping my social life. And maybe it wasn't directly related, but I didn't really feel up for video games and smoking with Alex or the nerd-duo. Too restless. I was *fairly* certain it wasn't the Butcher's influence; not her minds seeping into my own, anyway. But I was still several days and a dozen charges away from being confident I wasn't going to end up trapped in a solipsistic prison for all eternity. Maybe just knowing that had some effect on my zen.

So instead I wandered the rooftops and endless alleyways.

It wasn't really a surprise when I stumbled upon a fight in a dark corner behind some buildings. Half a dozen skinheads - worse than cockroaches.

Nor was I entirely shocked to see a dark figure phasing between them all in a blur of shadows and violence. If anything, I was surprised it had taken me this long to run into her.

I floated down to a sitting position on the edge of a convenience store roof and watched as she finished dispatching the goons with swiftly-executed vigilante justice. She moved with smoothness born of long familiarity; zipties, wallets, weapons, tranqs fired into the fidgety ones to keep them down.

Didn't notice me for a minute, though. Must not look up enough. Not a lot of flyers in Brockton Bay, I supposed.

She certainly spun around when I lit a joint, though, both crossbows aimed up at the sound, movement, and flicker of light. There was a moment of poised, tense silence, her whole body coiled like a spring, and then she said, "You looking for trouble?" *Wariness-hostility-anticipation.*

I snorted, then choked on the smoke, caught by surprise. Laugh-coughing. "You're like... so close to Armsmaster's classic line there... 'You gonna fight me'... snrrrk."

I may have giggled a bit.

It may not have been my first joint of the evening.

"How high are you? Get the fuck out of here." *Anger-disdain.*

She didn't relax her tense posture, though.

"Eh, two outta ten." Still grinning. "Anyway, I wanted to say nice work. Six guys, two with guns, one with a bat? Pretty impressive." That wasn't even me being facetious, either. She handled those
guys like a pro, giving them no time to react, flitting between them so they were constantly getting in each others' way, delivering brutal takedown strikes with minimal wasted movement. For all the shit I gave her in my head for being an edgelord, she certainly wasn't an amateur.

"Pretty average night for me," she said, but there was a flicker of *pleased-gratified* in her aura. She turned a little towards the grunts, still keeping me in view, and her voice (and aura) dripped with contempt as she added, "Fucking morons."

"I mean, Empire. Kinda goes without saying."

She shrugged, but said nothing. Her weapons were still at the ready, if no longer aimed right at my heart. She was still waiting for something, though.

Might as well indulge my curiosity. "How do you get away with this, anyway? Like, you call the cops and disappear, and none of the mooks say anything about you being there? Nobody at the Protectorate knows? Or do they know but just don't care as long as you're only beating up bad guys?"

Heh, that's a lot of *hostility-irritation*. "That's my business, not yours. And you should get going. Unless you want be standing there getting high when the cops roll up." *Amusement-disdain.*

I rolled my eyes, but she couldn't see that in the dimly-lit alleyway. Or my smart-ass grin.

Instead I made a show of pulling up my sleeves, then doing a gesture with my hands as though magically hiding my spliff. Which I was. Except I was playing it off as slight of hand for kicks. Aww. She didn't seem impressed.

I may not have been foaming at the mouth and burning with righteous anger at her behavior in canon, but I wasn't exactly a big fan of hers either.

*Do I... *

Yeah. Let's have some fun. Poke that bear.

"For a girl whose power is running away, you sure are aggressive." *Shots fired!*

She stared at me for a split second in sheer disbelief, but then her aura flared bright with *rage-fury* and she was suddenly in a combat stance again. "The fuck did you just say?" she demanded.

Heh. She reacted about as well as I had expected. "I mean, it's kind of impressive. Like, you'd be perfect for long-range sneaky-shooty, but instead you like to fight people hand-to-hand." I wasn't actually making this any better, and I knew it. This wasn't backpedaling, it was plausible deniability. *'I was just trying to give her a compliment, I swear.'* Good thing she couldn't see me fucking grinning, though. Totally would have ruined the delivery.

She studied me silently for a moment. Her aura was bubbling with *rage-hate*, but there was a cold thread of something almost calculating running through it. "Get out of here," she said, her voice tight. "Now."

"I suppose," I drawled, pulling my hands behind my head, slightly stretching. "Kinda thought you'd be more interesting." I floated a few inches off the edge of the roof, but wasn't really in a big hurry to
leave. "Maybe I overestimated you." Critical hit!

There was a flash of surprise-shock, and then it was swallowed up by that ever-present, simmering rage-hate-anger. "Oh, I see." Her voice was low and contemptuous. "Are you here for them?" She gestured towards the restrained thugs, not taking her attention from me. "Did the Glühbirne finally lure you all the way to the reich side?" Counterattack! It wasn't very effective!

"Glue-burner?" I raised an eyebrow. The rest of it wasn't worth responding to.

"German for lightbulb. Figure it out, genius."

My unseen grin turned smug. "You're accusing me of going Nazi when you're the one speaking German, SS." Counter-counterattack! Double points!

Bonus for accusing a person of color of being a Nazi. But she wouldn't know I knew that.

She made a low, angry sound; about the closest a human voice can come to a growl. "I'm not a Nazi," she snapped, and there was real disgust mingled with the rage in her aura. "And if you don't want people accusing you, maybe get your head out of Frau Glowstick's ass."

God, people made such a big deal about Purity. Sure, she was still pretty racist, quite possibly homophobic, and hasn't really spent time with me since she found out I could turn into a woman, but... um. Quick, change the topic!

"Oh, hey, about that. Remind me, how many Empire capes have you brought in again?" I rested my chin on my hand, faux thinking. Yeah, it wasn't fair, but it was also kind of stupid to accuse me of being a Nazi after publicly bringing in Alabaster and Krieg.

"Yeah, you're such hot shit," she sneered. "So fucking special. All that power, and what do you do with it?" There was a brief pause, long enough for me to see her aura flicker with anticipation-satisfaction before she said, in a tone of pure poison, "Just fuck around and get your friends killed."

...

I.

Really?

For a moment, I couldn't quite wrap my head around the words.

Jesus. And I thought Emma was the vicious one.

I tasted ash.

...I could just kill her.

It would hardly take any effort. Like squashing a bug.

But no. I could do better than that. The words surged out of my mouth without thinking, like a coiled snake lashing out.

"Plot twist. Actually a precog. Surprise." I made the world's angriest jazz hands. "I know your name.
I know-" Even in my cold fury, I resisted outing Taylor. That could only end poorly. ")all your dirty little secrets. I could destroy you with a word."

I paused, giving that just enough time to sink in, but not enough for her to reply. "But you know what's better? I know your future. Years from now, you will have accomplished nothing. Absolutely nothing. You will only watch as others you looked down on accomplish far greater things than you could ever dream of, and you will be left behind. Impotent. Pathetic. Weak." I said all of this calmly, almost casually, but my gaze never wavered. I watched the emotions boil off her like steam, shifting rapidly.

The silence stretched, tense as piano wire. I wasn't sure she's even breathing. But shock flashed to denial and she said, "You're lying. You don't know anything about me." I was satisfied to hear a quaver in her voice, though, doubt-fear coiling around her like serpents. More insistently, she said, "I don't have time for your fucking mind games. Just... stay out of my way." Abruptly, she whirled away and sprinted off into the shadows that were her namesake.

I watched her leave, her emotion aura fading into the dark, and just like a flipped switch the rage drained from me, leaving me... well, drained. Hollow. A bitter taste in my mouth.

By the time the sirens grew near, I was gone.

Well.

That could have gone worse.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all may have noticed my exuberant writing pace has subdued somewhat. It's not because I'm not writing (although my new job's responsibilities certainly have put a crimp in my writing time). It's mostly because I've been working on stuff with Kittius, who has also helped me write the Sophia scene in this chapter and with whom I have just finished putting final touches on a kickass little project that will likely be posted in the next day or so, along with several thousand words more of extended and future scenes. In the meanwhile, please enjoy this double-length chapter.

Thanks for your patience. I hope you continue to enjoy the story :)

EDIT: Maybe mentioning her family was a bit overkill for just trying to rattle her a bit.
I let myself into Alex's place, figuring they weren't answering their phone because they were asleep. Which was fair. It was four in the morning.

Instead I found their bedroom empty and Sabah in their living room, surrounded by books and fabric swatches, laptop open to cute animal videos and several cups of coffee littering the coffee table. She looked at me with surprise, needles and scissors jumping from wherever they'd been strewn about the room.

"Hey Sab. What're you doing here?"

She gave me a wary look, as if trying to look right through me. "Chris?"

Why was she so... Oh, right, she'd never actually seen me like this before. I gave a small wave, small smile. "Told you I was a man."

After a tense moment, she flopped back down on the couch, little sharp implements dropping at the same time with a tiny clatter. She rubbed her eyes. "I suppose you did."

"Different seeing it in person, though?" I asked, a grin on my lips. Maybe it had been foolish of me to show up to Alex's in my original form, but... eh. Not like Sabah knew me from Adam. I could've copied this look from anybody.

She just nodded, reached for a nearby coffee cup, made a face when it was empty.

"I'll get it," I offered, and she accepted gratefully. "So what brings you here?" I asked again, grabbing the half-full carafe and pouring it in the cleanest-looking mug near the sink. It looked like someone had tried to make pancakes recently. Either that, or a batter-kinetic had gone wild in the kitchen.

Sabah didn't answer until the mug was half empty again. "My roommates were keeping me up with their... noises," she explained with a burst of distaste-embarrassment. "But when I got here I still couldn't sleep, so I figured I'd work on a class project..." Marginally more coherent, she gave me a questioning look herself. "And you?"

"Ehhh..." I dithered. "Kinda hoping for advice, to be honest."

"Oh?" she answered noncommittally.

I looked at her, read her emotions. "Need a distraction?"

"Please," she half-begged. Heh.

I looked at the sofas covered in stuff - clothes, fabrics, dishes, at least three burner phones, what might have been hockey pads - and she assembled a few giant stuffed animals with a wave of her hand. It was a bit like watching a Disney princess in action, to be frank. Ribbons dancing, scissors
dashing around like silvery fish, and in the end three stuffed animals you could get lost in flopped on the floor like enormous, discarded toys.

I immediately plopped myself in one, sinking several feet into its enveloping comfyness. Sabah picked herself up off the couch - stepping over a bong and a water pistol - and did the same to the second. The third was left to stand watch.

Poor corduroy panda, no one loved you.

"So I ran into someone tonight..."

She mostly stayed awake as I, in very loose terms, described my encounter with Shadow Stalker. No mention of powers, goons, names, or specifics. Very general. Just the kind of personality she had, and that I'd threatened her, but she also had dirt on me. "So I'm not sure what she'd do. Snitching on me would hurt her too, but it'd hurt me more. Do I trust she'd keep things to herself, or beat her to the punch and try to get my story in first?"

"Prisoner's dilemma."

"Exactly."

She was quietly thoughtful for so long I wasn't sure she'd fallen asleep, held in the clutches of her enormous stuffed rabbit, ears wrapped around her like a fluffy blanket. I suppose the fact that the teddy bear hadn't collapsed on me yet was indication enough she was awake, so I waited.

"I... well. From what you've told me, I don't think she'd take it quietly. If she didn't snitch, she'd at least try to use that information against you. But... maybe that's just my own experience talking."

Even if that were true, it was still a fair point, and matched what I thought of Sophia. I nodded, then frowned. "Blargh."

"Hmm?" she asked sleepily.

"This conversation's gonna suck."

I managed to get a few texts off before the stuffed animals slowly deflated around us. I let poor Sabah sleep.

---

Miss Militia was waiting for me on the roof of the PRT building. Sometimes it was really convenient that she never slept.

She greeted me with a wave, and...

Was that a parachute on her back?

She noticed me looking, and I noticed she noticed me noticing, and ultimately I decided not to mention it. Not at all because of the warning look she gave me, side eye. An unspoken 'I dare you to say something'.

I didn't dare.
She tensed a bit when I wrapped her in a shield bubble, but I made damn sure to lift off as light as a feather.

I had learned my lesson. Bad idea to upset the woman who can shit nukes.

We flew in silence until I was reasonably sure we had privacy, high in the sky.

"Thanks for meeting me off the record," I began. We both knew that that meant as off the record as she could conscience, but I trusted her to use her best judgement in determining where that line was. Hadn't screwed me over yet.

"It's better than paperwork," she said lightly, looking out over the twinkling lights of the sleeping city, the faintest hints of dawn over the water. She was sitting cross-legged, back straight even though the spherical shield didn't lend itself easily to that sort of posture.

"I'd hope so." It was beautiful up here. Purity and I should... hm. I should really check up on her.

"So. What did you want to talk about?" Her tone was light, but no-nonsense. Not a social call, and we both knew it.

I sighed. *Time to face the music.* "I ran into Shadow Stalker a few hours ago. Patrolling solo."

She paused. "I see."

"Words were exchanged." At her look, I clarified. "Just words. No violence. But things did get a bit heated, and... I may have said some things I didn't mean."

"...Oh?"

"I may have implied I knew things I didn't." She said nothing. "And I'm worried about it. I didn't mean to scare her." Still silent. "Scare her that much."

Damn, I could have cut this tension with a knife. Conveniently, we both had one. Even if hers was bigger.

"Thank you for telling me, Fax."

I blinked when nothing else seemed forthcoming. "That's it?"

She gave me an even look. Damn, she could give Theo a run for his money with that poker face. Her aura just read... *resigned-disappointed.*

Ouch. That hurt more than I liked to admit.

To fill the silence, I kept trying. Or digging, depending on who you asked. "Not going to ask who started it? What words were exchanged? What she did to provoke me, or vice-versa?"

She gave the faintest of sighs. "Shadow Stalker is a... known entity." A known bitch, in plain English. "And you are... well..."

Jesus. I would've had less sick burns if she'd actually used a flamethrower.
Miss Militia gave me a sidelong glance. "This information you implied you had. I don't suppose you're at liberty to discuss it?"

"No, nothing like that." Totally like that. "Just... implied I knew her secrets. Told her I knew how things ended, and the future was... unkind. To her."

She said nothing again, and I rubbed my face with my hands. "I unloaded my anger on a traumatized teenage girl. Even if she had started it," which she hadn't, really, "I should have been the bigger person."

"And you don't want to apologize to her directly because you're concerned she'd consider that more threat."

I hadn't thought of that, but... "Yeah."

"And you wanted me to know you're not a Thinker before she snitched on you."

I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at her language, but eh. She'd surprised me before. "More or less."

She nodded. "Thank you, Fax."

A longer silence. Damnit. I broke first again. "And that's all you're going to say?"

Fuck, she had really expressive looks considering her poker face. "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Ooh. If that wasn't a loaded question. And considering who asked it, possibly as literal as it was figurative. I thought, and she gave me time.

Wanted to tell her? Plenty. I trusted her as far as I could throw her... which was pretty damn far, to turn that expression on its head.

Thought I should tell her? Not so much. She was still part of the Protectorate and had all of the restrictions and connections that involved.

When I shook my head, she said nothing for a while, but her aura flared with stronger disappointment-regret.

For fuck's sake, you're not my real mom, stop it.

I was almost ready to turn us around and drop her back off on the roof when she spoke again. "When I first came to the United States," one hand idly played with the American flag scarf at her waist - or maybe the Glock in the holster beside it, "I found I really appreciated the structure and order the Wards provided." Her gaze was piercing, but not harsh. Soft at the edges. "They helped take a traumatized young girl who could conjure nuclear arms out of thin air and gave her purpose. Something to work towards, guidance to aim those weapons."

Damnit, I just got this talk from Myrddin.

Something must have shown on my face, because she sighed a bit. "I just don't want to see you-"
"Waste my tremendous potential?" I interjected, a half-smile unseen on my lips.

"Get killed."

Oh.

Well shit. What do I say to that? I can take care of myself? I'll be careful? Nah. I didn't like lying to Miss Militia.

"What do you think I should do?"

I think she was as surprised by that question as I was.

"Training," she almost blurted out. I raised my eyebrow again. Not asking me to join the Protectorate? Tell me how foolish it was for me to go after the Butcher? "You've got a lot of power, but very little experience. Nothing kills new capes more."

I had to admire her quick thinking. She had to have figured out I would have rejected an offer to join the Protectorate out of hand, and I wasn't about to leave the Butcher alone til I got a solid grasp on her power.

And if I did accept, they'd get a chance to look at my powers up close, try to make me slip and reveal more than I wanted to, and if all else failed, get me closer to the Protectorate through simple exposure and incidental camaraderie. A clever plot.

On the other hand... she had a point. Three weeks ago I almost died to a knife in the back, and could barely stand from the shakes after Purity saved me from Oni Lee. God, it felt so much longer ago.

Then I had a much more unpleasant thought; if I'd been sharper, more aware... would Steve have lived?

Fucking hell, was Sophia right?

I felt energy blasts pooling in my palms, glowing orbs of light spilling out into the night sky. With a shake of my hands, they dispersed into glowing embers. I clenched my fists.

Miss Militia said nothing as I flew us back towards the PRT building.

She only gave the faintest of sighs when her feet touched the rooftop, but her aura had more relief than I would ever dare point out to her.

"So... about Shadow Stalker... Are we cool, or-"

"Do you know how this ends, Fax?"

I was startled by the abrupt question. I didn't think she'd planned on asking it either, judging from her emotions.

"No," I said honestly. And that frightened me more than I cared to admit.
Chapter End Notes

Stupid consequences. Hate you.

Thanks to Kittius for idea-bouncing.
"Hey, is everything alright? I haven't heard from you in a few days."

"I think we need to talk."

Oh, hey, she responded!

In the most frightening way possible.

The cafe was busy, sounds of talking and silverware and a bustling kitchen almost drowning out the sound of noon traffic. She was waiting for me in the private section in the back, even though we weren't in costume. Which really didn't help my nerves at all.

She looked nervous too, anxious-stressed-afraid-unhappy, although her expression was as still as she could manage. Not the best poker face I'd seen lately, although that bar was set pretty high. Business attire; probably taking a break from work. She looked... older.

I gave her a soft smile as I slipped into the seat across her, and she returned it fractionally, edges of her lips twitching.

"Hey, Kayden."

Her expression softened slightly. "Hey, Chris."

We were silent as the waitress hustled in and out with a pair of glasses of water. I took a sip, my throat suddenly dry.

"So what did-"

"I think we should stop seeing each other."

I blinked. Did Kayden just... break up with me? I didn't think we were dating...

I covered my confusion with another sip of water, giving her a chance to explain.

She didn't.

I cleared my throat. "Ah... could I ask why?"

"I don't think I have to explain my reasoning to you, Fax. If you respected me as much as you say you do, you'd leave it at that and accept my decision." Her words were cold, but I could hear the strain in her voice, see the way her hands twisted the napkin in her lap, the riot of emotions in her aura.

"Forgive me, Kayden, but I get the impression you don't want to do this."

Her nostrils flared. "If you-"
"Your ex?"

Ooh, hit the mark on that one. *Damnit, Kaiser, you shiteel.*

She set her jaw. "I made this decision on my own, Fax. I hoped you would respect that."

Damnit. "If that's really what you want, I'll... I'll walk away." She flared with relief-disappointment-fear, and fuck if that wasn't an ugly combination. "I hope you'll give me a chance to talk things through, though. I may have other options you hadn't considered."

She seemed to wrestle with herself for a moment, emotions boiling and shifting chaotically. When she caught my eye, I gave her a small, sad smile, and she looked away.

Finally she blew out a sigh. "I wish you wouldn't make this so hard on me, Chris." Oh good, it was Chris again. That was encouraging.

I gave her time to collect her thoughts.

"It... Aster's father, is..."

When she stalled, I gave her a sympathetic look. Gently, I offered, "Threatening to take Aster?"

Huh. Wasn't expecting surprise. "What? No! He's changed."

Oh.

Oh no. Poor Kayden...

She must have seen something in my expression, because she started talking hurriedly, insistently. "He's not the same. With everything going on between the ABB collapsing, Coil, the Teeth, the Ambassadors... he's humbled." At my skeptical look - I tried, I really did - she went on. "He begged me, Chris. Got down on one knee and begged. If you have any idea of what kind of man he was, how proud he was, you'd believe me."

Oh, I had ideas. They were spinning around my head already.

"And he said he could protect Aster."

"Y-yes. The Teeth, they don't play by the rules, and Accord is vicious, uncompromising. And like you said, Coil isn't afraid to use our private identities against us..." Oh fuck me. I contributed to this? She bit her lip, then continued, "I'm not jumping back into his arms, Chris. I know better. And you should give me more credit than that." I gestured, conceding the point. "This would be more equal, a true partnership. I could pick my own team, choose my own targets. He's made mistakes, but he's-"

"-Desperate to keep his strongest hitter on his side?"

She did not like that one bit. "Don't talk to me like I'm an idiot. I know why he needs me. But no matter what he's asking for, or why, the truth is my friends need me. The city needs me. Aster needs me."

I sighed, rubbed my forehead with one hand. "And you'll do absolutely anything to keep her safe."
"Yes."

"And where does that tie in with cutting me out?"

She hesitated, then hardened her features. "I know how you treat the Empire. You know where I live, where Aster sleeps. I won't be there if you look for me, Chris."

I looked at her, mouth agape. "You can't honestly believe I would do anything to hurt Aster."

Her lips were a narrow line. "I've only known you a few weeks."

I grimaced. Better the devil you know? Goddamnit. That had Kaiser's dirty hands all over it.

"If- if you need money, I can-"

"It's not about money. It's about Aster."

There had to be something... "The Protectorate." It was subtle, but I saw the distaste-doubt-fear in her aura. "No, really. They'll take you, criminal past and all. They would be thrilled."

"If my identity gets leaked..."

"They'd give you a new name. Move you to another city. One where you wouldn't have to worry about fighting your old friends." She seemed... flustered. Like what I said went against what she thought I'd say. Happy to surprise her, I supposed. Even if she seemed frustrated, too. Maybe I was getting somewhere with this. "And... yeah, ok, the Protectorate may not offer as much freedom, but they do protect the people you care about."

"Then why don't you join?" Her tone was biting, snippy.

I couldn't help but snap back. "Because you can protect yourself!"

...

Fuck.

I didn't think either one of us was expecting me to say that.

But wow, that aura was colorful. And her expression was priceless. Although I was sure mine wasn't much better.

She managed to speak first. The anger was mostly buried, smothered under doubt-fear-concern-guilt-fondness-fear. "Look, Chris, I... I care about you too, but I'm not really in a place where I can..."

I waved her off. "This isn't about that. You asked about me, and I answered. We're talking about you. And Aster."

Master of verbal jujitsu.

At least she seemed happy to let that particular tangent drop. "I will... reconsider the Protectorate. As an option."
"Ok. Good."

