Queen Of The Cards
by Catamboc

Summary

Kischur Zelretch Zweinorg is a complicated guy. But we all know that "he laughs at good and rages at evil". And the latest target of his ire is an inter-dimensional parasite granting powers to humans. To save a world heading straight to certain destruction, he will help Taylor Hebert wield the powers of myths and legends. The problem? She has to win them all - in Alaya's Holy Grail War.
AS BUTTERFLIES FLUTTER ABOUT

-QUEEN OF THE CARDS-

She could hardly remember that moment. The only thing she could clearly recall were two giant entities, twisting together in a seemingly endless helix.

<DESTINATION.>

<AGREEMENT.>

<TRAJECTORY.>

<AGREEMENT.>

<INTEGRA- >

<ERROR: HOST CONNECTION NOT FOUND… RECONNECTING…>

<HOST RECONNECTION FAILED…ERROR: HOST CONNECTION NOT FOUND…>

<SEARCHING ALTERNATE CONNECTION… HOST SERVER CONNECTION FOUND…>

<CONNECTING TO HOST SERVER… OK.>

<INTEGRATING HOST SERVER DATA… OK.>

<NEW SERVER COMMANDS FOUND…>
After that, she screamed and screamed as indescribable pain wracked through her, unseen lines of power carving deep into her very body, mind, and soul.

She opened her eyes – and knew then and there that everything has changed.
Dinah Alcott knew she was in trouble.

She couldn’t help it. Despite the numbers clearly showing her the risk, she just can’t ‘not’ go to the toilet. It wasn’t her fault that it was a hot day, and that the coffee shop in front of the clinic were selling their fresh fruit shakes at half-price, so she was able to finish two large glasses as she waited her turn to meet that, what did her mother call this man? Nervo-, nero-, ah, right, neurosurgeon. She didn’t have the urge to go before she met the doctor, it was after that. But once she’s done the deed, three things became clear.

Number one: she got separated from her mother. Of all the days that her mom scheduled to have her continuous headache looked at by the doctor, it just had to be on an week day - during lunch time, when people at the nearby offices rushed out for their meals at the nearest available restaurants and diners.

That also happened to all share the same wing as that of the specialist’s clinic.

It was annoying, but her usual recourse was to go to customer service and have the PA system call her mother to pick her up. That brought no end of embarrassment to her every time she resorted to this method. So what if she was ten? Ten was a good age to have a cell phone, but no, her parents thought that it was too early for her to have one. There was no need for her, they said. She can always go to customer service for help if she got lost in the mall – again.

This brought her to point number two: there was no one at the customer service booth. Which was really weird, since there should be at least one person manning the counter. Seeing the long line of angry shoppers in front, Dinah shook her head in annoyance. The young girl could have waited for her turn, but the one thing that stuck to her like a sore spot was actually the last point in her observation.

Number three: She was being followed.

It became apparent as she began to walk around the mall looking for her mom. At first, she didn’t really see anything wrong, only that several men seem appear to be watching her, some even
attempting to get close to her. They just couldn’t get any closer because she was able to walk away faster. But the longer she walked, the more she noticed that she was being led to the books and stationery wing of the building, which was devoid of most people at this time. Normally, she could go ask help at the mall security, since everyone does that, but just like at the customer service counter, there was no one in sight. It was like events conspired to ensure that no help would be forthcoming.

“Chance that I could be helped by anyone in the mall?” Dinah mentally asked herself.

1.01%

In addition to that number, she was getting the picture that no one around her would want to help in the first place.

“Chance that I would be kidnapped by these men?” she winced as the new question worsened her headache, but she needed to know more.

98.97%

“Chance that I could escape?”

1.27%

“Chance that they will kill me?”

4.01%

Not bad, to be honest, she could live with that answer. Still, she had to be sure:

“Chance that it will be something worse?”

95.99%
Well, that confirms it. She really was in deep trouble. From a new picture she’s getting, she’ll need some serious firepower to get away from this problem. Unless there was a cape around to help, she wasn’t going to be saved anytime. Wait, wasn’t the Protectorate supposed to be patrolling at this time? Where were they? Which reminded her:

“Chance that a cape could save me?”

0.00%

As if the numbers could get any worse. This was the first time, ever, that she got an answer with absolute certainty. Dinah was so distracted by the numbers and the worsening headache that she failed to notice another girl just exiting a bookstore – right into the youngster’s path. She was walking so fast that they crashed into each other, with Dinah the one bouncing down, painfully lying back on the floor.

“Ow!”

“Sorry! Are you all right?”

Dinah looked up at the stranger, leaning over her with outstretched hand. The first thing she noted was the eyes, how her round glasses enhanced the look of genuine concern on the older girl’s face. Next was how beautiful the girl’s long, curly, dark hair was. And that her body was really thin, made worse by the bulky grey sweater, faded jeans, and old sneakers she wore.

She decided, on a whim, to mentally ask another question. At least the splitting headache she’s having couldn’t get worse anymore.

“Chance that she would help me escape?”

100%

“What?!” Dinah couldn’t help but blurt out in surprise.
This was the second time that she got an absolute answer. Perhaps this was her chance!

“I’m sorry?” the teenager was genuinely confused.

“Please, help me!” Dinah grabbed the outstretched hand, “There are bad people chasing me and trying to kidnap me and I couldn’t find my mom and no one seemed to be able to help and I’m trapped inside the mall and…”

She stopped her babbling when she noticed the teenager’s expression change. Mouth set into a thin line, her eyes narrowed as she began to look around, the older girl then helped pull Dinah up and quickly led her away with surprisingly gentle hands. In hindsight, the younger girl also realized just how tall her companion was.