She was still a bit flushed. It looked cute on her.

"I want you to know... I'd never hurt Aster. Or try to use her against you." She tried to speak, but I held up a hand. "But if this is really what you want, I'll... leave you be."

Her voice was quiet, a bit drained. "Thank you."

Just as quietly, I added, "But if you need me, for... help, or money, or moral support, or anything else... you know how to reach me."

Her eyes sought mine, and she sighed out a faint, "Ok."

I paused. "Except..."

"Hm?"

"Maybe not babysitting."

She snorted in surprised laughter. It was adorable.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Husr and Kittius for idea-bouncing and feedback for this chapter.

It was a hard conversation to write. I'm still not 100% confident about it.
Day 26.71 : Guilty Pleasures

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I passed by Butcher's apartment - or, at least, the apartment she and the Teeth were squatting in - without stopping. Maybe I was too mentally and emotionally exhausted from my talk with Kayden to risk life and sanity today. Maybe I'd just gain another meta-charge.

On the other hand, that gyro place looked pretty good. Not like I'd ended up actually eating at lunch, and I was hungry. Funny how many non-white restaurants and businesses were so close to Empire territory; either they were unable or unwilling to leave, or delicious ethnic food was a guilty pleasure of many a white supremacist. Both seemed likely.

Kinda crowded. No one openly Nazi-affiliated, but I imagined even if they were they would want to hide it, lest their neighbors know their dark secret - a love of shawarma. Scandalous.

I'd already made it to the counter when I felt the parahumans enter my radar. In the kitchen? What the hell was the Butcher doing in the kitchen of a Mediterranean restaurant?

Did she just need to get out? Was she onto me following her? Did she, too, have a secret craving for fresh hummus?

The kitchen employees were agitated but not obviously so, and even their auras just had muted fear. And not even all of them, just the peek of those I saw in the kitchen. I supposed it wasn't cause for too much alarm, then... surely if I went all crusading hero on them it would only lead to civilians in the crossfire and tragic collateral damage...

Discretion was the better part of valor, right? I could choose a better battlefield than this. And if the Teeth went around butchering (heh) random civilians instead of just threatening them they'd surely have drawn more Protectorate and law enforcement attention by now.

I grabbed three more charges in the Butcher and... felt no different. Hm. Not like I could really test her power. More than once, anyway.

I didn't stay to eat.

My shawarma wrap tasted like compromise.

---

When I texted Miss Militia where I found Butcher today, she called me, much to my dismay. No, I didn't engage. No, nobody seemed hurt or particularly terrified. No, I didn't know why a renowned horror movie supervillain was hiding in a restaurant kitchen. No, I still wasn't at liberty to discuss how I found her.

She did, however, ask me a different question - was I up for training the next morning. At five goddamn AM. Who did that? Seriously.

---
Dinner at the Pelham household was... pizza. It wasn't even around the dinner table, either; everyone just grabbed a plate and went off to do their own thing. I followed Pan-Pan, who sat down in front of the television.

"Aunt Sarah is sleeping," Amy mentioned offhand when I asked about dinner. I raised an eyebrow. Seemed... mundane.

"Sleeping."

"Yes. She's had a long day."

"Amy."

She gave a put-upon sigh. "She was hurt." Amy said it casually, like it was an everyday occurrence. Her aura betrayed her fear-guilt-worry, though.

"Shit, is she ok?" Amy gave me a look. Oh, right, best healer in the world. "What happened?"

She shrugged. "Run-in with the Empire. Apparently Night and Fog are back in town from Boston. Calling in reinforcements with all the newcomers in town, I suppose." Goddamnit Purity. Fuck you, Kaiser.

"You're being awfully cavalier about this." Ooh, meat-lovers. Yes please.

Rather than answer, Amy just brushed me off, voice suspiciously casual. "How's the mindflayer coming along?" Hm. Not wanting me to involve myself in dangerous situations while still building up Butcher? I got it, but still...

I grinned, despite my concern. "This one goes to eleven."

She nodded, reference completely going over her head. Too subtle? Or... surely Spinal Tap was a thing on Bet. Maybe she was just too young. "And you'll still quit when you get to twenty?"

"That's the plan."

That was the plan Carol and Sarah had agreed to, once I admitted I had accidentally picked up the Butcher.

Carol had gotten up from the table when I told them about my dream. After they'd finished not-quite-shouting at me for my carelessness, anyway. Sarah, on the other hand, seemed to shrink in on herself. I looked between the two of them, concerned at their reaction.

"Chasing the Butcher..." Sarah said quietly.

"I have to do it. I'll be as careful as I can, but."

Surprisingly, she interrupted me. "I get it. I don't like it, but I get it."

I didn't quite breathe a sigh of relief.
"Carol?"

She was pacing the kitchen. Stalking, really, fists clenching tight, aura a dark, ugly blur. She stopped when her sister called her name, then fixed me with an intense, unyielding look. "If you're spotted, you will run." It wasn't a question.

I nodded, not wanting to upset her further by talking, much less talking back. Both of them seemed unusually distraught. Why were they...

Oh. Oh, shit.

I hadn't meant to lean on their trigger event trauma, but... there were unfortunate similarities. Trapped in the dark, powerless, at the mercy of another...

It was ugly, but they understood.

As long as I followed their rules, made every effort not to become the next Butcher, they tolerated me. The best I could hope for, really, under the circumstances.

At least they didn't have delusions of being able to take on the Teeth by themselves, even with my help. The Dallons and Pelhams got the same status reports I gave Miss Militia, just with less unspoken disapproval. Mostly. And from what I heard, they were planning on joint actions to that effect.

Back in the present, I gave Amy something that might have been uncharitably described as a smirk. "Where did you learn that term, anyway?" I leaned in conspiratorially, whispering, "Secretly a tabletop nerd?"

"Uber and Leet had a couple videos on dungeons and dragons. That's all." She was blushing. Just a bit. And of course her aura was lit up with embarrassment-shame-guilt, but not the usual somber tones, at least.

"Mmhmm. No shame in-"

"Hush. Dog Whisperer is back on."

We ate in silence for a while, til my stewing thoughts prompted me to speak up again. During a commercial break, of course. Man, this show was way more intense on Bet. "Seriously though, is everyone ok?"

Amy sighed, anxiety-worry-doubt-fear-guilt. "Because I was there, yes. Otherwise..."

"Shit, Amy. I'm sorry."

She just shrugged again, trying to play it off.

"I could help, you know. Even in a support role. Got two-thirds of Othala, now."

"Not my call to make." She was uncomfortable with the idea, but her emotions were so muddled it was hard to tell why. She noticed me peering at her, glowered, forcibly pointed my head back to the television with a freckled hand. "Quit it. One Gallant is bad enough."
Bah. It was a conversation I'd have to have with the whole team anyway. I just had to hope they could all stay alive until then. They'd made it this far... hell, they did fine til Leviathan in canon. I needed to trust that they could take care of themselves.

Damnit, I was doing entirely too much of that lately.

Chapter End Notes

Thirteen out of fourteen Butchers agree, fresh hummus is delicious.
"Hey Pan-Pan."

Amy calmly slipped a bookmark in the book she was reading, put it down, turned to face me, and narrowed her eyes. Her aura was... wow, that was grim.

"I... take it you don't like that nickname?"

She said nothing, but Grue had nothing on her billowing dark cloud of irritation.

I waved my fingers at her. "I've got Gallant's other powers too, you know. Don't make me shoot 'cheer' beams at you."

Silence. Bitter, black silence.

"Ugh. Fine. Amy."

"Yes, Chris?"

"You got anything to help me sleep? I'm supposed to be on the Rig at five AM and I'm not tired. I'd just drink myself unconscious, but I'm supposed to be training, so..."

"You want me to use my powers on you."

"I mean, if it's not too much trouble."

"To help you sleep."

"...Yes."

"Chris."

"Yes, Amy?"

"You're a biokinetic."

"Doesn't mean I know what I'm doing."

She rubbed her face with her hands and made a groaning, grumbling noise. "Isn't that the truth."

In the end she just handed me a sleeping pill from her medicine cabinet and told me to, and I quote, "Use your bullshit powers and mimic its effects the next time you want to knock yourself out." Which... I mean, it worked. And was kind of neat, watching how the different chemicals interacted with my-
Gahfuck!

I narrowly resisted blasting the accursed alarm clock to bits. Also because it was my phone and I needed that. And also because blasting holes in the walls of my hotel would have been bad.

...Why did I agree to this again?

Five AM should only ever be experienced while staying up partying from the night before. The sun wouldn't be up for hours, for fuck's sake. Why would they even ask me there so early? Was this a bootcamp-like situation where they wanted me to suffer to make me better? Or... hmm. Did they know when my power recharged and wanted to maximize the chances I wouldn't pick up any of their abilities while I was on the Rig?

Or maybe Miss Militia was just a sadist, paying me back for the first time we went flying.

Maybe all of the above.

Whatever. In any case, Tinkerfuel to the rescue. And, following Amy's advice on the sleeping pills, I paid attention to what all that caffeine did to my system so I could... huh. That really wasn't good for my heart.

Meh. It was delicious and I needed the help waking up.

I floated over to the Rig, shimmering in the dark, force field like a rainbow oil slick surrounding the floating base. A small opening irised open at the top, and I took it as an invitation, dropping down onto what looked like a helicopter landing pad. Miss Militia was waiting for me, curse her fresh-as-a-daisy-at-the-ass-crack-of-morning Noctis bullshit.

"Fax."

"Miss Militia."

"I wasn't sure you were going to show up."

"Owe somebody money?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny that."

Eye-crinkles met eye-crinkles as we smiled at each other behind our masks. "Follow me."

"Yes'm."

She raised one eyebrow fractionally, but turned and led us into the Rig proper. After a security check, of course.

"So..."

She didn't pause as she led me through labyrinthine corridors and featureless hallways, doors labeled cryptically and quite possibly deliberately inaccurately. Pretty sure I saw a bunch of people leave a
conference room labeled "Supplies 108B". She did, however, half-turn, acknowledging me.

"...What exactly did I sign myself up for?"

"To start, CQC and situational awareness training. Your trainer will also set a baseline for your strength, reflexes, flexibility, diet, routine-"

"Wait, 'your trainer'? Is that not you?"

She slowed to a stop in front of another featureless door. "Oh, no. We thought it would be best to pair you with someone more suited to your fighting style. And temperament."

Before I could ask what she meant, she opened the door to reveal a broad room, padded floors and racks of equipment along the walls indicating a gym-like purpose. And in the center, standing at ease, was a tall, muscular man in gym shorts and tank top emblazoned with the PRT logo. His aura was smooth, anticipation-readiness-patience.

The well-trimmed beard, V-shaped visored helmet and ten foot tall wooden halberd nearly scraping the ceiling were all something of a hint as to who this mysterious trainer might be.

"Armsmaster?"

"Fax." His voice was even, but I saw a flicker of irritation-disappointment in his emotions before they were quickly smoothed over. Shit, dude, I wasn't too happy about this to begin with, no need to be a dick about it.

"I'll leave you to it," Miss Militia said, anticipation-amusement-alert, then slipped away around a corner and out of sight. That wasn't a good sign.

I stepped forward, trying to ignore the impending sense of foreboding. He was cut - and I mean, damn - but he wasn't wearing his armor... either to prove a well-trained normal could still give me a run for my money, or because he didn't want to reveal any of the undoubtedly myriad anti-Fax countermeasures he'd built into his Swiss Army power armor. Either way, it was almost reassuring. With all my powers, how much damage could he really do?

"Are you ready to start training?" Damn, he really had a resonant voice, a bass that gave mine a run for its money. Could've been made for radio. The anticipation was back, but none of it showed in his voice or stance.

"Sure. Are we starting with-"

And then he hit me.

Chapter End Notes

BRING ON THE PAIN

Ow ow stop it hurts
Thanks again to Kittius for idea-bouncing.
"Ow!"

"Keep moving!"

Fuck walking, I was flying around the training room. It wasn't nearly big enough to avoid his ten-foot-plus reach, though. He spun around that halberd like he was a helicopter trying to lift off, and my outer shields shattered as fast as I could bring them back up again, one-two-three rapid-fire strikes hitting harder than a sledgehammer. Felt like a hammer between my ears every time it cracked, too.

"Scenario. You're on patrol and see a mugging in progress. What do you do?" Fucker didn't even seem winded.

"What? Ow!" Bastard was double-tapping me!

"Keep moving!"

I grabbed at the halberd but he spun it out of my reach with dismissive ease. I tried charging him, but he dropped to the ground almost instantaneously, brought his legs between us, and kicked me spinning into the ceiling. Which, curiously enough, was also padded. He then kipped up back onto his feet, catching the halberd with one hand before it could even fall over.

"What do you do?" he asked, barking out the question. Christ, his aura hadn't changed since we started. He wasn't even enjoying this. Much. I wasn't sure if that made it better or worse.

I floated back onto my feet, dizzy. "Um. Protect the civilian first, disarm and disable the mugger?"

"Keep moving!"

I did, trying to stay out of his reach. What powers could I use without revealing my hand like he was undoubtedly trying to get me to do? Sizing up was out; Skidmarking the ground beneath his feet to throw him off was out; I was afraid beaming him might actually seriously harm him and I wasn't about to reveal Othala's powers if I could help it; Grue's darkness, Spitfire's flames, Newter's juices, Gregor's foam, all out; disappearing or telekinetically controlling his halberd were both out. Fuck! What did I have left?

So I hit him with pain. I mean, they knew I had Butcher One already, right?

Fucker didn't even twitch.

He did, however, slam me against the wall with the axe-end of his halberd. Perhaps a smidgen harder than he had before. Thank god for Browbeat cushioning the blow... was he counting on that? Damnit!

I flinched, but he was just extending a hand out to help me up. I took it, half-floating to standing again. "Butcher One?" he asked, almost casually.
"Yeah. Wasn't too painful? I haven't tested it much."

"I wouldn't use it on a civilian."

"...Are you a Brute?"

He smirked a bit. "No."

I wasn't sure I believed him. I mean, I'd been wrong before, right?

The smirk faded. "Are you ready to keep going?"

I flew across the room.

Oh, now there was amusement in his aura. Fuck you too, dude.

---

I scraped against the ceiling again, trying to put some distance between us. He'd set aside the halberd and was fighting purely defensively, but just his counterattacks were putting some serious dents in my dignity.

"You won't always have room to maneuver. Adapt!"

For fuck's sake, I'd fought two giantesses and a close-range telekinetic and won, stop treating me like a chump!

Granted, I'd had the element of surprise and several canisters of tear gas on my side, and the twins were too big for the enclosed space... and Alabaster had been caught by surprise... and Oni Lee had been ambushed...

I thought I was good at this, damnit.

Decent, at least.

...Shut up.

"Stop trying to hit me and hit me!"

In frustration, I let loose a New Wave beam at his center of mass, but the slippery fuck just sidestepped it, jump-kicked off the wall with the same fluid movement, and smashed his knee into my groin.

Thank god he didn't double-tap.

...I owed Glory Girl a fruit basket.

---

"Boxing!" He switched his stance, one pad held at face height, the other in front of his stomach. I switched my stance too, relying on fuzzy memories and vague muscle memory from Uber, jab-cross-
hook-uppercut.

"Muy Thai!" Pads shifted only to be met with a flurry of elbows and knees.

"Capoeira!" Oh hell yeah, I could fly now! Spinning back-kick with a low sweep he deftly jumped over.

A certain epic rap battle came to mind. 'I'm switching up my styles like the Beatles with their pieces, each is such a wonder with a plethora of features...'

We settled into a rhythm, a staccato beat of fists, knees, elbows and feet thumping into pads, always exactly where they were supposed to be. Armsmaster was good. Very good. And also sweaty. At least I managed to accomplish that much.

"Scenario. Hostage situation, one gunman with a weapon to a civilian's head."

"Shield bubble around the weapon-ow!" It was more surprise than pain, as he wasn't hitting hard enough to break Glory Girl's shield, but he was fucking fast. I never saw it coming.

"Focus!"

"Remove the weapon," punch kick, "shoot to disable," knee DUCK, "and ensure the safety of the hostage!"

"Krav Maga!"

---

Finally, we took a break. Sort of.

He passed me a bottle of water, which I immediately started chugging. He took measured sips of his own, towel draped over his shoulders. Mine was almost soaked through. I'd ditched the jacket half an hour in, along with the hat (and only just remembered to take them off manually instead of disappearing them by reflex). And, because I could learn, I was wearing long sleeves beneath the jacket. Even if I was regretting not having shorter sleeves.

"Scenario."

I groaned. Even on break?

Undeterred, he continued, "You're in close quarters with the Butcher. What do you do?" He was breathing heavily - which did interesting things to his chest and back - but he didn't sound out of breath, even as he continued to question me.

"Run the fuck away," I answered automatically. I may have also leaned away slightly, keeping him in my line of sight. If nothing else, I was certainly developing some reflexive behaviors.

He didn't attack, though, still speaking between sips. "Civilians in crossfire. If she pursues, they will likely be injured."

My immediate impulse was 'run anyway,' but I didn't think he'd appreciate that answer. I wasn't sure if that's what I'd do in that situation either, if I was being honest with myself.
"Do I have tranquilizers?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"Depends. Can I have some tranquilizers?"

He frowned slightly. "Standard tranquilizers are too slow and too unpredictable against Brutes."

"Got anything better?"

Armsmaster smoothed over his features, only a flicker of annoyance-gratification-irritation coloring his aura. Come on, that was a perfectly innocent question.

He changed topics. "Do you have any sort of exercise routine?"

I snorted. "I haven't been borrowing Browbeat's power for fun." Although, to be fair, fun was definitely had.

The faintest of frowns, irritation-annoyance.

"Ah... I'm sure you're not too happy with me not having to work as hard as you to stay in shape." Not that he showed any irritation with Dauntless I could see, anyway. Either Tattletale was full of shit or he was really good at hiding it.

"I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed."

Damnit, not him too. I got enough of that from Miss Militia. "You're not my real dad."

He gave a small exhale through the nose that might have been, charitably, described as a chuckle. "I'm not even five years older than you. On the outside."

"Yeah, but it's what's on the inside that counts."

"That's not what I meant and you know it." His words were harsh, but his tone was, if anything, slightly amused. Take that, fanon-robo-Armsmaster!

"Speaking of segues, what do you think Mouse Protector is-"

"Absolutely not."

Aww.

---

After a bit more sparring, and a walkthrough of some calisthenics that would work despite my Brute rating (assuming I wasn't using flight), he continued pestering me about my life habits while I floated, legs in too much pain to stand despite biokinesis doing its damnedest.

"How would you describe your diet?"

"Abysmal."
"I see." Slight frown again. "Drug use?"

I paused. "Are you asking as my trainer or as an officer of the law?"

"I'll take that as a 'yes'."

"No comment."

"Do you drink alcohol?"

"Does the pope shit in the woods?"

He seemed to be taking notes, even though his hands weren't involved. Eye-controlled checklist inside a heads up display in his helmet? Wouldn't be surprised.

"I'm giving you an exercise routine."

"Aww."

"No whining."

"You're not my real-"

"No, but I'm sure if he were here he'd tell you the same thing."

I narrowed my eyes at him, but he didn't so much as flinch. "You're lucky you're right."

"Our next training is Friday. Group exercises. Remember that if you don't keep with the training, you're not just disappointing yourself, you're letting down your teammates."

"Oh my god is it Catholic in here or is it just me?"

When he didn't answer I looked over to see him fiddling with his helmet.

Then, to my surprise, he slipped it off. Aquiline nose, strong cheekbones, piercing blue eyes and short-cropped black hair somehow unaffected by sweating in a helmet for several hours.

_Damn._

He gave me an easygoing grin, held out his hand. "Colin Wallis."

I was not expecting that extension of trust. Were we gym-bros now? Or was it just a calculated risk considering his lack of dependents and relative lack of civilian life?

Fuck it. I pulled down my scarf and shook his hand. "Chris Reich."

Shit, he really was handsome. How was he not pale as hell considering how much time he probably spent in that armor? Not to mention he didn't have tan lines. Like, anywhere. Did he have tanning sessions between his endless workouts? Because fuck, those shoulders; he clearly worked out a lot. When did he even have time to Tinker? Dragon was a lucky woman.
"Chris."

"Mhm."

"You're still holding my hand."

Damn! I let go and *no it wasn't warm in here shut up.*

Oh, and he was fucking smirking, too. Dude *knew* he looked good.

Thankfully, the smirk was shortlived, replaced with a more genuine, warmer smile. "You did well today."

I snorted, ever so slightly relieved. "I got my ass kicked."

"The first step to improving is knowing where you have room to improve."

"I've got nothing *but* room, apparently."

He chuckled. "I mean it. You did pretty well for yourself. You stuck with it."

Damn, he had a really nice smile.

After a moment, that smile faded a bit. "Why are you training, Chris?"

"Because Miss Militia guilted me into it."

"Because Miss Militia guilted me into it."

A slight snort. "Besides that."

Why was I training?

I felt a weight pull on my chest, sinking into my stomach. "To make fewer mistakes."

He put a hand on my shoulder, gripped it slightly. His expression, and his aura, were all *sympathy-sadness-regret* "I'm sorry for your loss."

I didn't know what to say. I knew it by his tone, his emotions; he'd lost people before. He hadn't gotten as good as he was, as high-ranked as he was, without making mistakes along the way.

Friends, teammates... maybe even a Ward. It sucked. It all sucked.

He squeezed once more, then let go. "I'm... also sorry if I was... insensitive. In the debrief, afterward."

Shit, I barely remembered that. I shrugged, and he nodded slightly, his emotions shifting a bit from *guilt* to *relief."

For a moment, we both seemed at a loss.

Then Armsmaster cleared his throat, breaking the somber, somewhat awkward silence.

"Want to see my lab?"
"Hell yeah I do!"

Chapter End Notes

Training montage!

Also, to forestall some complaints about the mid-combat question-and-answer session, Armsmaster wasn't looking for correct answers. He was just trying to see if Fax could walk and talk at the same time. Rest assured, actual scenario discussions and procedure would be part of future training sessions.

Thanks again to Kittius for idea-bouncing and suggestions.
Day 26.74 : Into the Tinker's Den

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I was kind of nervous. Seeing a Tinker's lab... that was a pretty big trust thing, wasn't it?

Armsmaster didn't put his helmet back on as he walked me through the featureless corridors, and it was probably a moot point considering they probably had cameras everywhere, but I put my scarf back on to follow. He didn't say anything about it either way.

More security checkpoints, nozzles in the walls and ceiling, and then a vault-like door that looked more appropriate in front of a fallout shelter than a workshop later, and... oooh, shiny!