“I think I see what you mean,” the teenager said, “If I’m not mistaken, I count at least a dozen men who shouldn’t be looking at a young girl like you with eyes like theirs. Let’s go this way.”

The two walked straight into a service entrance meant for mall employees only. It was secured with a keypad lock, but the teenager simply pressed several buttons and the door opened. Seeing Dinah’s surprised face, the teenager simply said:

“It’s good to be friends with the housekeeper’s union.”

The hallways itself was devoid of people as well, probably due to being lunch time and all, and Dinah was getting worried. Her concern heightened when they entered what was clearly a large supply room, with plenty of cleaning and maintenance supplies filling the ten-foot high shelves. Considering the size of the mall, this was a suitable amount. The shelves themselves were not of equal lengths, resulting in an arrangement that maximized the use of space, but created a virtual maze inside. This did not seem to pose as a problem to Dinah’s companion, who led the young girl further inside. They eventually reached the back of the room, where a table with some playing cards lying on top, some chairs around, and a small fridge could be found.

Getting Dinah seated comfortably at the table, complete with a cold can of orange juice, the girl then walked back towards the front door.

“Take it easy, this won’t take long,” she said with a smile at Dinah, “I suppose this can be another field exercise for me. Oh well, here I go...”
The girl turned and disappeared amongst the shelves. Nervously, Dinah began to sip her juice. She was half-way done when a loud crash came from near the entrance and sounds of shouting could be heard. There were a few more crashes, and was that the whirr of an electric mop she heard? It was then followed by a series of pops that she thought came from bottles opening, but she quickly changed her mind when several something’s whistled over her head and tore holes into the fridge behind her.

Guns with silencers.

So what if she knew about it? It wasn’t her fault that her father liked watching action movies in the living room with her. The popcorn and soda was very irresistible.

“Ceasefire, you idiots!” someone shouted, “You might hit the target. Stay close and keep your eyes open. Whoever’s helping her has got to be close.”

The popping ceased and the room became virtually silent now. A thud was heard quite close, with someone groaning before becoming silent.

“Damn it, she got Suarez,” another voice cursed.

“Where the fuck is that bitch?” the one who shouted earlier asked, “She can’t be far, that pipe’s too heavy to be thrown.”

Another crash, another groan, but this time, it was closer. Dinah was about to stand up when one of the men who were trying to corner her earlier entered, gun in hand. Seeing his quarry, the man quickly rushed at her, grabbed her arm, and began to drag her out. She struggled, but the man’s grip was too strong.

“Hey, we’re not done yet, mister.”

A hand clamped down on the man’s shoulder, squeezing so hard that Dinah thought she heard bones breaking. It must be the case, since the man cried out in pain, letting go of her hand in the process. He tried to shoot his attacker, but another hand grabbed his other shoulder and twisted it hard. This time, Dinah was sure that bones were broken, since shoulder blades are not supposed to bend so much it touches the back. His gun fell from lifeless fingers.
The teenager stepped away, taking Dinah with her. The man was howling in agony, both arms lying limp by his sides now. In anger, he lunged at the two. He didn’t get close though. With a blindingly fast move, the teenager spun around and delivered a roundhouse kick right into his face. He flew straight into the adjacent wall, crumpled down, and did not rise again.

“Well,” the teenager muttered, “that takes care of all of them.”

Dinah couldn’t help but stare at the prone figure, then to her rescuer. One thing was clear in her mind.

“You’re awesome,” she said softly.

“Uh, well, not really,” the teenager said, scratching the back of her head, “I mean, those guys just wouldn’t stay down after one hit. It’s fixing the mess outside that’s going to be a pain.”

“Well,” Dinah shrugged, “at least you stopped them. Thanks, by the way. I was really scared.”

“No problem,” the teenager smiled, “By the way, why were they trying to kidnap you?”

“Don’t know. They just showed up after I went to the clinic with my mom.”

“Clinic?”

“My head hurts a lot.”

“Oh.”

“Are you a cape?” Dinah asked, “I mean, you don’t have a mask, but you’re really good, like Mouse Protector. She’s my favourite. Uhm, you don’t have to answer, and I can keep a secret you know. Uh…”

Her rescuer merely laughed, “Nope. What you see is just me. I mean, anyone can do what I did. These guys had no idea about this place. I did. Just created a home advantage in this case. Too bad I
can’t use this all the time.”

“Oh.”

Dinah then walked closer to the teenager and held out her hand.

“I almost forgot with all this happening,” she said, “We haven’t been introduced. My name is Dinah. Dinah Alcott. It’s nice to meet you, and again, thank you for saving me.”

The teenager looked at her in surprise, and then a small smile formed on her face. Taking her hand, Dinah’s rescuer shook it warmly.

“Nice to meet you, too, Dinah Alcott,” she said, “My name is Taylor. Taylor Hebert.”

Undersiders Hide-out

Near the Docks

2:07 p.m.

Four people, and three dogs, entered the common room, each of the four carrying a large duffel bag. One of them, a blonde teenage girl wearing a black and purple skin suit, went straight to the kitchen and dropped her baggage on the table as she tiredly sat down. The second one, wearing a black motorcycle helmet and leather jacket, dropped his right by the door and then proceeded to crash down on a La-Z-Boy beside the couch, taking his helmet off at the same time. The third person to enter, wearing a Ren Faire costume with his mask moved to the side, joined his bag with the second, and then flopped on said couch that was in front of a large flat screen TV. The last to enter, a muscular girl wearing a cheap dog mask, placed her bag, along with her mask, with the other two bags as well, and went to the kitchen cabinet, taking out a large bag of dog food.

It had been a tough day, with the job they did earlier. They almost thought that they wouldn’t be able to get away, but they did, and the ones supposed to stop them are pretty much the laughing stock right now. Who knew hiring a pair of prankster capes could be so rewarding? Not only did they increase their rep further as being the geniuses of escape, they were able to practically thumb their noses at the law enforcement agencies after them.

“Welp,” Lisa Wilburn, the girl wearing the skin suit, grinned smugly, “This by far was the easiest job we’ve ever done, guys.”
“You think?” the one in leather, Brian Laborn, groaned as he laid further back, “We got lucky to get away from the bank. Good thing we were able to hire Uber and Leet. Without that Mario Kart stunt they pulled, Vista would have had us running in circles and Clockblocker would have turned us into embarrassing statues.”

“True,” Lisa admitted, “if I wasn’t looking carefully, I wouldn’t actually realize Clockblocker and Aegis had switched costumes. Good thing I looked out the door in time.”

“What kept you, anyway?” Brian asked, “You spent some time talking to Panacea. If it wasn’t for you figuring out Glory Girl’s invincibility is only good for one hit before it resets, you’d have been in real trouble.”

“I just had an interesting discussion. You have no idea just how attentive a person could be if her sister is your hostage.”

The one in Ren Faire costume, Alec, snickered.

“Yeah,” he agreed, “I could almost see the scene being posted on PHO. Turning Glory Girl, of all people, your hostage? New Wave would be having a fit. Guess their golden child isn’t so golden in front of a gun.”

“Don’t worry, it’s on PHO now,” Lisa said, “Uber and Leet had a camera drone looking through the window and recorded the entire thing.”

“But what did you tell Panacea?” Brian insisted, “She looked really disturbed when you left her. Glory Girl’s expression wasn’t that far off either.”

“Some secret she should have known before,” Lisa shrugged, “And something she’d been keeping to herself, but should have admitted.”

“Hey, you better watch it, Lisa,” Brian frowned, “If you keep that up, New Wave would start gunning for us. I honestly think that they’d be hunting for us now already.”

“I could take them,” Rachel Lindt, the girl with the dog mask, said as she checked on her dogs.
Lisa simply shrugged, not really caring. As far as she was concerned, New Wave had bigger problems now to take care of. And if she got it right, the Undersiders wouldn’t have to worry about that group for a long while. She stood up, stretched, and began to walk towards her private room to change out of her costume.

“Hey, Brian,” she called out, “Better get your check ready. You’re supposed to pay her tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, right,” Brian grimaced, “Can’t believe I forgot to pay her last week. She didn’t even remind me when she left the apartment after taking care of everything.”

“Well, you know her,” Lisa replied, “She’s practically the only housekeeper I know that’d do the job and not be totally after the money. If I hadn’t insisted, she’d probably do it for free.”

“Just shows how she loves us, Lisa,” Alec said, “Never knew just how nice this place could be if you have someone to cook and clean regularly. Hmmm, can’t wait for that clam chowder she promised to make tomorrow.”

“Like her,” Rachel added, “Dogs happy when she’s around. Don’t even want to be paid.”

“Now that reminds me, Brian,” Alec looked up, “Why the heck are you paying her by check now? We’ve got cash, it’s easier. Turning it into a cashier’s check is too much trouble, you know.”

“It’s because he needed the documentation,” Lisa answered instead, “If he could show concrete evidence that he pays a housekeeper regularly, it could help prove to CPS that he’s got the financial capacity to take care of Aisha.”

“Oh, yeah, right. That custody case.”

Brian shook his head as he began to count some bills from his share of the loot, enough to pay for two weeks’ housekeeping fees. Then he remembered:

“Lisa, what’s her full name again?” Brian called out.
“Really? You’re asking me that?” Lisa voice came out of her room, “She’s been with us for more than a year, and yet you still can’t remember?”

“Hey, it’s not my fault,” Brian defended himself, “You know she doesn’t like using her complete first name. How was I supposed to know the bank needed that the last time?”

Lisa’s head popped out her door, “It's Anne. Taylor Anne Hebert. Write it down.”

*Coil’s Underground Base*

*Downtown Brockton Bay*

*5:44 p.m.*

“FUCK!”

Coil cursed as his twelfth timeline collapsed. No matter what option he chose, he still failed to kidnap Dinah Alcott. In the latest dropped timeline, he ordered his mercenaries to attack the girl’s home, killing her parents and making it look like it was a violent home invasion. But before his men could even take a step on the front lawn, the air inside his base became oppressively heavy, and then darkness covered his sight, which dropped that timeline.

Somehow, and he didn’t know how it happened, he lost the chance to obtain what could possibly be the strongest precog he has ever known. And it all started when he ordered his men to kidnap her at the Hillside Mall. Annoyingly, that was the only time he had been closest in successfully getting her.

“What a fucking mess,” he growled.

It was supposed to be a fairly simple job. After arranging to have the entire Protectorate scheduled to attend a gender sensitivity seminar organized by the PRT in Boston, he then used his men to get close to the Alcott girl in the mall. A clever decoy made separating mother and child easy. The Wards wouldn’t be a problem, either, since he had his first pet, Tattletale, create a distraction by robbing the Brockton Bay Central Bank. He knew the mall had piss poor security during lunch time, and he made sure that no one who could potentially help the child escape was available. Everything was simple and foolproof. That’s why he decided to drop the ‘don’t go’ timeline and created two ‘go’ timelines instead. That would’ve doubled his chance of success.
Except that was where everything went shit for his plans. He was forced to drop the first timeline because Dragon, that damned Tinker, turned out to have volunteered some of her remote-controlled drones to monitor above the city while the Protectorate was away. One of these happened to be flying right by the mall. What made it worse was that it possessed the latest communication upgrade that enabled the Canadian hero to listen in on all the radio frequencies that his mercenaries used, even if their comm gear were set to silence. The only option he had left was the second timeline, where he ordered a complete shutdown of communication. That was the last time he was in contact with them.