Armsmaster stepped aside to let me look over the fruits of his labor. A conveyer belt with boxy parts that looked like several industrial ovens stacked next to each other that was probably some sort of fabricator. Racks of power armor that looked like some of the bases I'd made in Fallout 4. A modular workbench that looked like it was just as comfortable working on RC cars as the full-sized versions. I stood in the center of the room and soaked it all in, both to get the full experience and because I was terrified of touching anything. Armsmaster just watched as my eyes wandered, interest-pride-curiosity with a hint of worry on the edges.

Don't worry man, I won't play with your toys.

Actually, knowing the Protectorate, this was probably a test in itself. If I had copied Armsmaster, presenting me with all these goodies would have been like putting a kid in a candy store. Clever, clever.

My eyes were drawn to one particular bit of schizo-tech on one corner of the workbench - what looked like a knife without a blade. Before I could ask, a video screen flickered to life, revealing a familiar face.

"Hello, Fax."

"Hey, Dragon." I smiled, she smiled, it was cool. Yeah, I'm on friendly terms with one of the most powerful capes on the planet, no big deal. I heard Armsmaster shift behind me and toned down my smile a bit. Nice enough to let me into his inner sanctum, no need to make him insecure about his one true love.

"You two do a lot of work together?" I asked casually.

"We do collaborate quite a bit. I value Armsmaster's insight and creativity."

I'm sure you do, Dragon. I'm sure you do.

"What's this thing?" I asked about the obvious prototype knife-thing.

Dragon shifted her gaze, looking past me towards Armsmaster, deferring to his discretion. I heard his bass rumble fill the small - no, efficient - workshop. "A prototype blade concept."
"There's no blade. What is, like a lightsaber?"

I could hear his small grin in his voice. "Something like that." I didn't need to turn around to see the pride in his aura.

Hmm. Prototype blade, this time of canon... nanothorn?

"Crazy sharp, I'm guessing?"

"That's the goal," he said offhand, but with a bit of a smirk in his tone.

You know what? I liked this Armsmaster (even if he kicked my ass seven ways to Sunday). I decided to throw him a bone.

"Sharp enough to cut an Endbringer?" I asked, keeping my tone casual. He didn't answer, although he could have just been deciding how to respond. I continued before he could say anything that might have been a denial or deflection. "Shame they get tougher the deeper you go down. Real reality-warping shit." I flicked my eyes over his way to see him looking a bit constipated, aura shimmering with irritation-wonder-annoyance-pride-curiosity. "Or so I've heard," I finished with deliberate nonchalance.

"That's an interesting theory," he finally replied, jaw moving like he had been chewing on those words for a bit.

"I read it on the internet."

He made a grunt that might have been an acknowledgement, or maybe just clearing his throat. I saw him look towards the monitor, where Dragon had one eyebrow raised - she quickly lowered it once I looked that way as well, taking an expression of pleasant neutrality.

My, that was an awkward silence.

I smiled politely, the picture of innocence, looking around the workshop as if I hadn't just dropped a bomb on them.

Ultimately, Armsmaster cleared his throat again, deliberately changing the topic. "You mentioned tranquilizers earlier for use against the Butcher. Coincidentally," oh, no stress on that word at all, no sir, "I had previously been developing Brute-rated tranquilizers designed to counteract regeneration, primarily as a contingency against Lung."

He reached into one of several hundred anonymous, unlabeled drawers - anti-Stranger defense, or were labels inefficient? - and pulled out half a dozen of the surprisingly small syringes, each individually wrapped and sealed, and laid them on the workbench beside me. "They were designed to be self-contained and easy to use, in case a field agent needed access to them. I'd even printed instructions on the side."

"Neat."

He gave me a carefully neutral look. "Unfortunately, as they are both untested-in-the-field Tinkertech and property of the Protectorate and PRT, it would be unlawful and irresponsible for me to hand one over to an unaffiliated hero, however helpful they may be."
"Oh."

A small shrug. "It is unfortunate. I cannot help you."

He then stepped past me, towards Dragon, blocking off her screen slightly with his muscular bulk. "Dragon, how is progress on the Cawthorne model coming along?"

She looked directly at him and gave him a small smile. "I think I should have a working model in production soon, with your help."

"I'm glad to hear it."

They chatted like two lovey-dovey nerds with terms that went far over my head for a bit, then he cleared his throat and turned back towards me. "I'm sorry for that, Fax. We Tinkers can be so easily distracted at times."

I gave him a warm smile. "It's no trouble." My smile widened. "Besides, you two are cute together."

They blinked. They glanced at each other. Armsmaster's aura went interesting colors. He clapped his hands together, suddenly all business. "I'm glad you enjoyed the tour of my lab, but I'm afraid I have work to do. I'll escort you out."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Kittius for essentially beta'ing once again.
"We would like you to sign a non-disclosure agreement before you go."

"Hm? Oh, right, that makes sense."

Colin hadn't put his helmet back on again, keeping it tucked beneath his arm. Considering he'd unmasked, some legal paperwork saying I wouldn't reveal that information wouldn't really stop me, but would probably give them peace of mind.

He took me aside to yet another mislabeled room - this one was "Video Conference 105C" - with a small table, several chairs, a couch and a potted plant. I took the couch, and he took a chair and moved it beside me, sitting down in it carefully - oh, right, probably used to power armor. Heh.

Let's see. Identities, yadda yadda, penalties, etc., layout and structure, defenses and countermeasures, an extra page for the content of his lab, PRT personnel, pay fine up to so much, may include prosecution and so forth. Seemed legit. I almost signed my real name, caught myself just in time. "Hey, I can sign with my cape name, right?" Armmaster nodded, and I signed "Fax" in tight, cursive swirls. Gotta practice that more before I actually became famous... may I never see that day.

He took the clipboard, checking it over, then nodded. We stood up, but he paused as he reached for the door. "Oh, I almost forgot. Ethan wanted you to give him a call for some reason."

"Oh, cool." I wondered what Assault wanted with me.

I didn't realize my mistake until I saw his lips press together slightly, gratification-irritation-anger flashing in his aura. "So... who is Ethan?" I added, doing my best to sound genuinely curious, but it was too late. Fucking hell, that was sneaky. Goddamnit.

Armmaster said nothing, tight-lipped, just handing me a business card. "Thank you for filling out this non-disclosure agreement, Fax."

Subtle as a brick, but message received. I gave him the least-forced smile I could and nodded. "Of course. Secret identities are a big deal."

See? No threat here. Just ignore that slipup, please.

Fuck.

I might have flown off a bit quicker than I flew in.

---

Argh. I'd been doing so fucking well, too.

I flew aimlessly in the early morning twilight, stewing in my annoyance and regret. Three fucking hours with Armmaster and I'd kept all my powers in check, but one casual comment and my OOC
knowledge just... slipped out. Goddamnit!

It was probably because I was fucking starving. Should've grabbed breakfast before training. The sidewalk didn't quite crack as I landed in front of a kolache stand in my haste to rectify my food situation, but it was a close thing. Nobody seemed to care, or pay me much attention. The perks of a cape-heavy city, I suppose.

And of course right then a run-down van with blacked-out windows chose that precise fucking moment to pass by me on the street, three parahumans lurking within.

And of course one of them was the fucking Butcher.

I didn't even question it as I grabbed my kolache and three charges for the day, one right after the other. I just watched as it idled at the stoplight for a bit before continuing onward.

I did sigh as I texted Miss Militia with one hand, other hand delivering much-needed greases and carbs and calories. No, I wasn't pursuing. No, they weren't actively attacking people. Yet. Where were they going? I checked the street signs and compared them to the mental map of the city I'd been developing over the last few weeks of flying, and... Merchant territory?

Hmm.

As an afterthought, I texted Skidmark too. I was fairly certain he wasn't stupid - or ballsy - enough to take her on in a fight, but he could at least get the hell out of dodge if she was seeking him out.

He didn't reply. I hoped it was because he was too busy evacuating.

---

I looked over the business card, flipping it over in my hand as I lay down on my hotel room mattress. Above it. Whatever.

Ethan Miller, PRT consultant, and a phone number. How strange would it be if it really was just a PRT goon who wanted to have a word with me about something? One way to find out.

Fuck it. I called.

"Hello?" Male, probably around my age, baritone, confident.

"Hi, this is Fax. I got your number from-

"Eyyy!" The tone shift was immediate, from professional to jocular. "Glad you called. You free tonight?"

"Um. I'm not entirely sure who-

"You checked out my wife's ass at the party Friday before last."

Ok, definitely Assault. He didn't sound offended so much as proud; I couldn't help but grin. "In my defense-

"It's a hell of an ass, I know, right? Ow!" There was murmuring away from the phone, a woman's
voice speaking with him. They didn't sound angry so much as scandalized, and their side
conversation ended quickly. "Sorry about that. Some people just can't take a compliment with
grace." I could practically hear the smile in his voice over the phone. "Anyway, I repeat my question;
you free tonight?"

"I mean, I guess. What's up?"

"Since you're training with us now," his voice slipped into an abruptly formal manner of speech, "in
order to better facilitate Protectorate-independent relations, extracurricular recreational and
networking activities have been scheduled, budgeted and approved at the highest levels."

A beat. "Your wife is letting you out to play?"

"With bells on!"

---

"So in the last 48 hours I've risked death and insanity multiple times, threatened a teenager, gotten
lectured for it by a woman with all the guns, gotten dumped by another woman I wasn't even dating,
and suffered through three hours of training from hell. On an empty stomach, no less."

"...Damn."

Ethan was a fairly normal-looking dude. Athletic but not as stacked as, say, Dauntless or
Armsmaster. Only a few inches taller than me, with a mop of brown hair that somehow seemed
artfully tousled instead of messy, a five o'clock shadow, a boyish face, and an ever-present smile.
Despite looking almost average, the man could make a nun blush with a wink and a nod.

He could also drink like a fish, considering we were on our third round and we'd only been hanging
out for twenty minutes. I hadn't planned on drinking all that much - had to maintain the charade, after
all, and loose lips sank ships - but I couldn't just let him win, so I just doubled my liver and kidney
functions and filtered out the extra alcohol through direct biokinesis.

I'd just finished describing why I was so very ready for a night of decompression and relaxation, and
he was the picture of sympathy. "That's rough, man. Having been on the receiving end of both her
lectures and his training, I feel your pain." He paused, then grinned. "Except for the woman
troubles." He leaned back, adopting a relaxed, confident pose. "Can't say I've ever had a problem on
that front."

The cocky bastard.

"Oh yeah? How'd you and your wife get together?"

Somehow his grin grew even wider, and his aura filled with warmth and affection. "Puppy chased
me for ages before she managed to make an honest man of me." Heh. Yeah she did.

Conversation was light, easy, and frequently hilarious. I tried to keep myself from slipping by asking
questions rather than talking, and he had no trouble obliging, spinning wild, improbable, occasionally
anatomically impossible stories that frequently got lost on tangents only to wind up back on the
original story half an hour later. My cheeks hurt from smiling, my gut hurt from laughing, my back
would have hurt from him slapping me on it but for the grace of Glory Girl's shield, and by the tenth
beer - even filtered - I was starting to feel nice and toasty.
"Man, thank you for this."

"Hmm?" He was starting to look a little tilted himself, but his grin and his good cheer never faltered.

"I didn't realize how much I'd been stressed out lately. The last few days have been... kind of a mindfuck."

"That's growing up, man."

I fixed him with a slightly lopsided gaze. "Whaddya mean?"

"You can only fuck around so long before life catches up with you, yannow? Eventually you've gotta stop running from your problems and... make them your own." He nodded to himself, as if affirming his own wise words.

"So, what you're saying is... I need to let the Butcher catch me, then marry her?"

"Exa-wait, no." He held up a finger, then his brows furrowed, and lowered it. "Damnit, that advice usually works."

"'Cuz I don't think I'm ready for that kinda commitment."

"Hold... hold on a minute, I can still make it work."

"That's what he said."

"Ha! No, for real though, gimme a second..." He put on an exaggerated look of concentration, then snapped his fingers. "It's about responsibility. You can only run from it for so long before shit happens. And when shit happens, you can either take that shit, or own that shit."

I considered it for a moment, then nodded. "Scatological, but not untrue."

"I missed my calling as a poet. Another round?"

"Eh, I should really call it a night..."

"No man, come on! You know how many nights out drinking I get approval for from both my boss AND my wife? Let a married man live a little!" He held his hands together in supplication and gave me honest-to-god, grown-ass-adult puppy eyes.

...Aww, I couldn't say no to that face. "Alright, maybe one or two more."

"Woo!"

Things got a bit weird after that.
Thanks to Kittius for helping me figure out what happened next!
"Dear bartender," my text message began, "I have once and for all proven that you are not, in fact, Mouse Protector. The real deal is actually several inches shorter than you."

Shortly following that, "And her tits are bigger."

I grabbed my phone back. "For the record, MP wrote that last part."

I gave her a considering look. She struck a pose. I typed, reading aloud, "That said, she's not wrong."

"Thanks!" Kitty said cheerfully. I wasn't sure she could say things any other way. Well, that or mischievously, playfully, teasingly, occasionally sultrily... I took it back, she had a wide repertoire of both sass and glee.

She was curled up on the hotel couch, feet tucked beneath her, wearing gray sweatpants and a baggy sweater with "I [snowflake] Chicago" on it, mug of crappy hotel coffee clutched tight to her chest. I was in plaid flannel pajama pants and an officially licensed Mouse Protector t-shirt bearing her smiling face (complete with mouse-eared helmet), floating cross-legged in front of the window a few feet away, watching snow fall over the city. Shit to be out in the middle of, but beautiful to watch from indoors.

"So," Kitty said, between sips of her coffee. "Did you get everything out of your system?"

"Hmm?"

"You seemed like you had a lot on your mind last night."

I turned slightly, raising an eyebrow her way. She was grinning over her mug. "What? I'm not just a pretty face, spectacular abs and winning personality."

"Hmm," I grunted, collecting my thoughts. I didn't have to see my tattoos to know they were there, growing with every passing day. The illithid... Even if I filled the second ring, I couldn't be certain with any level of confidence I wasn't doomed to a horrible fate. And that wasn't even considering the rising gang violence in Brockton Bay, the perils of trying to keep my true nature hidden, whatever the whole deal with Kayden was... Distantly, the far future loomed, a dark cloud of uncertainty and doom. My grin faded. I knew I still had time, but the end grew closer every day, and...

And then I nearly tipped over as a sudden weight appeared on my back, arms wrapped around my shoulder and neck, suddenly mug of coffee in my face, hair tickling my ear, body hanging off mine.

"C'mon, don't be all gloomy-pants," Kitty insisted as I swung us both back upright before we hit the ground. Her breath smelled of old alcohol and fresh coffee. "The past is behind you, and tomorrow is a brand new day! Face it with a smile!"

She demonstrated her blinding grin from over my shoulder, and I couldn't help but return it, if not
quite as brilliantly. "A sword against evil, a shield for friends too?" I quoted her cartoon opening song.

Kitty thrust out her coffee to the gray sky and gray city beyond the window, calling out, "The Mouse Protects! And so can you!"

There was a low groan behind us, felt as much as heard, and the shifting of unseen things, like the movement of tectonic plates.

Mouse Protector gasped, then disappeared, reappearing in a crouch on top of a blanket-covered lump on the hotel mattress. "The sleeper awakens! īā īā Ethan fhtagn!"

Ooh, so that's how you pronounce that.

Said sleeper groaned again, or maybe just wheezed under the weight of the heroine perched on his back. Then something shifted, she practically flew backwards (landing gracefully en pointe, not a drop of coffee spilled), and Ethan was now on the floor, facedown, half-covered by blankets, several feet closer to the bathroom.

I watched in fascination as he moved - without using any of his limbs - steadily closer to the bathroom. Like he was the world's slowest luge. He eventually disappeared through the doorway, and I heard retching.

Kitty and I winced in sympathy. Once again I regretted the need for concealing my powers; he really could have used a dose of regeneration. I floated towards the bathroom to check on him, but I could already hear running water from the sink. Had he-

And then he strode out of the bathroom, rubbing his face with a towel, as confident and healthy as you please. Before I could ask did-why-how!? he looked at Kitty, then back at me, then around at the hotel room. With a wide smile he asked, "So! What did I miss?"

---

The three of us devoured flapjacks like starving dogs.

"So you had this bright idea," I said between bites, maple syrup clinging irritatingly to my beard, "to head to Chicago for 'real pizza'. Being the obliging sort, I took us there."

"Fuck Myrddin, and fuck his crows," I slurred.

"Yeah!" Ethan shouted, raising his pint to the heavens.

"Let's go to Chicago and tell him to his face!"

"Buh?"

I was already standing, a bit unsteadily. "Lesgo to Chicago and tell Myrddin he's a shit wizard!"

Ethan stared at me blearily for a moment, then shrugged.

"That... does sound like me..." he began, but Kitty talked over him.
"And then you found yourselves attacked! By murder! A ravenous murder of hyper-intelligent crows!"

"Those came later," I said, and she nodded solemnly at the correction. "First we ran into the capable heroine, who joined our adventuring party."

"Come out, you coward! You phony!" I shouted at the PRT building. Or, at least, I was pretty sure it was the PRT building. Hard to tell with all the snow. And the fact that it was around two in the morning.

"He's... he's probably..." Ethan began, slurring around the hip flask.

"Hiding from us?"

"Sleeping," he finished.

"Oh, he's definitely hiding," a chipper voice called out from down below, in front of the entrance. A cute, petite brunette with a large duffel bag over one shoulder looked at us with mischief in her eyes. "But probably from me!"

I nodded solemnly. "Kitty happened to be in the neighborhood, and fought valiantly alongside us against the sorcerer-king controlling the foul corvid scourge."

"Sorcerer-queen," she corrected primly.

"My mistake," I apologized.

"It was hard to tell with all the robes and feathers," she waved me off, the picture of magnanimity.

Ethan flicked his eyes between us, our expressions matter-of-fact, and I saw the amusement-happiness-playfulness growing in his aura.

"And so we fought against the vile beasts, with Kitty at our side."

"You there!" I declared, coming to an abrupt stop in front of the taxi driver on smoke break. He dropped his cigarette in shock.

"Tell us everything you know about... the crows," Kitty intoned, perched on my shoulders, waving her fingers mystically at him.

"W-what?" He couldn't seem to figure out where to look, switching frantically between my face, Kitty's, and Ethan's, sitting on top of a floating shield bubble with his arms crossed, legs tucked around the foot-wide force field like some sort of bizarre bar stool.

"Just answer the question and we'll leave you be, don't worry about it," Ethan faux-whispered, giving the poor confused man a reassuring wink.

"I don't know anything about crows!" he almost cried, hands up as if we were about to mug him.

"Carry on then, citizen!" I declared, already turning to look for the next local to
interrogate about this confounding mystery.

"No littering! Smoking is bad for you! And eat your vegetables!" Kitty called out over my shoulder as we made our way onward and upward.

"And then what happened," Ethan asked, eyes wide with sheer wonder, trying to suppress the smile threatening to spill over his features.

"You, noble squire, solved the riddle of the crows once and for all, dealing a death-blow to the evil sorcerer-queen." I patted him on the shoulder, full of pride.

"Guys," Ethan began, staring at his phone. Amazing how he was able to keep his balance no matter how I swung that shield bubble.

"I think I see someone over there!" Kitty called out, full of excitement and righteous justice.

"Guys!" he said, a bit louder.

"Hold on tight, we're going ludicrous speed!"

"Guys!" Ethan called out, stopping us in our tracks.

"What!?" Kitty and I answered in unison.

"It says here that crows are native to Chicago."

"And then, our vile foe defeated, we rescued her captives before she could finish the dark ritual that would transform them all into her slave-crows," I explained, as casual as describing the changing of the seasons.

"Naturally," Ethan chimed in, rolling with it. "And I'm sure there was much celebration to be had."

"The hostages turned out to be princesses," Kitty clarified.

I nodded along, adding, "And they were ever so grateful to us, their saviors."

"Pfft. I can do better than that," Kitty slurred, shifting the woman on her lap onto the edge of the sofa and rising to her feet.

"I dunno," I mumbled, looking over the shoulder of the woman pressing her back against me. The woman on stage was hanging upside-down by her calves, spinning slowly, gyrating hypnotically. "She's pretty good."

"My honor is challenged!" Kitty declared, full of self-righteous determination. "I cannot let this stand!" She pushed between tables, heading towards the stage.

"Go get 'em, Kitty!" Ethan grinned, watching all of this from his own sofa. He wielded a bottle of champagne in one hand, waving off the occasional dancer who offered a table dance with the other. "God, I love you guys," he said, full of booze and mirth.

On one hand, Kitty was, in fact, a natural.
On the other hand, finding out that stripper poles could, in fact, spin on their own was a bit like finding out Santa Claus wasn't real.

And on the gripping hand, Ethan was also a natural.

But then we were kicked out of the strip club.

"Ever so grateful," Kitty echoed with a sly grin, pulling out the three different phone numbers scrawled on napkins and on the back of business cards, one written in lipstick, and laying them out on the table.

"Truly, it was a glorious adventure," I concluded, mopping up the last of the maple syrup with my final bite of flapjack.

We sat in silence for a moment, trying to keep a straight face between the three of us... before we all gave in at once, a cascading giggle failure.

"Ah," Ethan sighed, once the worst had passed, "Puppy's gonna kill me."

"Don't worry!" I reassured him with a proud smile. "I texted her before we left."

Then I handed him my cell so he could see the message I sent: "kidnapping your hubby, lol, bbl", followed by ten angry, unread replies.

Chapter End Notes

I think I have a crush on Mouse Protector.

Also, Ethan makes the best straight man.

Thanks as always to Kittius for helping me with this chapter.
The restaurant was mostly empty, the waitress having left us alone after I paid for our breakfasts, and Kitty had started saying her goodbyes. Ethan had gotten in touch with his wife, judging by all the wincing, and seemed ready to go as well. Numbers were exchanged. We all stood up from the booth. It was my last chance.

"So... I really like you, Kitty, and I want to give you a warning."

"That your heart belongs to another?" She bit her lip, looking soulfully at me.

I couldn't help but crack a smile, but it quickly faded. "Worse than that, I'm afraid."

"Oh crap, he's gone serious," muttered Ethan. "We're all doomed."

"Your nemesis is Ravager, right?"

"Pfft. She thinks she's my nemesis. Tormenting her is more of a hobby, really." Kitty was still grinning, but looking a bit more worried, despite her flippant words.

I took a deep breath. Point of no return. "I have reason to believe that... at some point she hires the Slaughterhouse Nine to go after you."

"...She can't be that stupid," she muttered, giving me an incredulous look. Ethan was watching me intently, with uncharacteristic focus.

"It doesn't end well. As you can imagine."

"...Jesus."

"I'd lay low for a while. Maybe change cities for a few months. Let someone else try to take Ravager in."

"You're serious." She looked at Ethan. "He's serious?"