The next thing he knew, there was a report on television revealing all twelve of his mercenaries dead in the mall’s supply room. He tried to find out who did it, but the blasted mall cameras in that wing weren’t actually working at all, and the supply room didn’t have any. There was also no evidence found of whoever did it. All he knew was that someone, probably a cape with Brute ratings, was able to help the Alcott girl get away.

It was when he tried to kidnap the girl again when he discovered he couldn’t even get close anymore. In all the timelines where he was able to even remotely do so, something happened that caused him to die, thus collapsing that timeline. And it was all consistent – that heavy, oppressive feeling that he could feel at the back of his neck. The last time he felt that was in Ellisburg.

The vein on Coil’s forehead began to throb. He hated that feeling. He hated not having complete control. He hated not getting what he wanted, and he had wanted everything.

Above all else, he hated, down to his very soul, the cape responsible for all this.

Deciding to relieve some of his stress, he pressed the intercom, “Mr. Pitter, report to my office please.”

Splitting timelines again, he then pulled out a gun from his drawer. Yes, some stress relief was really needed.

*A Certain Mansion By The Hill*  
*Captain’s Hill*  
*6:01 p.m.*

Taylor quickly pressed her access code on the gate keypad, allowing her through. She was in a hurry since it was already late and she had a lot of things to finish inside. Being a part-time housekeeper may not be a glamorous job, she admits, but the money was actually pretty good. And in the case of
this mansion’s owner, it gets her more than that. Sure, the boss wouldn’t give her grief for being delayed, what with the incident at the mall and all that, but he sure was going to find something he thinks would be funny about it.

That annoying old magician.

Still, it was a good thing she got to the mall earlier. The bookstore finally got the book her boss had ordered weeks ago. At least that will keep him preoccupied for a while.

Taylor quickly went to the kitchen and began preparing supper. Nothing fancy, she just had to make sure that his share of beef steak was done rare, the insides still bloody. Some fresh salad, tomato soup and freshly baked bread, and the job was done. She was just setting the table when the front door opened. Moments later, a loud voice boomed at the dining hall’s entrance.

“HONEY, I’M HOME!”

Quick as a flash, Taylor snatched up the steak knife she had just put on the table and then threw it at the newcomer’s head. With the same speed, the knife was snatched up by a gloved hand. The owner of said hand stared at the knife, and then at her. He slumped his shoulders and pouted. It was a ridiculous contrast to his white hair and beard, aristocratic suit, and the walking cane with its jewelled handle he held with his other gloved hand.

“Must you?” the old man asked petulantly.

“Knowing who you are, can you actually blame me?” Taylor deadpanned.

“Not really,” he chuckled as he straightened up, “What’s the score again? Three hundred and two against zero?”

“Three hundred and one against one,” she grumbled.

“No, my nuts don’t count. You used your foot.”

“It’s still a hit.”
“Fine, fine.”

Giving up on the debate, the old man then walked to the head of the table and sat down. Taylor was in the process of serving his favourite wine when he spoke again.

“I heard there was some excitement at the Hillside Mall today,” he grinned at her, inadvertently exposing his fangs, “Care to entertain an old man with the story of your heroism?”

Taylor sighed as she sat down by his right, staring at her own, well-done, share of steak.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” she closed her eyes, “I’m not a hero.”

“Not according to my book,” the old man chuckled as he took a sip of wine.

“Oh, give me a break,” Taylor looked up and glared at him, “Zelretch.”
She stared, her eyes unblinking, as the first person she fell for sneered at her.

“You’re nothing to me,” Emma continued, “You’re just a weak, sniffling girl that’s been wasting my precious time all these years. Go away, I don’t want to see your face anymore.”

Tears began to fall down her face, her mind refusing to believe what she just heard.

“Oh, look! She’s crying,” Emma said in a sing-song voice, “So, what are you going to do now? Are you going to cry again for a week? Just like when your mom died? How pathetic.”

No, the person in front of her did not just say that. It was the most painful memory she ever had. It was something they both swore never to speak of again. For Emma to say that, to be reminded that she had lost someone precious in her life, not just out loud but also in front of another girl she hasn’t met before, was an ultimate betrayal of trust.

“Yeah, Emma, go tell her,” the new girl smirked.

She turned away, letting everything that just happened to her sink in. It wasn’t even two steps yet when she tripped and found her face painfully pressed down on the stone path.

“Weak,” the new girl laughed, “just like prey. You don’t deserve to be in her sight, prey.”

A moment later, she could hear Emma laughing as well. Forcing herself up, she looked back at the one girl she cared with all her heart, who now had her arms wrapped around the new girl’s shoulder. It was easy to imagine how she looked to them: tall and stick-thin, the front of her shirt stained with dirt, and her face streaked with tears. Yes, she must look really pathetic.

She limped away, not stopping until she was well out of the neighbourhood, and definitely out of Emma’s sight. That was when she allowed herself to fall down to her knees, letting her tears fall. It was painful, and definitely will count as one of the worst memories she’ll ever carry for the rest of
her life.

It was also proof that something was wrong.

She knew it the moment Emma opened the door. The way her eyes looked, like it was remembering a nightmare she never wanted to recall. She knew the look perfectly well. After all, she saw those very same eyes in front of the mirror, every morning for the last six months. For Emma to have those eyes meant something happened while she was in nature camp. And she was going to figure out what it was, Emma’s new behaviour be damned. It was the least she could do for that sweet girl who stood by her side during the most difficult time of her life. The one reason she was able to pick up the broken pieces. To live. To love.

The world could burn for all she cared, as long as she could pay back whoever or whatever was responsible for all this. She loved her so much. That’s reason enough.

This she swore with all her soul.

Chapter Two: Those Who Hunt Men

Winslow High School

Brockton Bay

9:30 a.m.

“Hey, Taylor, watcha doin’?”

Emma Barnes sang right behind Taylor, snatching the notebook she’s been writing on. Looking up from her desk, she saw her former best friend standing beside Sophia Hess, the girl she seemed to have been traded with. Behind them, right in front of the class, sweetly talking to their teacher, was Madison Clements. Together, they were known as Three Queens of Winslow, the virtual idols in popularity, athletics, and beauty. They were practically placed on the pedestal by those that virtually worship their very existence.

They were also known as the Three Bitches of Winslow by those they target in their daily bullying campaign. Incidentally, Taylor ranks pretty high up in their priority list of daily victims.
“Emma, please give the notebook back,” Taylor asked, reaching her hand out.

“Make me, weakling,” Emma sneered, snapping her hand up, way out of the sitting girl’s reach.

“Please, Emma, let’s not make a scene,” she pleaded.

“Who’s making a scene? Am I making a scene?” Emma scoffed as she looked around her.

It was a pointless gesture, as Taylor knew no one would actually help, including that blasted Mr. Gladly. Not surprising, since this particular class is full of Emma's posse of pretty girls and Sophia's jocks. The few outliers were keeping their heads down. Well, she couldn’t exactly blame them. The trio has a very strong standing in school. If you were a student and you wanted to get popular with the coolest folks, get recruited into your athletics team of choice, or perhaps win a modelling gig with the city magazine, you'd have to do what the three tells you to do. And usually it's to help in bullying, if not outright ignore anyone that they have been bullying.

Even the teachers were not spared. Somehow, the three bitches got the higher ups’ support in what they are doing. The one time that Mr. Gladly, in his usual lame attempt in being ‘everyone’s teacher’, had defended Taylor, he got quickly called into the Principal’s office. When he stepped out, he was pale and sweating, and refused to talk to her anymore. Since then, he had been ignoring whatever the Trio’s been doing to her.

The one time she complained, Principal Blackwell had demanded evidence which she couldn't provide. She didn't keep any journals or similar records, there were no physical injuries to show, and no one would stand as witness. Well, there were a few, but they all said Taylor made it up.

In the whole school, she could perhaps count in only one hand the number of people who were kind to her. Come to think of it, the last time she checked, she didn’t even reach five.

It’s a sad fact of her life. Still, that’s how the world really worked. You took whatever fate’s thrown at you the best you can. Roll with the punches, so to speak. And if you fell down, well, all it mattered was that you stood right back up. To stare at adversity straight in the eye, and if it’s possible, to go ahead and spit on its face, perhaps throw in a punch. But that last point’s something for others to do. In Taylor's case, she thought it best to let things be at Winslow. It’s better to stay down like this. It wasn’t like she needed to be ahead in school, let alone finish it.

If what she was preparing for go the way she expected it to go, she wasn’t supposed to live long
enough to graduate, anyway.

Still, she needed that notebook.

“Look Emma,” Taylor began, “I know you just want to make a mess of my life, but please give it back. It’s got notes of what I’m supposed to be doing for work later.”

“Oh, Taylor,” Emma shook her head in mock sadness, “You should’ve known better than to let me know what’s inside your notebook. I mean, yes, I know you need to work so that you can pay the bills. Is your dad’s job still not paying well? That’s a surprise. From what my mother’s been telling me, the city’s been giving the Dock Workers Union a lot of big projects. Maybe you should take a closer look at how your dad spends his money. Are you sure he still thinks you’re family? Maybe he’s got a different one now and they needed it more than you.”

Taylor sighed, tiredly. No use answering that. It’s just the way the Trio worked whenever they’re targeting her, which was every day for the last year and a half.

Madison used her natural cuteness to sweet talk anyone, even the teachers, to do what she wants. Rumor has it, and Taylor had no way of proving it, that the petite brunette even spreads her legs to her targets whenever the situation called for it. Maybe that’s the reason she got such high grades, or able to pass her assignments on time. Still, no one could deny that the ‘adorable’ monster does have her charms, and knew how to use it. Like in this case, where she’s talking to Mr. Gladly, keeping his attention focused on her.

Sophia, on the other hand, was more of the brawn. When the pranks needed to be physical, like the usual tripping, the jostling by the door, or that locker incident right after winter break, expect Sophia’s hand in it. Taylor got lucky that time, since the janitor happened to pass by and almost retched at the putrid smell that reached his nose. The mess was cleaned up quickly, true, but word spread that it was her locker, and that, unbelievably, she was the one responsible. It wasn’t true, of course, but it was enough for practically everyone to shun her for the entire week. But she didn’t mind it. After all, it was nothing compared to what Emma’s been doing.

If there was anyone in this school who has the right ammunition to use against her, it was Emma Barnes. Her best friend practically since childhood, Emma knew a lot of things about Taylor. Things that, when twisted around or used in public as an attack, could hurt her more deeply than a rusted bread knife stabbed straight into her heart.