He had a closed look on his face, turning to me. "Let me guess; you 'read it on the internet', right? Another 'not at liberty to discuss' thing?"

I just nodded.

Kitty looked between us, a bit lost. "Well now I'm well and truly freaking out. The fuck is going on?"

Damn. If her aura hadn't already said it all, I knew then for sure she was rattled; she hadn't sworn once since I met her.

Ethan kept his eyes on me as he answered. "Chris has a strange habit of knowing things. Things that
he couldn't possibly know, or haven't happened yet. I'd take this seriously."

"I'd invite you to come to Brockton Bay with us, but right now the Butcher is in town. I don't want to pull you out of the frying pan only to throw you into the fire."

She gave me a complex look, her emotions in turmoil. "You're a precog?"

"No," I answered truthfully.

"...Did you know you were going to run into me?"

"A happy accident," I said, smiling a bit, still telling the truth.

And then she was hugging me, arms wrapped tight around my neck, feet dangling an inch off the ground. I hugged her back just as tightly, closing my eyes.

God, I just hoped I wasn't too late.

"Thanks, hon," she whispered, then kissed me on the cheek. She stepped away, smile back on her face. A deep, slightly shaky breath. "I guess I'm gonna go off the radar for a bit. People keep telling me I need to take a vacation anyway."

"Stay safe," I said, and she gave Ethan a quick hug and went on her way. With one last wave, she was gone.

Despite all of that... Hate to see her go, love to watch her leave. Heh.

Ethan whirled on me the instant she was out of sight. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it, chewed on his words for a bit.

I spoke first. "I suppose asking you to keep this to yourself is a losing proposition?"

He shook his head with genuine regret. "Sorry Chris. Anything like this, I've gotta report it upstairs."

"I figured." A pause. "Better for her that you guys know about it, though. Keeps her safer."

He gave me a thoughtful look. "And you told her that with me here so I could back you up, make sure she listened."

I nodded. It was worth the risk.

"Did you know about this all along?"

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

"No," I answered, shaking my head. My first deliberate lie to a member of the Protectorate. To someone I respected. "A happy accident, like I said."

He gave me a long stare, and it took all of Uber's skills and Browbeat's biokinesis to meet his gaze without giving anything away.

Eventually, his gaze softened. "You did a good thing, Chris."
"Thanks," I said, guts twisting at his praise. "I just hope it's enough."

---

It was a much longer flight home than I remembered.

Ethan spent most of his time sitting in the shield bubble texting back and forth with someone, presumably his wife. Occasionally he chuckled, but otherwise the trip was absent of the witty banter and good humor I'd come to expect from him.

We were almost back at the Rig when he called out, staring at his phone. "Fax?"

"Hm?" His aura was *alarmed-concerned-determined*. That... wasn't a great sign.

"It's the Butcher."

Chapter End Notes

To quote Kittius, who helped beta this chapter: "Dun dun DUNNN!"
"Last stop, chaos in the streets. Make sure you've taken all of your belongings, thank you for flying Fax Airways."

Assault didn't even bother responding, merely dropping into the edge of the ongoing open gang warfare. He had to borrow a bandanna, because he wasn't about to delay helping out civilians just so he could stop by the Rig and change into his trademark red jumper. He was a blur, and I lost track of him almost immediately.

Me, on the other hand... What was the saying again? Not my circus, not my-

And then I saw a familiar brilliant white beam.

GODDAMNIT PURITY.

Ugh.

I could still leave. Let her suffer the consequences of her own terrible decisions. I mean, she was a flyer, and none of the Teeth I saw had any ranged attacks, really. Except the Butcher, of course... But if I were being uncharacteristically honest with myself, would I have gotten away with as much as I had if other people hadn't stepped in before I suffered from my own bad choices?

With a quick dip behind a building to change into my costume, I flew out over the battlefield to see what the flying fuck was actually going on. Hookwolf was duking it out with a transformed Animos around a whole bunch of Teeth that looked like they'd lost a fight with a blender; Cricket was jumping and flipping around someone else wielding knives in red armor - ohh, that was blood. Ok, Hemorrhagia, then. Kaiser and the twins were maintaining a turtle defense against an explodey-teleporting Butcher, occasionally striking out with jabs of metal whenever she stopped to pull another arrow from the street. Christ, this was the first time I'd actually... seen her...

Jesus fuck she was intimidating. Maybe it was because I knew they were fake, but my Coil-lite simulations of her really didn't do her justice.

And above it all, the brilliant Purity. I zoomed her way and almost got a blast in the face for my troubles.

"Fax? What are you doing here?" she asked, anger-relief-irritation-fear-sadness-guilt-fear racing through her aura.

"Meddling!" I called back cheerfully, and looked down to pick my targets.

"I don't-!"

"Pew-pew, motherfuckers!"

Aaand Hemorrhagia was having a much worse day.
And so was Cricket. Heh. *Whoops.*

"Fax! Could you not!?"

"My aim slipped!" I lied. Let's see, who was - oh, hey, is that Night and Fog creeping on Vex? Looks like they were spotted, but a quick flashbang and the force-field spewer seemed nice and distracted. Except Night wasn't transforming... oh! Right! Shit.

So I blasted Vex just to make up for my mistake. I considered blasting Night while I was at it, but it's not like it would accomplish anything.

On the other hand, it didn't look like they were gonna leave well enough alone, as they were still creeping on the Shaker as if I hadn't just knocked him out. Shit. Would it even help if I blasted them? Too far for a force field, and I wasn't sure it would last long-

Oh hey Assault, nice save.

I made sure to follow Night with my eyes as she bounced against the next building over, lying limp and broken. Then I blinked and she was fine. Oh well.

Kaiser was shouting something behind his wall-of-giantesses, but I couldn't make out what. A fighting retreat perhaps? Hookwolf gave a final incredibly violent swipe of a fore-paw and spun in place, quickly bounding over parked cars and withdrawing from a slightly-stunned Animos.

And then staggered as I blasted him almost in half with a charged beam.

I already had a few words prepared for when Purity scolded me again, but... she wasn't there.

The fuck did she- oh *goddamnit.* I saw her double-helix beams lancing down, covering Kaiser's escape.

Of all the suicidally stupid-

I raced after her, wrapping her in a shield bubble only fractions of a second before the meter-long arrow buried itself halfway through the force-field.

And then I yanked her backwards, up and over and away and she could fly she'd be fine but first I had to make sure the Butcher wasn't-

Oh for fuck’s sake she was following the shield bubble with her exploding teleports. Did she just really hate missing, or was Kaiser already off the battlefield?

A second and then a third arrow smashed into and finally broke the force field containing the slightly rattled Purity, driving a spike between my temples. It would be a little bit before I could replace it and Butcher was already nocking another arrow and *they didn't miss* so even if I got in the way it wouldn't-

Fuck it. I hit the Butcher full blast with double-handed beams.

I think she was as surprised by this as I was. Oh, right - didn't she have a danger-sense? Heh. Fuckin’ Blank, hell yeah.
It didn't stagger her long, though.

"Purity?"

"Fax, what are you-"

"Purity, run."

I didn't have time to see if she listened because there was a burst of heat and pressure and she was right there.

The Butcher.

I rocketed back before she could latch on to me, and then just as suddenly she wasn't there anymore. Heart pounding, I spun in place, looking for her - there! On a nearby rooftop. Eyeballing me with such malice it was almost palpable, even outside the range of my empathic sight. Her head twitched slightly, and I followed her gaze - Purity, retreating. Back turned.

Butcher smiled, reached into the surface of the blacktop roof and pulled out an axe as long as I was tall, wickedly sharp, and flexed her knees, as if preparing to jump... or teleport...

Another blast to the face. Man, my aim was on point today.

I needed to give Purity time to escape. Time to draw some aggro.

"Hey Butch!" I called out, my tone biting, sarcastic, only a bit panicked. "Those skulls make you look fat!"

She just sneered up at me, face blackened and charred but she didn't even seem to notice as she reached back to swing her axe and-

This time when she exploded in front of me, I didn't pull away. I charged towards her, getting beneath her arms and hook-uppercut-hook to the stomach - felt like punching a brick wall - then double-leg kick downward, sending her spinning towards the street.

I didn't give her time to land, following her descent with hands outstretched, beams building charge-

She blinked away, a burst of heat and light on... that rooftop, there! I switched my aim but she was moving again, popping in and out of existence with a thankfully un-subtle teleport until the charge was too strong for me to risk hitting her with it. I flexed my wrist, dismissing the globe of energy into a shower of sparks and she attacked again (when did she pull that bow and arrow?) and crack went my inner forcefield and I was vulnerable but Purity was gone and I could finally run.

So I ran.

She pursued.

Every time I pulled into a straightaway to gain speed she exploded in front of me and forced me to hammer at her with elbows and kicks, or just try to pivot away, but she kept persisting, and trying to lose her in the corners was hopeless because she'd just follow up on the rooftops and I didn't have anywhere to run anymore but I couldn't risk using my full powers on her (silence darkness paralyzed
couldn't move couldn't scream) but I had to do something.

For fuck's sake, why?

Why was she still hunting me?

My taunts were juvenile, my attacks unremarkable.

Was it pride? Was it whimsy?

Was it because I managed to hit her despite her danger-sense?

My breathing was ragged, heartbeat pounding, blood roaring. My vision had narrowed down almost to a point but I could still see everything, the malicious glee in her too-wide eyes as she penned me in like a cornered beast, culling my options until I found myself in a construction yard. Rebar and I-beams littered the ground like fallen graves. She didn't walk, she stalked towards me, a jungle cat before a caveman, the very picture of a predator.

I shot out her knees, bones cracking, but she didn't make a sound. Not even a grimace of pain.

She just appeared in a burning whirlwind inches from my face, and I could see every tooth in her smile - no, her bared fangs.

I was...

I had...

I had her exactly where I wanted her.

And then I was behind her, sinking the syringe into the back of her neck even as the old me exploded into ash.

Chapter End Notes

Whee!

Thanks again to Kittius for listening and idea-bouncing.
"Fax, are you-!"

Wha? Oh! Armsmaster? How did... I finished wrapping the rebar around Butcher's eyes and face - I was pretty sure her teleportation wasn't line-of-sight but every bit helped - to join the rebar pinning their arms behind their back and spiraling around their legs. "Hey! Just in time! I have no idea what to do now."

"Console, the Butcher appears to be successfully sedated. Prepare for inbound." Armsmaster snapped out orders like he'd already been expecting this. Which, knowing him, he might have been.

To me, he continued, "Load her onto my bike."

"Flying is faster, and I want to drop her off ASAP."

He glanced at his bike, and I took two steps, reached down, and lifted it onto my shoulder. His jaw clenched, but he nodded.

---

It wasn't a long flight, but even with Armsmaster monitoring Butcher in my shield bubble, I was still freaking out a bit. What if she woke up? What if the tranqs killed her - would I get her power, or would Armsmaster? I wasn't even sure which would have been worse...

Finally, though, we dropped off the package, neatly wrapped up in rebar.

"So," I asked, "what happens now?"

"Dragon is already sending a rapid-response suit to this location. Butcher will be monitored and continually sedated while she carries her off to a temporary holding location until we can determine exactly how to safely-"

"I meant... we need to decide where we go from here."

"Hmm?"

"Who gets the credit for Butcher?"

He froze for an instant, almost too quick to notice, but his emotions were a colorful array of surprise-touched-pride-doubt-concern-appreciation-worry. "Explain."

"I may have been the delivery method, but I used your-"

"I understand," he quickly cut me off. Ah. I already knew from before that there was monitoring equipment on this rooftop. Probably didn't want to explain that he'd deliberately let me get hold of unlicensed Tinkertech. "You don't want the credit?" He seemed... genuinely confused.
"Hell naw. Way more attention than I need, you know?"

"I... see."

"I lured her into a construction yard out of sight," so nobody could see me use Oni Lee's power, "and you were there moments afterward." Which made me wonder- oh. Right. Of course he'd put tracking chips in his Tinkertech. Clever, clever. I grinned. "Plus it'd be a huge PR boost. 'Protectorate captures Butcher!'"

Armsmaster gave me a hard, considering look. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." Aww, his aura was adorable. And that smile! I didn't know he could pack so much warmth and appreciation in a single expression like that. And with only the bottom half of his face, no less.

He shook my hand with his gauntleted fist. "You did well today."

I couldn't help but return that smile. Then I remembered something - ok, good she was still in range. Almost forgot to grab those charges. To Armsmaster, "Oh! I have one request."

He almost seemed to be about to say 'anything' but then caught himself. "I'm listening."

"I need to visit her one more time. Tomorrow."

After a moment, he nodded. "I'm sure I can work something out with Dragon."

Heh. I'm sure you can.

---

"Chris?" Kayden's voice was shaky, unsteady over the phone. Was she hurt?

"Hey! Are you alright?"

"Am I alright? Are you- yes. Yes. I'm fine. What happened to you?"

"Oh, rescued by Armsmaster," I said casually, and wasn't entirely lying. It certainly could have gone a lot worse if he hadn't hooked me up. "I'm fine. Also, Butcher's arrested."

"..." I could hear her almost start to say things a few times, then changing her mind. Finally, she said "I'm glad you're ok."

"I'm glad you're ok too."

Neither of us said anything for a minute. Which was a really, really long time over the phone. I could still hear her breathing, a little uneven. Had she been crying? In the end, I broke the silence first.

"Hey, I meant what I said about..." leaving you alone. "...Giving you space. But if it's alright, I'd..."

"What?"
"Can we meet? I just... I just want to make sure you're ok." When she didn't answer at first, I added, "You can say no."

"I'm fine, Chris, really. I... yes. Let's meet."

---

"Is this where you've been staying?" she asked, slipping off her shoes by the door.

"No, I... I think my place is bugged. This is another hotel room." I was sitting on the bed, hands clasped in front of me. They'd been starting to shake.

She stood there hesitating for a moment - there wasn't that many places to sit, really - so I stood and made my way over to her instead. I put my hands on her shoulders and looked her over. "You sure you're-"

"I'm fine," she said, exasperated. "Just... shaken."

"God, me too."

She looked up at me for a moment, a tiny bit surprised, and then a small smile ghosted on her face. "Need a hug?"

"Yes please."

She stepped forward and slipped her arms around my waist, and I wrapped my arms tightly around her - minding my strength.

We stood there for a moment. "May I use Othala's regeneration on you?"

She gave a small exasperated sigh. "Fine. But I swear, I just have a bit of bruising."

"It makes me feel better." I felt the tingle pass from me to her and felt some of the tension leave her shoulders.

A tiny bit muffled, "And you're sure you're ok?"

I grinned. "Yeah. Just... dealing with the aftermath." My smile faded. "I seriously might have been the next Butcher." My voice cracked a bit at the last word, and she squeezed me tighter. My vision got a bit blurry, but I ignored it, focusing on my breathing, on her warmth.

After a long silence, once I felt less like the world was collapsing around me, she spoke. "I might have left Aster without a mother."

I couldn't help myself. "...Or fifteen of them."

She suddenly tensed. "That's not funny!" Her aura told me she thought it was a little bit funny, though.

"Sorry," I said anyway, and she relaxed into my arms again.

We stood there for a minute. Technically I'd gotten what I wanted out of the meeting already... but I
was in no hurry to end it.

She broke the silence first. "I thought... I thought I was too valuable for him to risk like that. That he cared enough about Aster, at least, to want to..."

I considered the battlefield, who was present. "The Teeth ambushed you guys, didn't they?"

She nodded.

"So when he panicked, he threw you under the bus."

"It... maybe he thought I could take care of myself."

"Or maybe he's a selfish asshole who would say whatever he could to get what he wanted."

She made a sound that wasn't quite a laugh, then pushed away from me a bit. She didn't stop holding on to me, though. "And you're not a selfish asshole?"

"I mean..." I didn't want to point out that I'd gone all serious action hero on her to keep her safe, but... I had the feeling I didn't need to.

She looked at me for a moment, then pulled me closer again, resting her cheek against my chest. That was as good a confirmation as any.

Then she startled a bit, looking down, then up. "Are you... bigger?"

"Nervous habit." It felt... safer, to be taller when I got scared. Both our feet were on the ground, but I was still a head taller than her. "Does it bother you?" I hadn't considered it, but maybe it reminded her uncomfortably of her ex...?

"I... no. It's fine." I guessed not. And judging by her aura... she really didn't mind it. Heh. Purity was into taller guys, apparently. Who would have thought.

"Where do we go from here?"

She shifted until her forehead was digging into my chest, avoiding my gaze. "Chris, I'm still not..."

"Are you staying with the Empire?"

"Oh." She took a deep breath. "I... I don't know."

"You know that I'm-"

And then her purse buzzed, and I lost what I was going to say. Goddamnit.

She broke away from me, at least a little reluctantly, and with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, it could be Theo."

"I understand."

Kayden withdrew her phone from her sensible purse and froze. I leaned over a bit, saw "Max" on the small outer screen.
That son of a bitch. I didn't even realize I was speaking until she turned back to look my way. "Let me guess. He's gonna say he didn't mean for you to get hurt, imply that you misinterpreted his orders, that he'd never in a million years want to risk your life, that he cares too much about you and Aster to ever want anything bad to happen..." Her face darkened, and... shit. Maybe that was a bit too close to home. The phone stopped ringing, unanswered.

"Even... even if you're right, it doesn't mean that you..." The phone started ringing again, and she seemed about to flip it open... then pressed a button on the side instead, rejecting the call. In a voice thick with mixed emotions, she said, "I need to check on Aster."

I resisted the urge to sigh. "Of course." I even managed to sound understanding instead of frustrated, and gave her a smile when she looked my way. "I'm glad you're ok, Kayden."

"You too, Chris."

Chapter End Notes

In a way, he was almost relieved. It meant nothing had to change.

Thanks again to Kittius for idea-bouncing.
Hey, what're you up to?

"Busy."

Aww.

Alex wasn't available, most of New Wave was in class/at work, Parian was in class, I didn't feel like playing video games with the nerds, and the Protectorate was busy dealing with the aftermath. Seems the Butcher getting arrested was equivalent to declaring open season on the Teeth; the Empire was trying to maintain face, the Merchants were out in full force, and I didn't know what the Ambassadors were doing but I imagined Accord wouldn't sit idle once he heard the news either.

So I celebrated the biggest capture of my heroic career by watching movies in my temporary hotel room.

Hooray.

---

I went to the Red Dragon restaurant for dinner. In disguise, of course; Chris had been politely asked not to return, after all. Thankfully, they didn't seem any worse for wear for all the chaos in the streets; apparently a small family restaurant wasn't a prime piece of real estate, even in contested territory. They did seem a bit less stressed out than before.

The noodles were, as before, delicious. Grandpa was watching the news, where damn near every cape in the city was making appearances. Not Purity; I was glad of that, at least.

The Teeth didn't last til sunset. I'd feel bad, but... I really didn't.

The press release was short and to-the-point. Armsmaster, the Protectorate and "independent heroes" collaborated to capture the Butcher, who was being held in an undisclosed location, future to be decided on as the heroes figure shit out. He looked so damn heroic. Attaboy, Armsmaster.

I texted New Wave, let them know I was available if they needed my help. They acknowledged it, but told me to stay put. They'd let me know if they needed my healing, but otherwise I was still on pause.

Which... made sense. Even I wasn't that eager to go out and risk death so close to achieving my 200% Butcher goal. What an unfortunate turn of events that would be; like a movie police officer being two weeks from retirement. Automatic death sentence.

Still, I was ready if they needed me. Better to risk myself rather than let Panacea die from being caught in the crossfire, or something.

It was funny, really. I was connected to so many people and groups - New Wave, Protectorate, Uber
and Leet, Parian, Coil, Undersiders, Purity, Mouse Protector...

And I was spending the night alone in my hotel room. Watching documentaries, eating frozen pizzas, drinking a moderate number of beers, and waiting for a call that never came.

Truly I was living an escapist fantasy of the highest order.

---

BEEP BEEP BEEP

Oh goddamnit.

I woke up reluctantly, wiping drool from my chin. I'd ended up falling asleep in front of the television, pizza and empty beer cans floating around me like tiny planets in the universe's groggiest solar system.

"Rig at 0700," a text message reminded me. Thanks for being so helpful, Armsmaster, you fuckmothering morning person. To think, I actually liked him at one point. This early in the morning, the reasons why escaped me in a haze of 'fuck you and the horse you rode in on.'

Maybe I should eat something and shower before I killed somebody.

Shower, yes. Shower good.

I munched on fire-breath-warmed leftover pizza as I slowly became more of a human being, slices darting in and out like curious fish. I really had to take advantage of Rune's power more often; this was a whole new level of laziness I could really appreciate. Never have a three-second-rule violation again.

Yawning expansively and sipping another Tinkerfuel - because even though I could mimic the effects with Browbeat, I wouldn't get that glorious taste - I crossed the city on my way to the Rig, glancing down to see it was all in one piece. No new craters, flags weren't at half mast anywhere, no still-ongoing infernos... good enough.

I met Armsmaster on top of the Rig, sinking down through the hole in the shield. He was in full armor this time, an impressive sight as the rising sun reflected off his blue and chrome.

"Mornin'," I greeted him with a lazy wave. My, he was chipper.

"Fax," he answered impassively despite his good cheer.

He made no move to lead me inside, so I waited.

"You should clear the landing pad."

"Ah, ok." I stepped towards him, facing the marked space for incoming helicopters, teleporters and flyers. "We waiting for someone?"

The last word had barely left my lips before I heard the rush of jet engines and looked up to see a fast-growing speck in the early morning sky. Was that...?
With a roar, a Dragon-craft the size of a city bus landed with surprising grace on the platform, not ten feet away. I had to use my inner shield and flight to keep from being blown back by the jets as she descended, but Armsmaster just stood there at ease, the showoff.

As soon as the engines cut out, I heard Dragon's chipper Canadian voice call out. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Dragon," Armsmaster said, this time with audible cheer. Not much, but it was there. The big softie.

"Mornin'," I repeated, curious. What was this all...

"Fax, how close do you need to-"

"Oh!" I caught on. Made sense they probably wouldn't keep the Butcher on the Rig if they could help it. That meant...

I took a few steps forward, ducking under the craft's draconic head. It turned to follow me until I felt Butcher's power... and then I kept going a few more steps till I was probably ten feet away. Three more charges. *Finally.*

"Got it," I said, then immediately backed away towards Armsmaster. The instant I was outside the marked line, Dragon nodded the ship's stylized head and promptly took off in a howl of jets and rush of wind.

Armsmaster observed me curiously. "Did you get everything you needed?"

I nodded.

It was done.

200% Butcher get.

Achievement Unlocked: Double Butcher.

"So. What happens to you if you die?"

I turned to Armsmaster, one eyebrow quirked up. *A bit blunt there, buddy.*

"Does anybody really know?" I tried to give him a winning smile.

He frowned slightly. "I mean you specifically." Not buying it.

Damnit. I blew out a sigh, ran a hand through my hair, replaced my hat. "If I were regular Butcher, I'd wake up in whoever killed me, with just a voice." He said nothing, watching, waiting. "Now... I think I'd be more than a voice. I can't be sure. Maybe I'm wrong."

"And if you killed yourself?"

*Jesus Christ, man.* I looked at him, but he was dead serious. Fine. I gave it a bit of thought. "I guess it'd be the same as if I died by accident, or by Endbringer. I'd probably hop into the nearest parahuman."
He gave me a long, considering look, curious-serious-concerned-considering-worried. "I see."

I supposed that the Butcher hopping bodies if killed by Endbringer wasn't exactly common knowledge; I only knew it because of Word of Wildbow. I was at a bit of a loss, though, and eventually he seemed to notice, his expression softening.

"I'm sorry, Fax. I had to ask. It's better to be prepared for these sorts of things; moreso when powers are involved."

"Yeah... I get it."

He put a reassuring hand on my shoulder, gave me a reassuring smile. "Let's do everything we can to keep you alive, alright? That's why we're training. That's why the offer to join is always on the table. We all want what's best for you."

Heh. You're still not my real dad, Armsmaster. But still... it was nice he was worried about me.

More importantly... I didn't have an easy way out, anymore.

It was something I'd had brewing in the back of my mind ever since I first ran into the Butcher. Well. Realized I had, anyway.

I'd been afraid for my life before. From Skidmark to Alabaster to Lung to Butcher herself, I'd known that fear. Sometimes all too well. Even felt the paralyzing fear, the loss, of having someone else die because of me.

I'm sorry, Steve.

But even at my lowest point, I knew that the end wouldn't really be the end. I'd die, the adventure would end, game over, do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars. It would simply be the end of a story.

But once I'd grabbed the Butcher... I feared something worse than death. Trapped in a body that I couldn't control, unable to move, unable to scream... even now, with whatever mystery awaited me if I died, I wouldn't really escape. The story wouldn't end.

Death was no longer a freedom, for me.

Win or lose, I was stuck here. Until Golden Morning; perhaps even beyond. Forever hopping from body to body, trying to save the world so I could someday leave it... or fail so horribly there would be no world to save.

It was a sobering thought.

Naturally, I tried to stop thinking it as quickly as possible.

"Anyway! Training?"

By whatever means necessary.
Fax does not like introspection. It itches.

Thanks to Kittius for framing and idea-bouncing.
"I am a water balloon full of sweat," I grumbled.

Then the water hit, and I was suddenly an ice cube made of sweat.

"That's a good sign," I heard Armsmaster's bass rumble from the next stall over. "Means you worked hard."

I waited until the water temperature was almost fit for humans, then gave a relieved sigh as the worst of the sweat started to sluice away. I looked around the stall, but...

"Hey, you got any-"

A small plastic bottle flew over the edge of the stall, which I did not nearly fumble, thank you very much. It didn't have a label. Custom made?

"Combination shampoo, conditioner, and bodywash," Armsmaster explained. Efficient; why was I not surprised. "Formulated to get rid of armor-funk, but it works just as well otherwise."

Heh. Armor-funk. I poured some out onto my palms and it started lathering immediately. Water-activated? Smelled... better than I'd expected. A bit like olive oil.

I sighed. "At least I don't have to stick around for the paperwork."

I lathered it in my beard. It was... tingly. Was that mint?

"I don't mind it."

I paused, eyebrow raised. Armsmaster must have felt my confusion from his own shower cubicle, because he went on, "I find after-action reports to be useful. Reviewing what I did, what I could do better. It's vital for self-improvement."

"Of course you would like that sort of thing," I teased. "I bet you write instruction manuals for fun, too."

"I actually like writing documentation," he continued. "It's a challenge to break something down into its simplest parts, condensing something I understand intuitively into concise steps anyone could follow."

I... guess I saw the appeal?

"So does that mean Shiny dropping his Arclance will be extensively noted and documented?" My pleasure-attack was surprisingly effective at even half strength, apparently.

"With video," Armsmaster replied, with no small sense of satisfaction.
"Can I get copies of that? The sound he made was **priceless.**"

"Come on guys," Dauntless whined from the shower stall opposite Armsmaster. "It wasn't **that** funny."

"It was pretty funny," Triumph countered, from yet another stall. "That must be a blast at parties."

Dauntless had gone silent. I checked his emotions through the stall walls, and... oh.

"Doesn't mean you're attracted to me, Shiny," I said reassuringly. "It's no different than me hitting Armsmaster with pain in training. Just more pleasant."

"And it ignores armor," Armsmaster chimed in helpfully, matter-of-fact. "It's highly effective against non-Brutes and shields."


"I'm not homophobic!" Dauntless blurted out.

"Didn't say you were," I said calmly.

"I don't have problems with guys being with other guys," he went on.

"Quit while you're behind, Shiny," Triumph muttered from his own stall.

"I mean, I'm straight."

"You do you, man," I offered pleasantly.

"But there's nothing wrong with being gay."

If I didn't step in he was gonna choke on his own foot. "If this is your roundabout way of asking me out, I'm sorry, you're not really my type."

Was that a little pride I sensed from Armsmaster's stall? Nah, probably imagined it.

"...I'm just gonna shower in silence now," Dauntless stated quietly.

"Probably for the best," Triumph answered.

Man, this stuff was refreshing. I wondered if Armsmaster sold it by the bottle? Maybe it was Tinkertech, property of the PRT, and I'd need to sign waivers for it. Or take a certification course.

"I'm gonna get talked at by HR again, aren't I?" Dauntless lamented softly, **resignation-guilt-defeated.** Poor guy.

I took pity on him and changed the topic. "So, is Shooty normally so liberal with the beanbag rounds? Because I look like a dalmation right now."

"Absolutely."

"Uh huh."
"Miss Militia is very careful about only using as much force as necessary," Armsmaster said carefully. "That said... yes."

Heh.

"At least you're a Brute," he added under his breath. Wait. Did my ears deceive me or was Armsmaster complaining? My god, I must have entered an AU by accident.

"That just means she aimed more carefully," I replied just as quietly. If I weren't a biokinetic, I'd be walking funny for a while. Perhaps I should have hidden that, but... I could have just passed that off as part of Butcher's Brute powers.

He most definitely did not snort in amusement at my suffering.

I finished rinsing off, toweled myself dry, and started putting on my costume again. Ugh. If only I didn't have to hide my powers; I desperately wished I could pull a fresh set from hammerspace. I was gonna have to start bringing a change of clothes in a bag. Like a plebeian.

Armsmaster slipped out while I was dressing, Dauntless close behind. Triumph was waiting for me, in his armor's undersuit, when I opened the curtain. "Hey, you got a second?"

My, wasn't I popular today. Did I have to let Shouty down easy too?

"Fifty bucks a pop for pleasure, seventy-five for pain."

Steve would have been proud.

"What? No, that's... no." Aww, he looked flustered. Poor Shouty. "I wanted to talk to you about your precog."

I held up my hands in denial. "Not actually a precog."

He turned, paced a bit, radiating frustration-guilt-fear-gratitude. That last one was a surprise. Finally, he managed to get out, "It's about Dinah."

Oh! Oh. Shit. "Is she ok?" I almost forgot they were cousins. I hadn't followed up in a while, was she...

"Yes, she's fine." Oh thank god. "She's in the process of becoming a Ward." Whew! Disaster hopefully averted. "But I asked around when the PRT started checking up on her, and nobody would tell me any details. I had to..." he trailed off, glancing about. They wouldn't bug locker rooms, would they? Even for the PRT that seemed a bit extreme. "I saw your name. That you were the one that gave the tip."

Shit. "I'm not at liberty to-"

He made a sharp gesture, cutting me off. "I'm not asking. I just wanted to say thank you. However you did it, whatever your sources... I appreciate it."

Oh.
I... didn't know what to say.

She deserved a childhood? Freedom? Her own life? Not to be Coil's 'pet'? I did the bare minimum, and maybe I got lucky, but... I was glad.

He held out his hand. I took it, and he clasped his other hand on top, a firm handshake. "I owe you."

"I don't-"

"I don't care. I owe you." Well. That was that.

He picked up his duffel bag and left me behind in the locker room, alone with my thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

Kittius suspects at least some of Miss Militia's "careful aim" is revenge for all the trouble Fax has given her. She's probably right.

Thanks again to Kittius for helping talk me through this chapter.
When I got back to my hotel room, there was someone in it.

I'd learned my lesson from Tattletale; I checked it before setting foot inside. Which is why I noticed *boredom-impatience-irritation* dead center of what I was fairly certain was - I checked the room number again, yeap - my room.

I backed up around the corner and sent out texts, trying to figure out who the hell it was this time.

Coil?

"No."

Tattletale?

"Like I'd tell you if I was 😎" 

...Skidmark?

"Bitch, if I sent you a hooker I'd tell you about it."

I pestered Tattletale.

"Seriously though, there's someone in my hotel room and if it's you I'm gonna blast you first and ask questions never."

Her reply was almost instantaneous. "I'm sure I could figure out who it was for ya. Maybe in exchange for a future question, answered honestly?"

Yeah, nope. I'd rather just open the door at that point.

"Spoilsport," she sent back after I didn't reply.

One last guess.

"Kitty, are you in my hotel room?"

"Not yet, but I like your enthusiasm!"

Shit. Who the hell was it then?

I made my way to the front door again, peering through it with my empathic sight. *Irritation-impatience-frustration-boredom*, now.

Fuck it.

I split the timeline.
I waited outside, safe, eyes open.

I raised a hand, ready to blast, and swung the door open.

The woman standing there waiting didn't so much as flinch. She was... elegant. A golden-yellow ballroom gown, complete with gem-studded mask and matching yellow lipstick. She was an island of class in an otherwise mediocre hotel room, making everything else seem shabbier by comparison. I was suddenly acutely aware of my sweat-stained costume. I should probably have changed once I left the Rig.

"Fax," she said calmly, the picture of grace, then gave me a small (but elaborate) curtsy.

Citrine.

Which meant Ambassadors.

Which meant Accord.

Shit.

"What do you want?" I didn't lower my hand, charging a blast that could punch through a tank.

She pulled a simple white envelope from somewhere, extended it my way. "Accord simply wishes to offer his gratitude for your elimination of the Butcher."

The timeline collapsed. I let it.

I didn't reach for the envelope. "Armsmaster took down the Butcher," I answered, trying to keep my voice level. What was his game? How fucked was I?

Heh. A burst of irritation-frustration again, although none of it showed in her voice or demeanor. "Please, Fax. Don't insult Accord's intelligence." The threat was unspoken, but plain as day. I wouldn't live long by insulting her boss. Hell, I'd probably annoyed him enough by making Citrine wait while I texted everybody.

I took a quick step forward, grabbing the envelope with the hand not gathering a frightening amount of blasting power. I didn't take my eyes off her to read it.

She gave another polite curtsy, prim and proper, and a plastic smile. "My message is delivered. May I go?"

I considered, watching her mounting concern-irritation. No fear, though, despite the basketball-sized globe of light in my outstretched hand. Her power had a noticeable effect, right? Was that Stranger standing behind me with a knife - Othello? Or was she just that confident I wouldn't blast her for passing on her boss's message?

I split timelines again.

OH GOD SHE WAS JUST OVERCONFIDENT FUCK SHIT

I collapsed the timeline.
I stepped aside.

She slipped past, as controlled and fluid as a ballroom dance. I followed her with the increasingly unstable charged blast and dispelled it with a *crack* once she was out of sight.

Fuck me sideways, that was tense.

I scanned the room for empathic signatures, found none. Would it work on that Stranger of theirs? Fuck, I had no idea; his power was barely mentioned in canon. Blasting around the room in alternate timelines didn't find anyone, but who knew how their power interacted with Coil's?

Finally, I looked down at the envelope, with immaculately neat script spelling out my cape name. It wasn't sealed; the letter inside more or less repeated her verbal message. Accord's gratitude, laid out in implausibly flawless handwriting, and an invitation to schedule a meeting to properly express his thanks. A phone number. A signature so clean it might have been printed.

I shuddered. Christ.

Then I vibrated. I picked the letter back up from where I dropped it, laying it on the bed, and checked my texts.

"So... are YOU in your hotel room right now?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Alone?"

"...Yes?"

And then there was a faint *pop* and Kitty was standing in front of me, a broad smile on her face. "Surprise!"

---

I handed her a beer. We toasted, then each drained our drinks in one go.

I sighed. She let loose a thundering belch. Eight out of ten.

If Accord had heard that, he'd have had her killed on general principle.

Note to self: *never let them meet.*

"So he sent her just to say *thanks*? In the most threatening way possible?"

"Apparently."

"What're you gonna do about it."

"...Nothing?"

"You think he'd think you were being rude?"
God, I hoped not. "There wasn't a time or date on the invitation. Seemed open." I gave it some thought. "Should I send a note thanking him for his thank you note?"

"Nah, that way lies infinite recursive thank you cards, each fancier than the last. The final one would eclipse the sun, throwing the world into endless winter."

I grinned. That settled that, then. On to more interesting (less terrifying!) topics.

"So... you said you tried to lay low?"

"And arrested four supervillains in twenty-four hours," she said drolly.

"Seriously?"

"No, with puns!"

I handed her another beer, conceding her the point on that one. She looked smug.

"Then I saw you'd already got the Butcher, so the fire was out, and the frying pan, et cetera, et cetera." She popped off the top with a practiced movement, this time taking a more modest sip. I didn't bother correcting her about Armsmaster's official capture; clearly nobody cared.

"And you figured you'd come to Brockton Bay?"

"You offered. And besides, you wouldn't let anything bad happen to me, right?" She fluttered her eyelashes coquettishly behind her shades. I couldn't help but grin.

"It is good to see you again."

"You too, honeybunch."

We enjoyed the view off my balcony for a moment. Mostly nearby buildings, but the skyline was relatively clear, and the day was sunny for a change. She wore giant, fashionable sunglasses against the brightness. I didn't bother.

"So... what's there to do for fun in this place?"

"How do you feel about beating up Nazis?"

If her smile were any wider I thought she might burst.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who's back? :D

Thanks to Kittius for idea-bouncing and support!
Kitty and Alex eyed each other. Judging by their auras, whole waves of communication were passing wordlessly between them. It was kind of impressive, honestly.

"So, you're his main squeeze?" Kitty broke the silence first.

"Nah. He's more of a pet, really."

So, this wasn't Nazi-baiting. But Nazis generally came out more at night. Sun too harsh for their pale skins, I supposed.

They circled around each other, like two cats sizing each other up. "Did he-" Alex began.

"Nope."

"Hm."

" Wouldn't have minded."

Alex nodded. "You know he's a shapeshifter?"

I facepalmed. Neither of them seemed to notice.

Kitty just raised an eyebrow. "No, but now I'm intrigued."

Alex smiled. It was smug.

Kitty had been restless, so I thought, 'hey, who else do I know that's cool to hang out with and is chill about superpowers?'

This time Kitty spoke. "Is he-"

"Oh yeah," Alex answered immediately.

"Like-"

"Definitely."

"Hm."

I was starting to think I'd made a mistake introducing the two. Looking between them, their emotions all over the place but generally curious-interested-amused, I was completely lost. I wondered if Tattletale would... nah, she'd probably follow all of it and tell me absolutely nothing.

I cleared my throat.
"Hush," they said in unison.

"The adults are talking, Chris," Alex said.

I crossed my arms, gave them my best disapproving scowl. I had to admit, it was pretty funny, though.

"And he just-" Kitty gestured at me.

"Like a bitch," Alex nodded.

"Huh." Kitty gave me a thoughtful look.

"Oh come on, I'm right here."

Kitty leaned in, whispering in Alex's ear. Alex nodded, then did the same for her, covering her mouth so I couldn't lip read. Neither of them took their eyes off me.

"Should I be worried?" I asked, a small smile on my lips.

"Oh yeah," Alex answered immediately, deadpan "Definitely."

Kitty giggled. "I think I'm gonna like it here."

What have I done.

---

"Help me, Sabah. You're my only hope."

"Ignore him," Alex said dismissively to a wide-eyed Sabah, just taking her shoes off at the door. She had a rather large bag full of fabric rolls, needles, thread and scissors under one arm and a somewhat dazed expression. "Princesses should be seen and not heard."

"But-" I was cut off when Kitty flicked my earlobe. I gave her a dirty look, but then she was right up in my face, leaning on one of my shoulders.

"Who's the prettiest princess, Chris?" For someone who went by Mouse Protector, she could really purr when she wanted to. With her pressing her chest against me, I could feel her whisper as much as hear it.

I glanced at her, then at the full-length mirror in front of me.

Then I sighed. "I am."

"That's right," she said, smiling wickedly, and went back to doing my hair.

---

My phone buzzed. I pulled it from nowhere into my hand while Sabah was distracted trying not to stare at Kitty too openly. Then I blinked.
"Hold on girls, I need to take this." They paid me no mind as I floated out of the cocoon of hovering cloth assembling and deconstructing a dress over and over again (when Sabah wasn't being distracted, anyway). I landed gracefully on the fifteenth pair of heels I'd tried on in the last hour, out in the hallway, and flipped open my phone.

"Coil?"

"Fax."

"What is-"

"You made it very clear you wanted me to look out for certain people, Fax."

"...Yes, I did."

"Would you consider Theo Anders among Purity's family?"

My eyes narrowed. "Yes. Yes I would."

"Good. Then you should know Accord is planning on kidnapping him. Tonight."

"...What?"

"I can't speak to his motives, but I imagine it would have something to do with Theo's family connections." His family. Accord was going to use Theo to control Purity? No... Max. And then gain control of Medhall, presumably, cutting the head off of the Empire at the same time. Intentionally targeting both? It was definitely something he would do. Shit.

There was another concern.

"And what do you get out of telling me this? Aren't you and Accord friends?"

"We collaborate on occasion, but he does not include me on the day-to-day operations of his organization. I have enough self-preservation to not attempt to counter him directly." Fair. "But, as per our agreement, I thought it necessary to inform you of his intentions."

He was so full of shit it was coming out of his ears, but if what he said was actually true... "How soon?"

"Soon."

Shit.

"Thank you, Coil." I'll take 'words I never thought I'd say' for 500, Alex.

He hung up.

I immediately dialed Purity. C'mon, c'mon, pick up...

"Yes?"
"Kayden!" Thank god. "I just got a call from a-" shit, what should I say? "-a source that said Theo might be in danger. I'm going to try and find out what I can, but in the meanwhile-"

"I'm not far from where he should be. I'll go there right away." Attagirl. No doubt, no hesitation.

"I'll let you know as soon as learn more. I hope it's just a false alarm, but..."

"Thank you, Chris."

I looked at the phone in my hand. That... well, it was better than nothing, but I doubted even Purity could do much if Accord had his eyes set on Theo. Hell, I might have just put her in danger too... Goddamnit. I needed more information.

Tattletale didn't pick up. I left a message, sent a text for good measure.

Who else would know? I went down the list of numbers... one stood out.

Accord.

He wanted to meet, me, right? I could just... ask him... not to kidnap Theo?

Fuck.

At the very least I could ask if he intended to do that at all. If not, I was gonna beat the shit out of Coil for wasting my time.

The phone was dialing before I even realized I'd hit the call button.

After two rings, a cultured woman's voice answered. "Good evening."

I took a deep breath. "Good evening. My name is Fax, and I would like to arrange a meeting with Accord."

"A pleasure to hear back from you, Fax. Accord has been expecting your call. When would you like to meet?"

"As soon as possible, please."

When I finished the call, I wandered back into the living room in a bit of a daze. Kitty noticed me first, immediately picking up on my distress. "Chris? What is it?" Sabah and Alex had been debating gown designs for something straight out of Cinderella, but turned to look my way when Kitty spoke.

"I have a meeting with Accord in an hour... and I have no idea what to wear."

Chapter End Notes

First impressions are normally important. With Accord? They're a matter of life and
death.

Thanks again to Kittius for idea-bouncing.
At two minutes to the hour, I stepped into the reception area of Accord's local office. The door bore the name "Academy of Excellence", and it was as immaculately decorated as one would expect of the supervillain, even in a temporary base of operations. Lots of polished marble, dark wood, and chrome accents.

A woman I didn't recognize sat behind an expansive desk, in a deep purple ballroom gown with matching mask, lipstick, and earrings. She was perfectly posed, the picture of elegance, and greeted me with a smile that was as polite as it was fake. She didn't even bat an eyelash at my appearance, but I didn't suppose she would.

Precisely on the hour, she opened the door to the office behind her, and I floated an inch above the spotless flooring, the bottom-most edges of my dress nearly-but-not-quite-dragging on the ground. My hands were clasped before me, delicate fingers intertwined, polished nails matching my dress. My posture was, as far as Browbeat's biokinesis and Uber's acting skills could ensure, absolutely perfect.

Almost like a dance, my unnamed escort stepped in place behind me, stopping in front of the door while I drifted purposefully to the precise center of the room. It seemed spartan, but I had no doubt that beneath every decorative panel, exquisitely positioned painting and microscopically symmetric piece of furniture hid more deathtraps than you could shake a stick at. While I was fairly confident that Accord knew about my Double Butcher status, there were a lot of ways to incapacitate, disable or bind someone without killing them; if anyone could build and set up traps to explore those options, Accord would be it.

The supervillain in question sat at a clean desk, tastefully plain, poised in a high-backed (no doubt hand-stitched) leather chair, hands steepled before him.

He looked like a CEO. Only an ornate mask with curling, overlapping bands of dark metal trimmed in silver marked him as anything more. His hair was oiled and neatly parted, and his white suit had been brushed clean with immaculate care.

That mask shifted, matching his expression, one eyebrow raising fractionally.

I bowed into a sweeping curtsy - thanks again, Uber - taking care to move smoothly and carefully, not a hair out of place. My eyes never left his, but I was watching his aura for signs of danger. Thankfully, he seemed... pleased, as he returned my greeting by standing and offering a formal bow in return.

"Fax."

"Accord." I was still getting used to this voice, its melodious richness, but the sound of it lent a flush of pink to Accord's aura. If I didn't know better, I'd say the metal panel marking his lips shifted a millimeter in a faint smile.

"You are not in your usual costume," he noted, his voice neither approving nor disapproving.
"I thought it prudent to make a good first impression."

He nodded faintly, eyes trailing over my dress. Sabah had done her magic, making the whole thing a masterpiece of flowing curves and precise stitching, not a single thread out of place. Absolutely symmetric, it was elegant, in black and shades of grey with white accents. My earrings matched, delicate and understated, and my lips were pigmented in the same precise shade. No makeup, everything done with biokinesis, to prevent smudging or slipping. We measured my features with actual rulers to make sure I was as flawless as superhumanly possible.