“So, are you going to cry?” Emma taunted, “Just like when your mom died and you cried for an entire week?”
Just like now. Taylor swallowed, trying very hard not to let the tears out. She refused to give Emma the satisfaction that her words had hurt her again. Not today. There were important things to do after school and she needed those notes for her preparations, damn it!

“Well, I’m not such an evil person as to keep something as important as this from you so long, so here,” Emma then handed the notebook to Sophia, “Let my real best friend give it back.”

Sophia did that by ripping the notebook in half and scattering the pages up. Taylor could only watch in silence as another property of hers was desecrated.

“Have fun with the clean up, Hebert,” Sophia smirked, “Isn’t that what housekeepers are good at, cleaning things up? It’s just like you to be someone’s servant. Pathetic.”

Seeing as her partners were done, and with the bell ringing to signal the start of class, Madison quickly ended her conversation with Mr. Gladly and returned to her seat. The wimp of a teacher looked at Taylor directly for the first time since the entire scene started. She stared back at him as challenge.

“Taylor, can you please not scatter your garbage while we’re having class?” he simply said, “Your behaviour is unacceptable. Do that again and I will put you in detention.”

The Trio began to snicker in their seats. It's just like Mr. Gladly to ignore what they've been doing just stay on the popular side. Honestly, how the hell had he managed to stay as a teacher with a wimpy attitude like that?

Taylor sighed – again.

She can hardly wait for the day to end.

Downtown

Brockton Bay

9:50 p.m.
“I knew it, I switched pages,” Taylor grumbled, “Should’ve remembered that tonight’s going to be the Barret M82 and Milkor MGL, not the RONI C-G2 and PVS-7. How am I supposed to kill these assholes now?”

She was sitting on top of the highest building in that block, observing the streets below. Due to Sophia messing up her notes earlier, luckily written in cooking recipe-style code only she understood, Taylor ended up carrying a Glock 17, inserted into a RONI C-G2 that turned it into a carbine rifle, with sound suppressor, 31-round extended magazine, and ten extra ones clipped on her tactical vest. Attached to her head harness was the PVS-7 night vision goggle. Dressed up in a full black combat suit with ablative body armor, her face hidden by a balaclava, Taylor looked ready to charge in with guns ablaze for a quick and dirty close quarter combat. Except that wasn’t the plan.

Tonight was supposed to be a long-range combat exercise against the Archer’s Bridge Merchants, not a zero-illumination tactical strike using night vision. That one was scheduled next week for a different building. At least she got the rest of the pages right. Tomorrow was going to be some KM2000 knife work against Empire 88 thugs harassing some businesses at Lord’s Street Market. The week after that, she was supposed to release mustard gas in an underground gambling den of the Azn Bad Boyz that was hidden near the Ship Graveyard. The list of field exercises she had to perform went on and on.

The past eighteen months had been hectic for her, but she needed this. There was no way she’s participating in a war without first getting used to being a hunter of men. The first time she consciously planned and killed a man, using her bare hands, she knew she’ll never stop. Well, she’ll stop - eventually.

It was going to start soon and she knew her death would come right after the conclusion. It’s just that her damned conscience made it really difficult for her to kill in cold blood. She had to stop letting her emotions do the killing and later letting remorse get to her, turning her into a whimpering, crying mess.

Her opponents won’t have the same problem.

For now, there was an attack to perform, at least thirty men she’s expected to kill, probably several bricks of cocaine that she’d be torching tonight, and more than a thousand dollars worth of drug money she was hoping to steal. She needed to save for the future, after all.

“Yay, me,” she muttered, “I hate it when something like this happens.”

Looking through her rifle’s scope, she counted at least five Merchant’s standing outside one of the
buildings she had identified as part of the gang’s chain of stash houses and labs. Previous scouting missions revealed that lot of money and drugs, not weapons, are stored here. What she wasn’t sure about was how much exactly was stored. If the cash stored there was too much for her duffel bag, she might have to torch it along with the drugs. Shame if that was the case. At least it meant less for the Merchants then.

The problem here was that she couldn’t get in close and personal. There was just too much open space for her to get across unseen. The street directly below her was just an example.

It was built as a two-way, three-lane access road for ten-wheeler trucks back when Brockton Bay’s seaport was still alive with cargo ships. It was the favorite destination, due the Bay’s naturally deep coastline, for safe passage of goods to reach Northern America. Now, it was virtually deserted. This meant that anyone deciding to cross the street will be practically seen by the Merchant sentries. It was the same problem on either side of the building, while the back had a large, empty yard without anything to serve as cover.

Yeesh, talk about an island fortress.

The plan for tonight was supposedly to use the sniper rifle to kill the guards and destroy the visible armaments outside. For those inside, she was going to launch a generous helping of tear gas grenades through the windows she would have shot earlier with said rifle. She was then going to snipe everyone forced to go outside. Well, the plan’s shot now. She’ll have to wing it.

Damn it, Zelretch won’t let her hear the end of it later, that annoying old man.

Taylor was contemplating on the best way to approach the safe house when she noticed a small van approaching. Stopping in front of the Merchant building, the driver stepped out and opened the back door.

Seeing just who were being pushed out the van had Taylor gaping in shock.

It was Sierra Kiley and Charlotte Branch, two of her classmates at Winslow. They also happened to be two of the only four people kind to her. Both appeared to be tightly bound and in a drug-induced haze. Observing the Merchants that were dragging the two inside the building, Taylor could see the lust in their eyes and the growing tent in their pants.

Unbidden, a piece of memory came to the forefront of her mind.
“It was terrible, Taylor,” Anne told her, “Dad and Sis don’t want to talk about it anymore, but you deserve to know. You’re family to us.”

She suddenly remembered the two revenue streams the Merchants were known for: production and distribution of illegal drugs within and beyond the city; and the kidnapping and drugging of women to be raped and turned into prostitutes.

She started seeing red.

It was happening again – and right within her sight this time.

No, she’s not letting it happen. Not again, never again. She had sworn that one time was the last time. The sweet girl she had loved so dearly as more than a sister was forever gone because of the urges of godless men. And she had made sure Brockton Bay knew how she felt about it. Even now she could still remember how slick the blood of her victims were on her hands, the screams of fear and pain of hundreds as her spear pierced through their mortal bodies, the squelching of brain matter leaving the skull of the one cape that dared attack her from behind, as well as the heat of flames as a dragon tried, and failed, to stop her rampage.

She had lost her Emma, true, but at least the ABB now know the rage of a girl whose broken heart and soul screamed vengeance for a lost love.

There’s a reason why La Pucelle d’Orleans was feared in the myths, after all.

This time, for what these Merchants were about to do, they won't meet a mundane end. No, they don’t deserve a bullet to the head. They deserved worse than that.

Sophia kept preaching about predators and prey. Well, these men were definitely predators of the worst sort. But what that bitch probably never realized was the one fundamental truth that throws her beliefs right out of the window. It could be boiled down into a maxim taught to her by the man who even now is helping her towards her death:

*For every predator that stalks its prey, there is a hunter right behind it.*
Yes, these so-called predators from the Merchants may have gotten their grubby hands on Sierra and Charlotte, but they’ll never get far, since she’s right behind them. And while the current rules were strict on what she can or can’t do, Taylor was determined more so. Screw killing these men in cold blood. For what they’re about to do, she’ll let her rage do the talking.

“By my Right as Administrator of this System,” Taylor began, “I Command a new Ritual!”

She raised her left hand, triggering the formation of the summoning circle. A golden card emerged from within, its surface pulsing with light. The image in front showed a woman with golden robes, holding a scale with her left hand and a spear with her right.

As she grabbed the card, electric blue veins appeared all over her body, empowering the arcane ceremony that brings forth the power of one residing in the Throne of Heroes.

“Fill, Fill, Fill, Fill, Fill!” Taylor intoned, 
"Repeat five times, but destroy each when filled. 
Let silver and steel be the essence. 
Let the Archduke of contracts be the foundation. 
Let Death be the price I pay tribute to, 
Let rise a wall against the wind that shall fall. 
Let the four Cardinal Gates close. 
Let the three-forked roads to the Kingdom turn. 
Heed my words! 
I shall be all the good in the world, 
I shall defeat all the evil in the world. 
My flesh is your catalyst and my soul your power. 
In order to gain all Heaven’s virtues, 
In order to fight All The World’s Evil, 
Answer my call, O Saint of Orleans! 
Install Ruler!”

Tremble, Brockton Bay, for She will make her presence known once more.
Downtown

Brockton Bay

9:59 p.m.

Gallant paused in the middle of his stride, pressing the transmit button on his earpiece, “Please repeat that Console, I didn’t hear it completely.”

“I said be advised,” the voice of their newest Ward buzzed, “Suspected cape fight at the abandoned Sheridan building along East Avenue. Proceed with caution and observe. My drone scanners also detected suspected Shaker/Striker activity in the immediate vicinity.”

“Copy that, Gallant out,” the boy wearing silver tinkertech armor replied, “Hey, Shockwave, did you also hear what Oculus said?”

“Cape fight, Sheridan, East Ave, caution, observe, yep, I get the picture,” a cheerful voice replied, “Let’s just take a look. I’m not actually eager for a fight right now. It’s Merchant territory.”

He looked at his partner for tonight’s patrol. Shockwave was perhaps the next best cape to have joined the Wards. Boasting five solo cape captures, including Hookwolf, who was one of the E88’s dreaded heavy bruisers, as well as intelligence that enabled her to assist Kid Win, the new Wards Tinker Oculus, and even Armsmaster in their various Tinker projects, the teenager was expected to be a shoe in as the next leader of the Wards once Aegis graduates from the program.

She was also the crucial buffer they needed in order to deal with Shadow Stalker. The vigilante turned probationary Ward was definitely one of the most difficult people to deal with, even the Protectorate members that occasionally takes her along for patrols complain about her hard headedness and tendency to act on her own. But partner her with Shockwave, and she’ll behave, just quietly grumble as she does her assigned tasks to the letter, making it easier to give out orders.

Her power was no joke either, her whole body capable of generating waves of electro-magnetic charges strong enough to heat steel until it melts, just like how she dealt with Hookwolf. There’s a reason the PRT assigned a Blaster 9 in their threat ratings for her. There was another threat rating, but it was classified though. Only Rebecca Costa-Brown, PRT Chief Director; Emily Piggot, the PRT ENE Director; and Armsmaster, Protectorate leader and Wards overseer, knew what it was.

Maybe that’s the reason Console contacted them? Or this could be another raid by the Undersiders?
That’s one villain cape group in the city that had never failed to escape the Wards' or Protectorate’s clutches. Just like that bank heist they performed a few weeks back. Now that was an embarrassment. Gallant wasn’t built like King Koopa but he still ended up being bounced around like one. Good thing his armor absorbed most of the shock.

Gallant shook his head in annoyance and refocused on the current situation.