I stood there, poised, accepting his examination with what appeared to be quiet grace, but actually carefully restrained panic and more than a little unease. Still, the more pleased his aura, the less likely he would kill me, or worse. Every bit counted.

"It is," he paused slightly, jaw working behind his mask. "Acceptable."

Motherfucker, we'd worked hard on this! Trickster just combed his hair and took off his hat for fuck's sake. Damn double standards.

Still, his aura betrayed his true feelings on the topic. I accepted the compliment with a small nod of acknowledgement. "I am pleased to hear it."

Neither of us mentioned the fact that shapeshifting was not a part of my publicly known powerset. I assumed Coil had filled him in, if he hadn't done the research himself.

"I wished to thank you personally for your part in eliminating the Butcher. They are an agent of chaos," he pronounced the word like one would say 'kicker-of-puppies', "and we are all better for their absence."

"It needed to be done," I demurred politely. *When was the right time...*

"Because I am a believer in balance, I offer you a boon. I see you are no longer in need of a better costume," his eyes dipped down to my dress again, and I once again felt like a piece of meat... although in his eyes, probably better to say I was a choice filet mignon. "But I expect we can find some other means of expressing my gratitude."

Coming from anyone else, that line would have had skeevy implications. From Accord, though, it just sounded like an opportunity to bring up the reason I agreed to this visit.

"May I ask a question?"

"You may."

"I have been told that you are planning on abducting a boy named Theo Anders tonight."

This time the eyebrow-panel rose up more obviously. I almost missed a glance behind me - oh fuck, *I'd completely forgotten about her, the sneaky bitch* - had I not been watching his eyes. Still, that growing sense of menace didn't seem to be directed towards me.

"I see."

I did not take a deep breath, because the dress I had been sewn in would not have survived the
attempt, but I did take a mental pause of preparation. "Is this true?"

"Why do you ask?" His voice was still absolutely calm, but there was threat in it, nonetheless.

"I wish that he, his step-mother Kayden, and his step-sister Aster, are all kept safe and healthy."

"This is the boon you request?" If he hadn't been planning on kidnapping Theo - and I wouldn't be surprised if Coil had just fucked with me for shits and giggles - then it would be a waste, but... I didn't really have anything else I wanted from Accord aside from him forgetting I existed.

"It is."

"That is out of the question, I'm afraid. I have need of Max Anders, CEO of Medhall, and despite his distant relationship with his son I believe he will still be a suitable lever to advance my business interests in the city. What else would you ask for?"

Fuck.

"I..." shit no don't hesitate don't say 'umm' don't just sit there fuck "I would ask if there are alternatives to harming them."

"None quite so elegant. Even with his mother at his side-" on the one hand, at least Purity was there. On the other hand, it didn't seem like Accord much cared. Probably had contingencies just for that... I really didn't want to think about what those could be. "-or pursuing them should someone make an ill-advised attempt to lead them to escape," wow he could project that quiet menace, "I am confident they will be in my grasp shortly. It is an inevitable step in my plans for the city. I do not like my plans being changed."

Goddamnit Accord!

I split the timeline.

"I see," I said with forced calm.

I untucked my hands and blasted him in the chest, sending him reeling and then Mouse Protector was there but what the fuck was happening to my limbs I couldn't move and Kitty was paralyzed oh fuck what

I resisted the urge to look at the unnamed, unidentified parahuman quietly standing behind me. I kept forgetting about... hm. Oh shit Accord was waiting for me to speak-

"May I propose another possibility?"

"You may," he said, although I could see his patience wearing thin.

"If your goal is to take over Medhall, would revealing Max Anders' identity not serve the goal just as well, if not better?"

"What about his identity?" Accord asked, probing.

"He is the supervillain Kaiser."
I tried not to flinch as he made a disapproving huff. "It is rather impolite to reveal someone's identity in that manner."

"Please forgive me, Accord. I assumed you already knew."

"Very well," he replied, somewhat mollified. "However, the Unwritten Rules exist for a reason. Revealing his identity and subsequently buying out his company would be too obviously connected to me for my comfort." Damnit.

Oh well, I was planning on this anyway. "Would it be better if I arrested him?"

He shifted slightly, one hand rising to his chin in obvious affectation. He was, however, somewhat surprised by my offer. Coil was still a steaming pile of shit in human form, but perhaps he hadn't set all of this up deliberately. Maybe.

"Perhaps."

"I would ask you for the opportunity as a boon, Accord." A thought struck me, and I added, "I would also ask that the continued safety of his family be a part of your plans for the future should I succeed."

He gave me a long, dissecting look. His emotions shifted, turning darker, and it took all my self control not to shift or fidget under his gaze.

"You... irritate me, Fax."

Shit.

"Oh, your appearance is spectacular, and I appload the effort, but the fact remains you are. A. Messy. Person." As if the distaste-disdain-hate in his aura weren't clear enough, the way he tensed his jaw and clenched his fists made his opinion on messy known loud and clear. "You complicate things unnecessarily."

I split the timeline.

I kept absolutely still.

I untucked my hands and blasted him in the chest, sending him reeling and wait didn't I already try this before why can't I move fuck

Fuck you, woman in purple. Whatever it is you do, fuck... wait... Shit, he was talking again. Couldn't keep losing focus like that.

"Were it not for the fact that I am grateful to you for removing the Butcher, I would simply have you eliminated." He stared at me for a moment, and I could almost see the deathtraps in his mind's eye. "That said, I am nothing if not a reasonable man. You have twelve hours."

Any other situation, I would have breathed a sigh of relief. He continued, "If you fail to achieve Max Ander's arrest within that timeframe, I urge you not to annoy me further by attempting to hide the child. It will not end well." I did not shudder. Accord had clearly missed his calling as a motivational speaker.
"I wish you good luck. You are dismissed."

Chapter End Notes

Even being the prettiest of princesses can only compensate so much for a month of chaotic fucking about.

Thanks again to Kittius for help idea-bouncing and proof-reading.
"And that's the deal."

Kayden watched me intently, hands folded beneath her chin. Theo was in the other room, watching over Aster... along with Night and Fog. Christ but they were exactly as creepy as canon described. Dorothy's cookies were goddamn delicious, though.

"And you couldn't just... *kill* Accord?"

I shook my head. "Even if I did, it wouldn't put you out of danger. The man has contingency plans upon contingency plans. *It's just what he does.* He's the Lung of plotting." At her look, I explained "His intellect scales to the problems he faces. He figured out how to solve world hunger in an afternoon. One hundred and fifty pages, eighteen years, three trillion dollars, complete with individual countries and political climates and who had to sacrifice what and how to make them do it. When he got arrested for siphoning off funds to pay for his plan, he was busted out by jailbreak experts hired months in advance."

I could see the question in her expression, but continued before she could ask how I knew that. "Even if he didn't have someone tailor-made to counter me," possibly literally, if he'd bought her vial instead of just hiring her - that purple bitch's Stranger effect had worn off once I'd left, but I still had no idea what the limits of her paralysis power were, "we'd spend the rest of our lives wondering what nth-degree backup plan involved our deaths, or the deaths of those we cared about."

Her eyes flicked towards the door, and her aura spiked with fear. I didn't blame her.

Then she looked back towards me, face growing resolute. "So we have to have Kaiser arrested."

I nodded.

She pursed her lips, then blew out a sigh. "I'm not one hundred percent sure this isn't just an elaborate ruse to humiliate my ex-husband... but even if it is, I'm willing to hear you out." She gave me a small grin, which I returned, but it quickly faded.

"I wouldn't lie to you about Theo and Aster."

Kayden closed her eyes, shook her head. "What are you planning?"

"It's simple. You call up Kaiser, tell him you want to meet. I disguise myself as Theo, and as soon as I'm in range, BAM! Ambush, with the Protectorate leaping in through the windows to make the arrest." I was pretty proud of that plan, personally. "What do you think?"

"Um."

"Great, right?"

"Kaiser knows Theo is with Dorothy and Geoff. They'd call him if he left."
"...Fuck." Of course Purity would call Kaiser and let him know about the threat to his son's life.

"And... I may have told him earlier today that I needed a few days to think things over. He'd be pretty suspicious if I suddenly called him saying I wanted to meet. Especially if I was supposed to be watching over Theo."

"Aww, man." It was such a good plan. "Do you at least know where he is?"

"He's been moving safehouses lately... He said it was to keep an eye on operations, but I think he's just worried about Accord. And Coil, of course. Maybe even the Merchants, a little bit; the Empire has been doing well for itself after Lung," I shuddered, but she didn't seem to notice, "but things have been anything but steady, and there's a lot of competition for territory and resources."

I rested my head on the breakfast table. After a moment, she patted my hand. "If it makes you feel any better, seeing you disguised as Theo would have been really awkward."

"Heh," I chuckled, face-down into the light-colored wooden table. "I suppose it would."

We spent the next ten minutes shooting down each other's ideas. No, I didn't have a power for that. No, he'd already prepared for that. No, they wouldn't really buy that. No, they'd see right through that. No, a pride parade would take too long to arrange, as sure-fire a means of getting Kaiser to show up as it would be (and as entertaining as it would be. I wondered if Legend would show up to represent).

"If..." Kayden bit her lip, looking contemplative. "If Kaiser is arrested, they'll unmask him, right?"

Shit, I was a tourist, how would I know? "I think so? I'm not sure."

"Which means I would be suspect. Our marriage is a matter of public record, and rumors of Kaiser and Purity being married are apparently not all that uncommon..." I winced, but I was pretty sure Kaiser said something to that effect to her in canon, so she wasn't wrong. "I would be at risk. As would Theo and Aster."

Ah. "The Protectorate would-"

"Are you sure?" Her tone was sharp, demanding, but I could see in her aura she wanted it to be true.

"Ninety percent sure. Even if not, I could put in a good word with a few people to improve those odds further."

"You'd do that for me?"

I blinked. "Of course. I don't want anything to happen to you, much less Aster or Theo. They're good kids."

She pressed on. "Even if it meant hiding us across the country, cutting off all contact?"

I frowned a bit, but... "Yeah. If that's what it takes to keep you all safe." I wondered why she was... "I don't think that by itself would be enough to keep you away from a determined Accord."

She shook her head, and I trailed off. "No, I believe you. Kaiser has to go."
Good. Easier said than done, though, and the clock was ticking. What resources would I have to call in to make this happen? How far was I willing to go to keep her and the kids safe? "I just don't know how."

Her aura filled with determination-will-acceptance. "If you want to lure Kaiser out, you'll have to hit him where it hurts."

I blinked again. "Look, you said you weren't ready for a relationship, and I respect that..."

"I... meant his gang..."

"Yes. Of course. The Empire."

No, this silence wasn't awkward at all.

I coughed.

"...You'll have to take out his enforcers. Hookwolf, Stormtiger and Cricket. He couldn't ignore that kind of challenge."

My first reaction was to note that she went straight for Fenrir's Chosen. Then what she was actually asking me sunk in. "You... want me to cripple the Empire?"

She fixed me with a hard glare, but I could see it was a little brittle at the edges as she convinced herself as much as me. "You were planning on it anyway, weren't you?" I nodded, conceding the point, but she wasn't quite done. "If Max goes, the Empire will fall apart. Hookwolf off his leash..." she ignored my stifled chuckle, "...will only be worse for the city, and the remnants of the Empire will probably still be on Accord's hit list..." I nodded. Probably would. She sighed, glanced at the door again. "I told you when we first met to stay away from the Empire, Chris. I'm... not sure what kind of hero I can be in the Protectorate, but... for Aster, I'll find out."

I gave her a warm smile and took her hand in mine. "You're a great hero, Kayden."

She closed her eyes and breathed out a sigh, her aura solidifying into determination. "There's another problem."

"Of course there is."

Kayden gave me a half-hearted glare, but continued, "The Empire has standing orders to avoid Fax if spotted. After the fight with the Butcher, you're too big a threat to face with anything but overwhelming force."

"Damnit." I could always try to take them out by ambush in their civilian identities, but without signs that they're at least capes, the Protectorate wouldn't have much cause to keep them, much less charge them for their crimes. I wasn't about to let Hookwolf walk. I needed to find some way of fighting them...

"...What's the Empire policy on Schwarz?"

She blinked, then a small smile crept across her features. "Attack on sight, I believe."
"Eeexcellent."

Then her expression turned a bit concerned. "You're not going to fight them all yourself, are you? I mean... I can't help directly, but-"

"Oh, no, I know some people."

---

"So you're asking a middle-eastern lesbian, a genderqueer clown, and a bisexual rodent to help save your neo-Nazi not-girlfriend?"

"Yyyyyes. Yes. That's about the long and short of it."

"Okay."

Chapter End Notes

Circus doesn't mince words.

Thanks to Kittius, Pangolin and Husr for help beta-ing.
“Hey, where the white women at?”

Silence in the Nazi bar.

Apparently they weren't a fan of the classics.

Well, except for one guy, a beefy-looking biker dude, complete with scraggly beard, leather jacket, and sunglasses indoors. He put an arm over my shoulder, matched my shit-eating grin with one of his own, and belted out a belly laugh that echoed throughout the run-down bar. He punctuated it with 'friendly' smacks on my chest that might have sent a weaker man gasping for breath.

"Ah, man! You've got some balls on you, buddy. Lemme buy you a round."

Wait a minute. That wasn't how this was supposed to go...

At least the stares I got from the pasty patrons were as expected, following me with predatory intensity as I was led - somewhat forcefully - to a barstool right in the middle of the infinitely-stained wooden bar. "Franklin, get this man a beer. He's earned it."

There was almost no movement aside from the bartender quietly pulling a cheap American lager into a nominally-clean pint glass. One or two people continuing their conversations in lowered tones, a few people sneaking out the exits, one slipping past a table towards the restroom. My smile never wavered, although I looked far more relaxed and confident than I felt. Not that I felt particularly at risk, despite two figures that I knew were in the crowd, but... that much focused intent had a certain weight to it.

Franklin clunked the pint onto the bar in front of me. It was expertly poured, freely offered and not even spat in. I felt a little bad about what I had to do next.

First, though, I grabbed the beer, toasted it at my new friend, downed it in three gulps, and smacked it back onto the bar. Biker-dude almost looked impressed.

"I'm not really here for white women," I admitted, wiping my mouth with the back of my tan-colored sleeve.

"I figured," the smiling man said knowingly.

"I'm actually more interested in white men. You single and ready to mingle, brother?"

The smile evaporated from his face. For just a moment, he showed naked, raw hate. Then his expression split into a smile again, a bit more forced. "You're a funny one, aintcha."

Damnit, this wasn't working. How hard was it to start a fight as a black man in a Nazi bar?

Well. At least I was sure I'd given Alex enough time.
"Are we joking? I thought you were hitting on me first. Bought me a beer and everything." I then winked, slow, suggestive and obvious.

A strained chuckle, followed by a heavy hand on my shoulder. "Joke's wearing a bit thin, buddy. Maybe this isn't the right bar for you."

I looked around as if realizing for the first time the German flag, eagle paraphernalia, confederate flag, 1488 and other fascist kipple adorning the walls and tables. I blinked slowly.

"You mean this isn't a bear bar? I was so sure with all that leather..."

The hand on my shoulder squeezed with rather impressive force. He leaned in, fake smile fading, and said in a loud, stage whisper, "How about you leave before you get your scrawny black ass whupped?"

Somehow the tension and silence of the bar racked up another few notches. Every eye in the place was watching us, bar one or two exceptions.

I gave him a thoughtful look, complete with one hand stroking my chin as I considered his warning. Then, in an even louder whisper, I replied "How about you suck my fat, black-"

---

Fifteen seconds and twenty men later, and I was starting to worry they weren't going to show.

Then the side door slammed open, revealing a shirtless man in a tiger mask and a furious-looking buzz-cut blonde with a freakin' birdcage on her head. Right, they would have ducked out to change into costume. Time for the real acting to start.

"Oh shit!" I exclaimed with blatant fear, and hopped over a flipped-over table towards the back door.

"Get back here you-!" Ugh. Fucking Nazis.

Cricket flipped over obstacles with efficient grace, while Stormtiger just smashed through them with quick burst of air-claws, blatantly disregarding the complaints of his groaning, incapacitated bigot-brothers caught in the blast radius.

She was a quick one, and if I hadn't modified my inner ears specifically with her in mind, I would have been a lot more than just a tiny bit dizzy as she used her ultrasonic space whale magic to try to keep me from running. Just a bit further to the unmonitored, isolated alleyway...

I skidded to a stop, turned, and blocked a knee to the face with one arm, narrowly dodging the follow-up blow as she flipped over me and tried to nail me on the back of the head with her elbow. And then she was in the air, unable to dodge herself... and completely helpless against the streaming cloth-tentacles that erupted from what appeared to be piles of trash on either side of the alleyway. She made a mechanical chirp of dismay before she was abruptly mummified.

Good thing Alex had pickpocketed her kamas back at the bar.

Stormtiger, on the other hand, was too busy dodging Mouse Protector and withstanding her quips and puns with poor grace to do anything to help. With a "Here, kitty kitty!" and "I thought tiggers
were supposed to bounce!", Stormtiger joined Cricket in the bundle-o-baddies floating in the alleyway, except his hands were pressed firmly against the sides of his own head. Pretty sure he couldn't generate claws with his feet.

We were gone before the rumble of Armstrong's bike got too close, leaving the Nazis behind like gift-wrapped hate with a pretty pink ribbon.

---

**Half an hour earlier:**

"Hey, Armstrong, what are you up to?"

"Tinkering. What is it?" Even with his brusque reply, he didn't sound rude so much as... well, efficient.

"How quickly can Dragon pick up some prisoners?"

"...Quickly. Why?" He certainly didn't waste much time dissembling.

"If what I hear is right, you're about to have a few new ones. And I'd hate for them to be captured only to lose them to a jailbreak."

A short pause. "Are you at liberty to discuss your sources?"

"Nope!" I cheerfully replied.

The faintest hint of a sigh. "Fax. I can't do you favors on such short notice or with so little information. What's going on?"

That was fair. I could only stretch the faith he had in me so far before even he got in trouble with his superiors. Dragon might not mind stopping by on his say-so (if just to hang out around Armstrong like a teenager with a crush), but transferring prisoners probably involved pesky things like jurisdiction and other issues I was happy to never deal with ever.

How much truth could I give without admitting anything directly?

"The Empire is losing some heavy hitters tonight."

He didn't hesitate. "How can we help?" If he was serious before, he was all business now.

I hesitated. "Is this a secure line?"

Beep. "Yes."

"Ok. There are too many moles in the PRT to tell you much. But I'll call you when I think an attack is going on so you can show up and arrest the survivors."

"Are you going to be attacking them, Fax?" Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies, Armstrong.
"I may be tangentially involved."

He made a muffled, frustrated sound. "Why now? Can't you bring us in on this?"

"I'm sorry," I answered, and it was true. If only I didn't have that stupid deadline. Fucking Thinkers. "Time is short. I swear, I'll explain what I can when it's all over."

"I'll hold you to that." Sorry, future-me, your problem now.

Chapter End Notes

Fax could have started a fight by spitting out the beer over the biker-dude and insulting the brew, but that's an insult to free beer.

Thanks to Kittius for idea-bouncing, as always.
Day 29.87 : Doggo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Nothing?"

"I checked both bathrooms, the offices in the back, and asked around. He hasn't stopped by tonight."

Damn.

I called another number.

"You find him?"

"Nope, but I'm petting the most adorable blue heeler ever."

"Like, a guard dog?"

"If he is he's terrible at it. He rolled over for belly rubs as soon as I popped in through the doggy door. Who's a good boy? You are!" I heard the telltale thumping of a tail hitting the floor.

Huh. Did not expect that.

"Any clues to where he might be?"

"Nah. He does have some sexy underwear though."

Shit. Where was he? Purity's info wasn't that out of date, and we did confirm we had the right locations...

I sighed and dialed another number.

"Papa's Pizza on Lamar, what can I get you?"

Very funny, Tats. "I need information."

"Of course you do."

"I'm in a hurry, so I'll give you two thousand dollars for the location of-"

"No."

Oh for fuck's sake...

"C'mon, three thousand."

"Three questions," she countered. It took me a minute to realize she wasn't offering answers, but demanding answers from me in exchange for information.
I blinked. "Yes/no questions?"

"Full answers, thorough and honest."

"Can't." Not only would that risk things I really didn't want to play with, it might accelerate the end of the world, or simply provoke people that should not be paying attention to me this early.

"Ugh. Fine. One question."

"Yes/no questions are safer."

"One complete question."

"Information first, no answer if the information doesn't help. And it'll have to be at least 24 hours before I deliver."

"Deal."

Sorry, future-me. Maybe you could fake your own death before you had to tell Tattletale everything she knew was a lie?

"Where the fuck is Hookwolf? He's not at home, at his favorite bar, or at his dog-fighting rings."

Tattletale went silent for a moment. "He's visiting his boyfriend."

"You're fucking with me."

"Conspiracy Bar. A strip club. He meets with the bartender once a month, out of costume. He used to have another fuckbuddy in the Merchants, but..."

"But?"

"...Huh."

"What?"

"Well... looks like you two had something in common."

---

I sipped a cocktail and watched the stage, occasionally waving off a proffered table dance. Women of a certain profession were generally the only ones who visited this bar, aside from the ones who worked there (although that line was blurred there as well, depending on how your night went and how much money you waved around). Most people just ignored me, despite my skin-tight dress and fuck-me heels.

Every minute or so, I glanced around the room. Sure enough, there was Brad, wearing a shirt and covering most of his tattoos but still with that greasy dirty blonde hair and copious body fur peeking out through the collar. And there was the bartender, a tall, skinny, ethnically-ambiguous man with
short-cropped hair and a certain swagger. Apparently Hookwolf had a type. They didn't make eye contact, but when the bartender told his coworker he was taking a break and slipped out from behind the bar, Brad followed him with his gaze and sent away the girls grinding on his lap.

When he stood up, I followed suit and intercepted him as he headed towards the bathroom. Swaying slightly, giving him my best drunken-sultry gaze and leaning into him suggestively, I giggled and said "Hey sailor. Looking for some company?"

He gave me an up-down and sneered. "Not with you." He didn't push me off so much as keep walking, letting me spin off of him like a discarded cigarette.

I sneered right back. "What, because I'm brown?" I spat. He ignored me. "Or am I not man enough for you, honey?" He stopped and narrowed his eyes at me, but didn't move towards me til I made a rather suggestive gesture towards my crotch.

Then he was all up in my personal space, looming threateningly, one hand suddenly tight around my throat. "The fuck you say bitch?"

The bar abruptly went still as even the dancers on stage grabbed what cash they could and went backstage. Patrons picked up their drinks wordlessly and abandoned ship. Only the braver - or less observent - of the crowd stayed in the blast radius of Hookwolf’s anger for long.

I widened my eyes in fright, but doubled down. "You heard me, pillow biter," I squeaked out through clenched teeth and a feral grin. "You a top or bottom?"

Hookwolf leaned in close, face inches from mine, and growled. I could almost see metal moving beneath his skin, hate-anger-fear-fury.

"You shut your whore mouth."

And then he threw me back against the wall, hard enough to crack the drywall. I wheezed, clutching at my throat, then spat on the ground. He just watched, menacing, daring me to keep talking.

"I bet you never said that to Steve."

---

I skidded to a stop, skin scraping on the rough gravel of the parking lot. Debris from the hole I made in the front of the club littered the ground around me. Hookwolf hit like a freight train. Thank god the building wasn't brick.

And then someone was checking me over, armored hands shifting me gently. "Are you alright miss?"

I looked up at a handsome, bearded, visored face, and at the badass motorcycle stopped a few feet away.

Oh, hey Armsmaster. Great timing.

"I'm alright," I insisted with a smile. "You should see the other guy." I then gestured at the gaping hole in the building where I could just see Hookwolf wavering slightly, metal rippling over his skin, something blocking one of his eyes. Nice aim, Alex.
Armsmaster let me down gently but quickly, spinning into a stance and barking out something to Hookwolf, halberd held in a defensive position between them. I clambered to my feet, Armsmaster automatically taking position between me and the threat, the big softy.

When he got no reply, Armsmaster stepped forward, barking out another command.

Then Hookwolf fell over, smashing a table with the crash of broken wood and shattered glass.

By the time the hero finished securing the scene, Alex and I were gone, leaving only one of Armsmaster’s own tranquilizers as evidence we were ever there.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve gotta stop humanizing these Nazis.

Thanks to Kittius for idea-bouncing.
"This thing is a clear and present danger to each and every one of us. Not just to our lives and livelihoods, but to our way of life. A danger we simply cannot allow."

Man, Kaiser was one heck of a public speaker. His poise, his timing, the way he projected his voice; it all made for a solid performance. The crowd was certainly eating it up, that was for sure.

He kept calling me 'that thing' and 'it' as he emphasized the existential fear of an enemy who could disguise themselves. Rather dehumanizing, to be honest, but that was no doubt intentional. Taking the lack of appropriate pronoun for a genderfucking shapeshifter and running with it.

"So what is the plan, anyway?" I asked the skinhead to my right, voice just above a whisper.

He gave me a look that wasn't quite a scowl. "He explained already. You not paying attention?"

"Had to run home and get my piece," I explained calmly, lifting my jacket just enough to reveal the gun at my hip, freshly stolen off of an unfortunate jackbooted thug on the way over.

His eyebrows rose fractionally in acknowledgement, then looked back up at the stage where Kaiser was still waxing poetic. "We can't find the shapeshifting fuck, so we're luring it to us."

"Uh huh," I said noncommittally. "How, exactly?"

"You know the ghetto-ass apartments on MLK?"

"Yeah, sure." A predominantly-black neighborhood, if I recalled. Not really a ghetto - I'd seen my fair share - but certainly disadvantaged.

"We're gonna raze the fucker."

I raised my eyebrow in surprise. "Really?" It took all my willpower not to shout at the smug little shit. Seriously? Burning down an entire apartment complex full of people of color just to get at me? I'd have been flattered if I weren't fucking horrified.

"Yeah," he said, grinning in feral anticipation. Aww, a budding arsonist as well as a white supremacist. How cute.

I absorbed that in silence, letting Kaiser's melodic words roll over me and the rest of the crowd. I had to admit, as vile as it was, the plan would have worked. A big public mob, a night of broken glass; I would have definitely interfered. Enthusiastically.

Good news: I'd been told about this meet-up before it started.

Bad news: the Protectorate was still ten minutes out, busy dealing with smokescreen attacks by a few of the more mobile capes in the Empire's arsenal.
Worse news: Kaiser was on stage with Menja, Fenja and Crusader. I couldn't deal with all of them by myself, not without revealing more of my capabilities than I was hoping to share. Circus was busy, and Parian and Mouse Protector were ill-suited to a direct confrontation, especially if we continued trying to keep their involvement something of a secret. Fuck if I was gonna let them get away with any part of their fucked up plan, though.

"Where's the shitter?" I asked the would-be-pyromaniac. He gestured with his head, accompanying it with a grunt.

I pulled out my phone as soon as I was in the concrete-walled shithole - Christ, it reeked of piss - and sent off a few texts. If everything went according to plan, my alibi would be solid and backup would arrive before the main event started.

Backup plans were in place, diversions in progress, everything was under control.

Then I caught Kaiser's words as I emerged from the festering bathroom. "And in case this degenerate shapechanger is among us tonight," he said dramatically, as a hooded human figure was roughly thrown onstage before him, "speak now or forever hold your peace." Then the hood was removed, revealing a black teenage boy, gagged and bound, eyes wide with panic.

Oh fuck me running.

Kaiser grabbed the kid by the hair, yanking his head back, gasping in pain through the cloth wrapped around his mouth. "This piece of garbage has been sentenced with drug-dealing and attempting to defile one of our white daughters. If anyone," he gave pause as he made a sweeping gesture to encompass the jeering, spitting crowd, "has any reason that this animal shouldn't be put down like the rabid dog it is..."

He paused for dramatic effect. My mind raced.

That son of a bitch had planned for this. The crowd was thin enough he could burst metal spikes out of the ground damn near anywhere; with him trapping me, Crusader would make short work of me, no matter how tough I was or how good my shields, and Menja and Fenja had all the room they needed to provide support... He had counted on me being there. Expecting I wouldn't be able to resist saving the hostage.

Well fuck him too. I had a certain way of dealing with carefully laid plans.

"Candygram for Kaiser!"

"Ah, the degenerate him-"

And then he was cut off as the grenade bounced against his helmet. Thanks, Oni Lee!

As he reeled, people screamed and ran away, Fenja lunged, I shot myself forward towards them. Kaiser got both feet to the chest, sending him flying backwards. I used the change in momentum from the impact to land on the stage next to where he had been, quickly scrambling to regain my balance. Then I grabbed the kid and straight-up tossed him a hundred feet out over the edge of the lot.

Parian had been waiting over there, right?
Pretty sure.

Like, ninety percent.

Fenja slammed her shield over the grenade - joke was on her, I'd disarmed it earlier! - but my attempt to escape while everyone was distracted was somewhat foiled by the sudden sharp pain in my leg where dozens of razor-sharp metal spikes jutted out of the ground, digging into my calf and pinning my foot.

Fuck.

A movement behind me drew my eye before I could dislodge the metal bear-trap. Ghostly, armored figures, wielding ten foot spears... and their leader, sitting on their shoulders, looking smug.

I pulled a playing card from nowhere, sent it spinning towards him (guided a bit by Rune's power).

Naturally he dodged it, despite it being a completely normal playing card.

Then Mouse Protector blinked to the mark she'd laid on it, grabbed onto Crusader's neck and yanked him backwards off of his ghost, Wrestlemania-slamming him into the ground with a triumphant woop. The ghosts flickered out moments later, Mouse Protector disappearing as well, and I tried to get a grasp on the metal spikes to pull myself free...

Kaiser was up again, with the twins flanking him. More metal joined the spikes forming my prison, nearly capturing my hands in the process.

I didn't have any more trump cards to play, literally or figuratively. I'd lost track of time - how far away were the heroes? After all the effort I'd put into maintaining the charade of Schwarz-not-Fax, would I have to drop the mask and teleport out of the trap?

The metal-clad asshole radiated anger-smug-satisfied-eager as he barked out, "Purity, now!"

I looked up.

The glowing woman herself, a night-time sun, floated high above, casting double shadows with the half-full moon. Light gathered in her hands, even brighter than before, and after a moment it lanced down like the fist of an angry goddess...

Smashing Menja and Fenja to the ground.

How I wished I could have seen the look on Kaiser's face. Even his aura was priceless as he half-turned to see them crash down, shock-disbelief-fear.

I punched the spikes, shattering metal beneath my hardened fists, but he took the moment to send yet more rising up around me-

And then gasped, staggering, as I hit him with waves of debilitating ecstasy.

I kept him there, disabled, ragged breaths and kneeling and shaking, as the PRT swarmed into the lot, sprayers jetting out streams of yellowish foam. I only released my grip on him when he was fully encased in it... and myself as well, of course.
I had some time to think. This time, though, I made myself enough shimmy room to send a few messages.

"Update?"

"This beard is itchy."

"Suck it up. Actual updates?"

"I'm in place, waiting. Lo mein is excellent. Weird to be in costume and nobody doing anything."

"S'what happens when you're a hero."

I texted another number.

"Send in the clowns."

"You got it bitch."

Then Leet replied again.

"I think I see him. Frosted tips, really?"

"That's the one. Good luck."

A few minutes later, from yet another number.

"Mission accomplished."

"Complications?"

"Dweeb's muscle-suit glitched. I had to take out the last Merchant sacrifice myself."

"Knew I could count on you, Alex."

"Next time you want me to babysit one of the dorks, at least let me watch the cute one."

I grinned as the foam started to dissolve, hiding my phone in nowhere. Battery and Assault were standing in front of me, her glowing, him also at the ready.

"Hi," I said calmly. I gave a small wave, 'look, nothing in my hands'.

"Hey there," Assault said easily.

In a much more business-like tone, Battery asked, "Are you Schwarz?"

"Maybe."

"The same one who robbed the bank in Boston a few weeks back?"
"Do I look like them?"

Assault grinned. "No you do not. Do you mind answering a few questions?"

"I'd rather just leave, if that's alright."

"I figured as much. Have a nice night." Surprisingly, Battery stopped glowing and nodded at me, while Assault gave a lazy salute and turned away.

Huh. That was... easier than I'd expected.

Still, gift horses, etc.

I left before my luck could take a turn for the worse.

I had one more phone call to make, after all.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a pain in the ass to write, but it's done. Finally.

Thank you very much to the Cauldron Discord for significantly improving this chapter. Special thanks to Husr, Kittius, BlueRose for their suggestions and proof-reading, and a shout-out to LightningLancer for providing witty banter (that I didn't end up using, but I appreciated nonetheless).
I wasn't expecting Accord to answer his own phone.

"Speak."

"It is done," I said simply, my voice once again a beautiful harmony in itself.

"Indeed," he replied succinctly. "As discussed, Theo, Aster, and Kayden are no longer a part of the plan. They are safe from me." He sounded pleased as he added, "You have done well. Better than anticipated, in fact."

"I am glad, Accord. I hope this concludes our business together." Please say yes please say yes...

"I am afraid our affairs are not yet put into balance, Fax." Shitfuck. Before I could say anything, he went on. "You have gone above and beyond what was required of you. You showed initiative, something I did not think you were capable of. When properly motivated and directed, I believe you can rise above your chaotic nature and make the world a better, more orderly place. In your own way."

"Thank you, Accord." I wasn't sure what else to say, waiting for the other shoe to drop. He wasn't offering me a job, was he?

"You requested safety for your companion and her family in exchange for Kaiser's arrest. You have instead delivered seven legal arrests of interfering supervillains including Kaiser, all without implicating me or, publicly, yourself." I could almost hear him adjust his tie over the phone. "Once more I find I am in your debt, Fax. How may I restore the balance?"

I resisted the urge to simply reply 'leave me the fuck alone'. Not only would it not go well, but if Accord insisted on 'restoring the balance' without my input or direction I shuddered to think what he might do on his own initiative. "Please allow me a moment to consider, Accord."

"Of course."

What did I want? My friends safe. My slow build to absolute power uninterrupted. Freedom to do whatever I wanted. What could Accord...

_Freedom_. There was someone I had offered to help, that I still hadn't delivered on.

"You are aware of Coil's Thinker Tattletale, yes?"

"I am," he said with mild distaste. Very mild. Must not have met in person yet. Probably for the best.

"She is unhappy with her employment, but does not feel she has the freedom to leave it..."
with her life intact."

"Coil has... displeased me, recently. Despite his explaining his reasoning, and the results being satisfactory, he nevertheless interfered with my plans in a way I do not appreciate." Served the sneaky fucker right. "I do not think, however, that Tattletale would do well in my employ."

Jesus, was that an understatement. And it'd just be trading one leash for another, with the risk of imminent demise only hovering closer over her head.

"Are there alternatives that offer Tattletale her freedom without constant death threats?"

"I would not suffer her as an independent supervillain, even if I could persuade Coil not to terminate her for knowing too much. But, perhaps... I still have contacts within WEDGDG. They guard their Thinkers very carefully, and it is very... stimulating work."

First I thought, 'wasn't he fired and arrested for embezzling?' Then I remembered that WEDGDG had Thinkers capable of foiling even Accord's plots... Tattletale would probably have a field day with that sort of challenge. If she was up for it, anyway. "I would not make that decision for her, but an offer might... satisfy my own need for balance with regards to her freedom, literal and figurative. Assuming Coil might be persuaded not to terminate her, of course."

"This is what you request, then? It seems rather trivial."

Well, might as well. "I have a list of people I consider important to me. I would ask that you keep their safety and health in mind when you consider your future plans."

I listed off the names, and I could almost hear him taking notes, the faint sounds of pen on paper.

"This is acceptable. I will reach out to WEDGDG and Coil, and our affairs will be in balance."

"Thank you, Accord."

"Thank you, Fax."

He hung up and I collapsed, suddenly exhausted. Fuck me sideways, dealing with that maniac was terrifying, even - especially - when he asked me what I wanted.

I descended from my watchpoint high over the city, lit by the faintly glowing hint of dawn over the water, and landed on one particular terrace. Music thumped from inside, the sounds of laughter and shouting spilling through the glass doors. I could smell a certain kind of smoke, saw moving figures through the frosted glass, dancing, talking, celebrating.

For a long moment I stood there, on the outside looking in, and reflected. I had done some pretty incredible things on Bet so far. Defeated the ABB and the Empire, sure, captured the Butcher, too. But beyond that, I had found friends, built a support network, made connections, gotten invested. I was a part of this world, as strange and terrifying as that was.
Then my shadow moved, and another figure flew down behind me, radiating a warm, welcoming
glow. I turned and smiled.

"Hello, Purity."

"Fax..."

She looked exhausted, physically and emotionally. I had to remember, it had been a rough night for
her as well; not just in the mental trauma of fearing for her family's lives, but in making the decision
to betray her former comrades, even to pick up her life and start over fresh somewhere else, with
people she had once seen as enemies... At least, I hoped.

"Come on down, rest a while. I have a mask if you want to stop glowing for a bit." The light was
comforting, but also somewhat conspicuous, and if she could follow me here then others could
follow her even more easily.

She descended gently to stand beside me on the patio, her emotions in turmoil, but generally muted
by exhaustion. It was a little disappointing when the glow ceased, but she didn't bother putting on the
offered mask. She took a deep breath. "I spoke with the Protectorate, after... after the arrests."

I felt a spike of nervousness. They hadn't dropped the ball, had they? "And?"

"I leave in a few hours, with Aster and Theo. Custody papers were signed a few minutes ago, along
with the Protectorate contract. Probation for a year... I was expecting worse."

I sighed in relief, smiling softly. "I'm glad. You deserve a fresh start, away from this city. Go be a
hero without all this baggage." Her last act as Purity being her blasting Menja and Fenja in defiance
of her ex-husband was probably the final nail in the coffin for the ex-Nazi supervillainess. I'm sure
the Protectorate was both thrilled and completely unsurprised at her conversion, knowing them.
Probably had the papers printed out days in advance.

Her emotions roiled, apprehension and doubt coming off her like steam. "I... I owe you so much,
Fax. Chris."

I shook my head gently, grinning warmly. "You did this for yourself. I just... showed you you had
options."

That was definitely frustration tinting her aura now. "This could be the last time I see you, and you're
still... ugh."

"I-"

Whatever I was about to say vanished as she took my face in her hands and kissed me. When we
came up for air, our arms were wrapped tight around each other and we may have been floating a bit.
Or maybe it just felt that way.

She rested her forehead against my own, our breaths mingling in the early morning chill. Eyes
closed, just... resting.

"Thank you, Chris," she whispered softly.
"Anytime, Kayden," I replied just as quietly.

"Woo!" shouted Kitty, from the patio door into the apartment.

Kayden didn't loosen her embrace, but she did jump. We both turned to face the door where Kitty was raising a bottle of tequila in toast, Alex was leaning casually against the door frame in the same pose she was in when I first met her, Sabah was leaning drunkenly against Kitty in a more-than-friendly way, and Uber and Leet, wearing small domino masks, peered around them curiously.

I sighed. "We were celebrating. Would you... like to join us? Meet my friends?"

Bless her heart, she rallied quickly. "I... yes. Yes I would."

And then we heard sirens.

Chapter End Notes

This is it, folks. The beginning of the end.

Thanks to Kittius for helping me plot this out ahead of time, and for idea-bouncing, etc.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It wasn't actual sirens.

*Who the fuck had that as a ringtone? For fuck's sake!*

Wait. It was coming from my Protectorate phone? And several others...

I flipped it open, hoping it was a macabre joke, but...

"Simurgh, Canberra, Australia. Meet at PHQ in fifteen minutes."

Alex snapped her own phone shut. "Well *that* killed the mood."

Sabah looked pale. Uber and Leet grimaced, shared glances. I knew they didn't fight Endbringers.

The question was... who should?

Kitty sighed, partially answering that question. "So much for our celebrations. Duty calls." Gently distancing herself from Sabah, tinted with *regret-disappointment-fear*, she tapped Alex on the shoulder. "Load me up, buttercup."

Alex tapped her back, except where she did, Kitty's costume appeared on her body. Helmet, armor, sword and shield. Transformed from normal person to hero, larger than life.

Kayden gave her a slightly surprised look, but gave no other reaction except to hold me tighter.

Our eyes met. Hers were pleading. "Chris, I..."

I shook my head. "You can't go. You've just started a new life, Aster and Theo need you..."

"I *know* that," she said, a little irritation shining through the fear. "What about *you*?"

What *about* me?

I closed my eyes, thinking. Canberra. Simurgh. It would be domed afterwards, the whole city abandoned to its fate. Out of my hands; I wasn't strong enough to fight the Simurgh directly. Plus, if memory served, none of the Brockton Bay Protectorate were killed in that fight. Hell, Panacea didn't even attend in canon.

It would be fine, right?

But... what if I had butterflied that assurance away?

What if they wouldn't come back? What if I could have helped, but didn't, because I was too much of a coward to step up when it counted?

Who would die because I had meddled? Because I refused to help? Because I relied on Blank to
keep myself safe?

I looked to Kitty - no, Mouse Protector, now that she was in costume - and she read the unasked question in my eyes.

She gave me a small grin behind her helmet. "I'm just search and rescue love, don't worry about me." She struck a cheerful pose, holding her sword to the sky. "The Mouse Protects!"

"...And so can you," I finished, murmuring.

"Chris," Kayden said quietly, *alarm-worry-guilt-fear*. She must have seen something in my eyes, the way I held myself; realized I'd made a choice before I did, apparently.

I cleared my throat. "I'm going too."

A wave of *apprehension-fear-worry* crossed the crowd in various degrees, tinting the whole room an ugly greenish-black to my empathic sight.

"I can help without fighting, right?" I asked Mouse Protector.

She nodded, her ever-present smile smaller, but still shining. "And I'll look after you, too." Her grinned widened, became a bit more fond, a bit more mischievous. "Someone's gotta keep you out of trouble."

It said something about my state of mind that I let her comment go without answering in kind.

I had no gear, and was already in costume. What did I have left to do but say goodbye, in case it all went to hell?

Kayden let me go, a bit reluctantly, as I moved towards the others.

"Alex, I-"

"Shut up, you big baby. This isn't goodbye. You will come back." Despite her calm assurance, I could see her fear as plain as day, and she didn't resist when I swept her up in a hug.

Sabah hugged me silently, not trusting herself to speak.

Uber and Leet fist-bumped me, giving me nods of respect.

"Can I get a lift?" Mouse Protector asked. I nodded.

That just left...

"Be safe, Chris. Please," Kayden begged quietly. Everyone else gave us some space, going back inside, as I pulled her close and kissed her.

Not goodbye. Just... for luck.

---

"One stop first."
Mouse Protector nodded over my shoulder. I told her she could have her own force-field bubble, but she insisted on a piggy-back ride nonetheless.

I set down on the Dallons' lawn. Amy was waiting by the door, but hesitated when she saw the cape behind me.

"Give us a moment?" I asked.

MP accepted with uncharacteristic lack of comment, and Panacea led me inside into the dining room.

"Chris, I... Are you sure?"

"I'm doing support, not fighting, but every second counts. If I can help with more than just regeneration..."

She sighed, looked away. "There's... something I haven't... my power isn't just..."

"Amy," I said softly, and she met my eyes, fear-worry-guilt-shame-fear. "I know."

Amy blew out another sigh, more forcefully, accompanied with a frown and a hand on her forehead. "Of course you fucking do."

I couldn't help but grin, but it faded shortly after. "Do I have your permission to-"

"Yes. Just... take it and go. Don't want to miss the bus."

I didn't check my tattoos, but I could feel it there. One more circle, one more power. I could only hope it would make a difference.

Mouse Protector didn't say anything for a good minute after we took off, heading towards the Rig. Then, teasingly, "So... you and Purity, hmm?"

I smiled, despite my anxiety. "She's leaving soon; witness protection. I might never see her again."

She hugged me tighter, high up in the air. "I'm sure you will," she reassured me. "One way or another."

After a tense minute had passed, and the Rig loomed ever closer, I replied, "So... you and Sabah, hmm?"

"You bet your sweet ass," she confirmed without hesitation. I could only grin, and wish her luck.

---

I descended into a smaller crowd than I'd been expecting. I supposed not that many heroes or villains would risk their lives helping a city across the world, compared to a local battle...

Mouse Protector hopped off my back gracefully, making a beeline for the Protectorate capes with a cry of "Armsy! Missy!"

I, however, paused to look at Othala. And Victor, of course, but who cared about him. I almost
expected them to give me shit for arresting almost all of their friends hours earlier, but... I suppose Fax was only responsible for Alabaster and Krieg, really. Thank god for a solid alibi.

They still gave me unkind looks when I approached them to grab another charge of Othala, though.

"Come to gloat?" Victor asked harshly.

I shook my head. "Good luck, you two."

"...Same to you," Othala replied eventually.

Only then did I head towards the heroes. Armsmaster and Miss Militia were fending off Mouse Protector's enthusiastic greetings and effusive camaraderie with irritation-fondness-appreciation (and, in Miss Militia's case, alert, of course). Velocity, Battery and Assault, Dauntless, Triumph... none of the Wards, although I supposed I shouldn't have been surprised. Even if they did volunteer for Endbringer duty, and their parents allowed it, nobody wanted kids at a Simurgh fight.

My phone rang.

Who the hell would call me right now?

"Do you have any idea how much money I'm going to have to hide?"

"Hey, Tats."

"Any idea?!"

"Millions?"

"Millions!"

Some of the tension in my neck and shoulders dissipated as I chuckled. "I'm guessing WEDGDG made an offer? You're welcome, by the way."

"I admit, hearing Coil grind his teeth over the phone as he wished me success was pretty damn satisfying."

"I'm glad it worked out."

There was a pause. I could almost hear the gears turning in her head. "You're going."

"Yeap."

"You're not ready."

I really wasn't.

But still... "It's non-combat, I swear."

"...Be careful, Fax."

I waved at Armsmaster as he gestured me over to join them. Or maybe to clear the
landing pad. I moved either way, replying "I'll do my best."

"I'm holding you to that. You still owe me one question answered." She hung up.

Ah, shit. Maybe dying wouldn't be so terrible after all.

The Protectorate heroes welcomed me with nods and, in Assault's case, a fist-bump. They were all shades of grim-determination-fear, but each bore it with dignity and gravitas that I could only try to emulate. Frankly, if it weren't for biokinesis, my legs would have been shaking.

"Fax," Armymaster said finally. "I'm glad you're here, but Simurgh fights are-

"I know. No fighting, search and rescue only. And maybe the medical tents?" Far from the fighting. As safe as one could get, at a Simurgh fight. I gestured vaguely at Othala, and understanding dawned in Armymaster's eyes. I didn't mention that it was my seventh charge, not my first, but as long as he didn't ask... He didn't. Instead, he nodded. "I'm proud of you, Fax." He meant it, too. Empathic vision was kinda cool sometimes.

Still not my real dad, Armymaster, but... I appreciate it anyway.

I just nodded back.

"Don't worry!" Mouse Protector declared, suddenly right beside me. "We'll all keep an eye out for you, rookie."

Miss Militia nodded in agreement. The other Protectorate heroes took a moment from their own tense waiting to let me know they had my back. I might have teared up a bit.

Then there was a crack and a rush of displaced air, and Strider was there on the launch pad. His voice was clipped, business-like, and brooked no argument or discussion. "Gather up people, only making one trip here."

We crowded around him, and I grabbed a charge in his power, because hell yes.

Then, with another crack, we were gone.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all've been waiting for an Endbringer fight since chapter one. Here you go.

Are there any other death flags I could wave? Should Miss Militia promise to talk to Fax about something when they get back? Should Dauntless confess his feelings for Fax? Should Velocity say he's two weeks from retirement? I'm sure I could slip something else in there for extra foreboding.

Thanks to Kittius, Husr and BlueRose for idea-bouncing and review.
Day 30.91 : Duty

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My first thought was, *gah, my lungs*. I hoped Strider didn't affect himself the same way, or whatever teleport I got from him would suddenly be a lot less attractive.

My second thought was, *I was expecting daylight*. What was the time difference between Brockton Bay and Canberra, anyway?

My third thought was, *oh god it's her*.

The landing area - quickly cleared, as I followed Armsmaster's lead off to the side - was set up on top of a terraced hill with an expansive view of the city, unhindered by the young trees. I wasn't paying attention to the low buildings and considerable greenery; my eyes were fixed on the Great White Bitch floating above it all, almost glowing in the night sky. She didn't put out her own light, but her driven-snow whiteness took every bit of illumination from the explosions, blazing fires, and glittering beams coming from down below and the occasional flier darting about. Even the ring of debris that seemed to surround her like orbiting planets couldn't obscure the sight of her.

The most shocking part of it all was the wings; she had so many, asymmetrical and illogical in their arrangement, each with pristine white feathers. The three largest wings folded around her protectively, far too large in proportion to her body, even with her height. Other wings of varying size fanned out from the joints of others, from the wing tips, and from her spine. Some seemed to be positioned to give the illusion of modesty, angled around her chest and pelvis.

She was delicate and menacing, floating lightly as a dancer on point. None of the descriptions and the occasional fanart could come close to capturing her horrible beauty, the way her lopsided, chaotic wings seemed to flutter and twitch in a way that was both random and purposeful. Every tiny movement seemed to put a wingtip right in the way of a beam or slide her effortlessly out of the way of a missile. I saw a glancing blow with a seemingly dainty feather slice neatly through concrete without so much as bending.

I'd forgotten she had hair as well, whipping around her, nearly as long as she was tall and platinum-white. It moved as if by the breeze, but contrary to the wind.

A certain quote came to mind: '*...A queen, not dark but beautiful and terrible as the dawn! Tempestuous as the sea, and stronger than the foundations of the earth! All shall love me and despair!*'

I wasn't the only one to stop and stare; Victor and Othala had frozen at the sight of her as well. We all startled when Miss Militia whistled, sharp and commanding, gesturing us to follow her.

There was a briefing. I didn't remember much of it, the terrible creature destroying lives only a few miles away serving as a constant distraction.

Shifts, ok.

Armbands, yes.
Even for support capes, fine.

Explosives, I knew.

Evacuation procedures, fallback point in the dry grass lake to the north, look for windmills, got it.

I followed Othala and Victor to the medical tents. The latter surprised me at first, until I realized he'd probably stolen the skills of several expert surgeons... and was completely useless against the Simurgh regardless.

It was already a hive of activity. Evacuees went to other facilities, and only a limited number of capes were sent in to fight the Endbringer at a time to reduce exposure, but there were already dozens of people on hastily-assembled medical beds with twice as many doctors and nurses and technicians bustling between them all in barely-contained chaos. Three or four capes joined them, unfamiliar, and that was a strange thought all in itself.

It reeked of disinfectant, blood, and shit.

The Empire capes didn't even hesitate, making a beeline to the first person with a clipboard by the entrance, and I did my best to follow suit.

"Regeneration, one person, limited duration, single touch," Othala listed off rapidly, practiced and professional. The woman in scrubs nodded, then gave me a questioning look.

"Uh, the same?" I said hesitantly. Othala narrowed her eyes at me, and Victor shifted his weight slightly, angry-irritated-threatened.

Fuck you guys, we were all hands on deck here. Sorry you aren't the special snowflake you were expecting.

"Just weaker," I added. "Same duration, though. Also some touch-based biokinesis, although I don't have any practice with it."

"Got it. You?"

"Trained surgeon in-" and Victor rattled off a bunch of medical jargon that seemed to impress the woman but flew right over my head. Good for him, I supposed.

And then the work started, and everything was blood and screaming.

---

oh god oh god oh god-

Hand slick with blood so much blood tingle of regeneration passed, cells breathing beneath my fingertips no no stop leaking go back where you belong-

Even limited it was still too much so much information all broken dying by inches or miles never enough time to fix go go go-

Sagrada called out for help in Spanish, her blood running low. I tapped her in passing and her eyes
went straight back to the patient, mixing essences, giving of herself to save others-

Arm off at the elbow, closed it off stopped the bleeding sealed the skin dulled the nerves better crippled than dead-

Strangelove with his goggles and rays tapped me on a shoulder with a gloved hand, shook his head I thought my power had stopped working but no it was because they were already dead-

Broken spine, bruised spinal cord, patch patch patch you can relearn how to walk, right?

Othala side by side stacking regeneration for the drastic cases, taking things much more calmly than I was, but she didn't have to see exactly how her patients would die. Even my blurry vision was enough to fill my mind with catastrophic, cascading failures I couldn't stop in time-

Lungs collapsed, ribcage crushed, kept that heart beating manually til it all regrew rebuilt come on come on-

Regular doctors, surgeons, soldiers, moving always moving never slowing never blinking. Nurses and assistants wove between them like remoras on whales, dabbing, passing, holding, endless low, urgent droning like crashing waves, felt like drowning-

How can someone even survive this much rebar? Stop that, you don't have to pull it out just let me - and it was gone, hand jammed in the space left behind before they bled out, leaving sealed flesh where I withdrew-

A head and half a torso? Why did you even bring me this? Did you just want to see me fail? All I could do was fill their brain with enough drugs to make their inevitable death less horrible-

Skull crushed, regrew the bone and veins and nerves but the information was gone I hope they're still them afterwards-

Sharp-eyed nurses told me when to stop, hands shaking, drink some water, sit down a spell, you're not helping anyone like this, take five then back into the fray-

All the while listening to a litany of the fallen from my armband. Less than Leviathan, but only because there were far fewer bodies on the field; every loss was a tragedy.

Especially the ones who were trapped past their limits.

The poor souls.

Dehydration stress bruising you're fine why are you even-

It took me a minute to realize the hand on my shoulder wasn't a patient.

Longer to realize they were speaking. "-ok? Fax?"

I opened my eyes, bloodshot, looking up at them. Miss Militia. Hi. Yes. Right, words. "Hm?"

"The Simurgh is gone. Scion no-show. Are you able to do search and rescue?"

I nodded. God help me, I nodded.
Shit. Sudden panic. What else had I missed? "Is everybody-"

She nodded back, thank fuck. "Everybody we brought is still with us."

I took a deep, shaky breath, eyes blurring. "I'm glad."

Miss Militia squeezed my shoulder, eyes crinkling in a small smile. "You did well, Fax. You did well."

But the job wasn't over yet.

Chapter End Notes

Continuing my "Endbringer battle spent in medical tent" trend from Aberration, woo.

About two more chapters til the end of the story. Been a fun ride, folks.

(Don't worry, I pull on planning on pulling a Tabloid and continuing to add omakes and snippets and epilogues til I start my next project, whatever that may be).

Thanks again to Kittius for helping along the way.
Day 30.92 : Death of a Parahuman

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was still night. Had it only been a few hours? Had it been a full day? I had no idea. Didn't bother asking.

Armsmaster joined me, armor scuffed and scratched, one panel a different color. Replaced in the field? Didn't matter. He was fine. He was fine.

His eyes were haggard, exhaustion-determination-resolve. No hint of despair. I wondered what my own aura would have looked like. He put a hand on my shoulder too, a different question unasked.

"I can still help," I rasped, coughed. He handed me a bottle of water from somewhere. I drank greedily, only choked a little. Would it have been gallows humor to say 'I can sleep when I'm dead'?

He gave me a ghost of a smile at my unspoken joke. He got it. A hint of pride-worry, the big softie.

Our wristbands beeped insistently. Stop nagging, Dragon, gawd. I took a long, ragged breath, then scooped up Armsmaster in a shield bubble and followed the bouncing ball.

I tried not to pay attention to the devastation. The ruined buildings, the smashed streets, the burnout husks of cars and homes. The story never really conveyed the sheer scale of Endbringer destruction, and this wasn't even the most damaging one. In the short term, anyway.

I tried not to think about the dome. About the survivors, trapped for the rest of their lives, alone with only their insanity for company.

Fucking Simurgh.

I owed Eidolon a punch in the mouth. And a really good psychologist. Maybe Dr. Yamada, the Only Good Therapist.

Even S&R was depressingly limited. Not a lot of capes to save, when they were all on explosively-enforced sanity-timers...

The map led us to rubble that had once been an office. A Mexican hero, Guardador, trapped and down, but not at the exposure limit. I ran my hand along the shattered concrete and steel girders, letting shards of glass skitter off my inner shield. The rubble cleared itself out at my command, stacking neatly off to the side. Armsmaster said nothing about me using Rune's power; whether it was because he was busy keeping watch, because he figured I may have run into her in the last four days, or because it didn't fucking matter, I didn't know. In fact, I didn't care. Not really.

My little games, the you-know-I-know-you-know bullshit; it wasn't important. Not when lives were on the line.

One could argue they always had been, and I'd been willfully blind to it all to wallow in my own selfish amusement. That it was only when directly confronted with my own mortality, or the loss of those I finally started giving a fuck about, that led me to take on burdens, make sacrifices, think
ahead. One could even say that I caused as much trouble as I aimed to prevent.

They might not even be wrong.

The guilt might be gnawing at me already, a lead weight in my stomach. Or maybe... when was the last time I ate?

Anyway, I was here, now, doing something about it. My hands were caked with dried blood and concrete dust, and in the eerie silence of a city still realizing it was already dead, under the vigil of a true hero, I was stepping up and-

"Who's hungry!"

GAHFUCK

I did not almost blast Mouse Protector. She did not in any way have to duck beneath a panicked laser.

She did, however, have meat pies. Fuck yeah, Australia.

She looked... haggard. She didn't fight, and she had no use in the medic tent, but just being there, watching your friends risk their lives against the most terrifying of mini-kaiju... a part of me also realized we'd been up for over 30 hours without sleep, too, between the Rig at dawn and Butcher and training and Accord and the entire Empire and then being teleported across the freakin' planet...

She was remarkably chipper, all things considered, even if we didn't talk much.

Nobody wanted to discuss the attack. The people who had died. The city in ruins. The lives lost on the operating table. The heroes and villains who had sacrificed everything they were against the implacable, unstoppable angel of bedlam.

So instead we talked about the party, and Sabah, and Kayden.

"I don't know how big a part you had in it, but thank you for that, by the way. I think she'll be happy with a fresh start as a hero."

Armsmaster nodded, smiling, satisfied-proud. "I was told you had a large part to play in her decision to join the Protectorate. So, thank you."

Mouse Protector looked between us, grinning. "Would you two just get a room already?"

I gave her a scandalized look, holding up and gesturing at my armband. "Oh Em Gee, Em Pee, Dragon is probably listening right now. I'd never try to steal her man."

Armsmaster cleared his throat, gesturing at the rubble I'd continued to clear while we talked and ate. I saw a leg, white pants stained with...

No, it was just dirt. Not blood. Not blood.

A flier came and picked him up. Brute enough he wasn't hurt, just trapped. Not urgent.

So few urgent cases, really. Not a lot of middle ground for capes, with the Simurgh.
The armband beeped again, pointing us to the next rescue. Broken armband, not sure if dead or alive... great. I steeled myself and-

Huh.

Was... was that music?

I strained my ears, missing something Dragon said. I could almost make it out...

Oh.

Oh god.

Armsmaster was shouting something, grabbing my shoulders, telling me to move, to run.

For a moment, drawn by impulse I couldn't understand, I glanced past him, looking at the sky.

The instant I did, light reflected just so, catching the white figure, a nimbus of wings, descending once more from the star-studded dome of night. Graceful, like a falling snowflake, wings moving gently as if in a slight breeze despite her tremendous speed.

I-

Shit-

We had to-

One delicate hand moved, long fingers reaching out towards me, then clenched into a fist.

I felt a crack, somewhere, and a tugging sensation, then it was suddenly... cold.

I tasted copper.

What-

I can't feel my legs-

I can't see anything below-

Armsmaster shouting, cradling me in his arms. When did he catch me?

When did I fall?

Voices. Hard to focus my eyes. Distantly, a star moved, receding back into the void. A meteor in reverse.

I tried to speak, nothing moved. Biokinesis was a confusing jumble of- no, seriously, where was everything?

I still had... one hand. I reached with it, grasping. Armsmaster, Colin, took it, held it tight within his gauntlet.
"It's ok," I failed to say. "It doesn't hurt," I couldn't-

He was saying something. Probably important. I strained my ears - oh, good, that music was gone now - and I heard him say-

"I've got you, Chris. I've got you."

And then nothing.

Chapter End Notes

This is it, folks. One chapter left, then epilogues and omakes and other shenanigans. The story will be properly complete, and everything after that is just bonus.

Thanks to Kittius for a great deal of support and several noteworthy lines, as well as Husr and BlueRose for idea-bouncing and beta-ing.

EDIT: Alternative Simurgh song, crafted by our very own Husr.
I regained consciousness reluctantly, slowly; awareness in a slow drip.

I could feel my hands, my feet. Unlike the last two times I woke up in hospital beds - because where else could I be, the feel of paper-thin sheets and cardboard mattress and yeap those were straps on my wrists and ankles - I didn't actually hurt.

A pleasant surprise.

Until the memories returned.

I didn't want to open my eyes. I didn't want to know. I wasn't given a choice.

A voice, soft in my ear. "How are you feeling?"

For a moment I was too overwhelmed with unexpected warmth and fondness to respond. Eyes opened, a small cubicle of curtains, familiar; no one in sight, although I saw a few knots of anxiety milling around on the other side.

Then I recognized the voice. My earpiece. "Dragon?" I whispered, voice hoarse.

I could almost hear her hesitate, the faintly digital voice somehow expressive even in its pauses. Finally, she spoke again.

"Colin?"

I worked my jaw, suddenly unfamiliar, heavy. My face was wet, vision blurred. "I'm," I coughed. "I'm sorry, Dragon."

She was silent. I could feel her heart breaking through my earpiece.

I couldn't take it. There was a snap as I tore the bindings on my arms so I could cradle my head in my hands.

Features both familiar and unfamiliar beneath my fingers. A beard that was not my own, but was.

The curtains opened, hurried footsteps, stopping at the foot of the bed. Drawn by the noise, or alerted by Dragon... I didn't want to look, but I had to. As I saw them, I felt a surge of emotions both mine and... not. Affection, respect, pride, loss...

Hannah searched my eyes, looking for... for her teammate, her commander, her friend.

Kitty just took one look at me and sighed out, "Oh, Chris..."

Miss Militia looked at her, then back at me, expression shifting. I nodded, unable to speak through the lump in my throat.
Miss Militia debriefed me in private when I'd calmed down enough to speak.

She rattled off M/S code phrases. I answered just as automatically, despite... well.

The local version of the Protectorate predicted the entire city would have to be domed. I was not surprised. Cape casualties were middling. Most of the defenders were still on site, arranging transportation, debriefing, undergoing psychological evaluations. I supposed this was mine.

"What happened?"

"The Simurgh left after... Fax died. You collapsed. We took you here, removed your armor, monitored your condition. Healers found you... healthy enough."

"I'm... I'm so sorry, Hannah-"

She cut me off with a gesture. "You... He knew the risks."

I listened to my feelings as she spoke. I felt... Confirmation. Bittersweet satisfaction. No regret.

Well. The regret was all mine.

"Yeah," I said finally. "He did."

_Fucking Simurgh. She'd left. Everybody was safe._

I pulled a joint from nowhere, lit it with a soft exhale of flame. My powers were... Still there. It was reassuring.

Then I took a hit and immediately started coughing my lungs out.

_Oh for fuck's sake._

Hannah handed me a cup of coffee with a small smile, which I accepted gratefully. I'd downed half the cup before I realized it was _delicious._

I looked to her with surprise. It was a little odd to see her wistful expression without the scarf. The rest of her face was just as expressive.

"Your own blend," she explained softly.

That's right... It was in my Endbringer Preparedness Kit. His kit. Fuck, this was weird. I imagined it was only worse for Hannah.

We sat in silence as I sipped the rest of the ambrosia. A pronounced... peanuty quality, and heavy body. Hints of chocolate and some spice - cinnamon, perhaps - that lingered in the mouth after each
I thought of Alex, the coffee they made me drink after Steve's wake.

Fuck, Alex...

Kayden, Kitty, Sabah...

Hannah, Ethan, Cassie, Rory, Robin, other Robin...

How did I even start? How the fuck was I supposed to handle my own death?

Even if I'd given it a bit of thought after first encountering the Butcher, I'd never imagined it would be like this...

I couldn't-

It-

Miss Militia interrupted my musings. "So, what will you do now?"

I ran.

With a crack, I disappeared from the hospital bed, appearing in... Ah. The last place I remembered being.

In the weak light of early dawn, greyish, filtered through smoke and dust, I saw what the Simurgh had taken away.


And yet here I was, standing before my own remains.

How did I mourn a man who sacrificed himself when I squatted in his body, the subsumed remnants of his personality and memory lingering like the taste of coffee in the back of my throat? Reflexes, emotions, knowledge, mine yet not.

The answer came to me, unbidden, rising up from my subconscious.

He didn't want me to mourn.

I could feel that. He wanted me to keep going.


How could I expect to save the world? All the worlds?

Turning my back on the bloody remains, I instead looked at the rubble of a city no less dead. It seemed worse in the light, like a nightmare found to be real come morning. How many people were
still buried here, doomed, because I didn't want to talk to Eidolon sooner?

I wanted nothing more to return to my mediocre extended-stay hotel, drink myself into a coma, and sleep through Gold Morning.

I could do it, too. Colin was dead. Fax was not a member of the Protectorate. I was under no obligation to... I could just not. Just, keep going as I had been, gathering power at my own pace. Perhaps slower, at first; my current powers themselves had not weakened, but I felt... diminished, somehow, by the 'transition'. Charon's toll, every time I was ferried across the Styx and back. I could figure out exactly what that was later. Point was, My plans didn't have to change.

Something shifted in the back of my mind. Not a presence, as such. A phantom thought, like a memory evoked by a familiar scent.

You're still not my real dad, Armsmaster.

Even the disapproval of Colin's echo wasn't an insurmountable obstacle. Not really.

Hell, it'd be easier than the alternative. With most of my foes dispatched or dealt with, one way or another, with Kayden safe, with all of - almost all of - the Protectorate intact, Brockton Bay wasn't in a bad position. I could rest. Surely I'd deserved some rest. And besides, the end of days was still years out. I had time. It was tempting.

I sighed, closed my eyes. With a thought, I lifted off from the ground, light as a... well.

Without realizing it, I was hugging myself, curled up in a ball around my feelings. And, apparently, his as well.

I felt... reassurance. Hope. Pride? Really?

Couldn't help but smile a bit at that.

There was... something to that, at least.

I wasn't the same man that appeared in Brockton Bay, only one month earlier. Literally or figuratively, I thought with some bitter amusement.

One fucking month... it felt so much longer.

It had happened in bits and pieces. One anchor at a time, like Khepri's sanity in reverse. People I grew to care about, was willing to sacrifice things for. People I didn't want to die - too late, too late - because I was unwilling to step up my game; stop half-assing and commit to whole-assing. They pulled at me, in vivid flashes. Alex, slipping arms around my waist. Steve's ghost of a smile. Hearing Dragon laugh at an unexpected joke. Giggling with Kitty. Drinking with Ethan, seen in double. The taste of Kayden's lips.

I felt a surge of confirmation, determination, and that echo of pride again as I made my choice.

What happened now?

Now I had work to do.
People to save.

Worlds to save.

With a crack, I was back in the room with Hannah, who jumped to attention at my reappearance, back straight, awaiting orders. I wasn't her boss, but...

"Tell Alexandria I need to speak with her."

Chapter End Notes

Thank all of you for reading, liking, watching, sharing, and commenting. It's been a fun ride.

Thanks to Kittius for this and so many other chapters as my unofficial beta and idea-bouncer, as well as BlueRose and Husr and many others for contributions.

As I've mentioned before, there will be more CU, but this is the end of the main, self-contained story.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!