Together, the two Wards sprinted through the three blocks that separated them from the Sheridan building. Even from this distance, they could tell a serious fight had occurred, the buildings in front being silhouetted by the fires raging near the site, along with various objects that were clearly thrown scattered around them.

“Gallant, better go dark,” Shockwave advised, “It’s a striker/shaker combo, we’re not sure if your armor could handle it. I’ll take point.”

“Got it,” Gallant said, “Console, be advised, I’m activating stealth mode, Shockwave taking point.”

“Copy that, Gallant,” was Oculus’ reply, “Shockwave please update us on progress. I’m doing my best, but my scanners couldn’t get anymore readings. Something’s keeping my drones from getting any closer. Be careful.”

“Copy, Console, Shockwave out.”

Gallant took a step back, blinking his eyen in a set pattern to activate one those armor upgrades Armsmaster had installed as response to the humiliation the Wards suffered in the hands of the Undersiders.

Using special micro-cameras that captured his surroundings, his armor then displayed said images unto the side of the armor that covered said surroundings from normal view. It allowed him to practically fade into the background, with only a very faint outline of him to be seen. Coupled with his now silent servomotors and body heat nullifier, he’s now more than capable of performing stealth operations or simply hide in ambush while waiting for villains to come right by him. Honestly, if he had this when he fought the Undersiders, that group, or even just a member of theirs, could have been arrested.

With Shockwave taking the lead, they finally reached the street bordering their destination. Although, given what they were seeing right now, they wished they hadn’t gone there.
It was a nightmare. Seven-foot tall flames blazed all over the Merchant building, the charred bodies of what they hoped were only Merchants scattered about. The twisted remains of vehicles and weapons could be found all over the place. Their attention was caught by a flying body that crashed into a building on their left, crumpling to the ground and staining the pavement with his blood. Tracing the trajectory, the two Wards stared at the source, and immediately their faces turned pale.

In the midst of the carnage, skewering the body of another struggling Merchant with an ornate spear that had a familiar pennant attached, was someone they hoped they would never encounter in their lives.

“C-console,” Shockwave’s voice wavered, “P-please advise, it’s the Armored M-maiden. I repeat, it’s the Armored Maiden.”

There a moment of shocked silence on the radio, until the gruff voice of Armsmaster was heard.

“Withdraw immediately, Wards. I repeat, withdraw immediately. I’m already en route, ETA four minutes.”

At that moment, the armored cape looked up, straight into their direction. Gallant swore the stare was directed right at him.

“W-we can’t, Armsmaster,” he was shaking in fear, “She’s looking at us right now.”

A moment later.

“And she’s approaching us,” Shockwave added with a squeak, “P-please advise us, sir.”

There was a muffled curse, then Armsmaster’s voice came back, “Stay calm, do not make any hostile moves. Let’s hope your status as Wards is known to her as well. I’m close, just hold on.”

The two Wards nervously watched as the cape that caused them nightmares steadily approached, spear up and pennant fluttering in the air. Never in their entire lives did they imagine this moment to be happening to them.
“It’s been almost two years,” Shockwave whispered, “What’s the reason for her to come back?”

That was a question Gallant would like to know as well.

In Brockton Bay’s recent history, no other cape has created as much fear and panic as the one known as the Armored Maiden by the public. She was the stuff of nightmares, especially in the Asian community. And she was also the reason why the ABB now is a mere shadow of what it was before.

It all started so suddenly.

One fine Halloween morning back in 2009, PRT emergency hotlines began to ring non-stop, reports coming in of a cape wearing, well, a cape and armor that was attacking multiple warehouses that were identified as being in ABB territory at that time. Not wanting keep things going, for fear that Lung would escalate, Protectorate and PRT forces were deployed in order to intercept said cape. But she moved too fast, leaving only bloody streets, burning buildings and charred corpses behind. It was a sobering experience for the first responders, who had never seen violence in such a scale.

The only way they could tell where the cape was going was based on people running from streets, screaming “Armored Maiden!” in sheer terror, as well the trail of corpses, all ABB gang members, that were left lying around in her wake.

Of course, the feared scenario happened. Lung had rapidly ramped up in size and strength, growing big enough that he sprouted wings. He had also deployed Oni Lee to kill, or trap, whoever it was attacking his territory.

The result? Protectorate forces had a hard time identifying the remains of Oni Lee, whose whole head was crushed into pulp by what Protectorate Thinkers compared to as a bare hand slamming a watermelon hard into concrete – with the force equal to half a ton.

Later on, PRT forces were able to reach a badly injured Lung, who was no longer in his dragon form. He had serious internal injuries, was bleeding heavily and, most worryingly, not regenerating at all. Even Panacea, at the request of Miss Militia later on, had a hard time repairing the damage. It was stated by the healer that whatever it was this new cape did was preventing her powers from working properly.

The closest anyone got to the new cape was Armsmaster himself, and he requested immediate med-
evac a few minutes later, having gotten his armor damaged and losing an arm in the process. And he said the Armored Maiden did all that to him with just one swing. He didn’t even see it coming.

Protectorate forces from even as far as New York responded as well, with Legend taking the lead. A kill order was being considered due to the violence, but by then, the Armored Maiden had vanished without a trace.

In the aftermath, the ABB lost three hundred twenty-six of their unpowered members, effectively two-thirds of the group. In addition, all their properties and warehouses in the Dockyard and Ship Graveyard were burned to the ground. With the death of Oni Lee, the only cape left was Lung, who was able to escape while in transit to the Birdcage. The gang had been barely getting by ever since. Only the sheer strength of Lung was what’s keeping the other gangs from encroaching into his territory.

It was simply hard to describe it in words. In just one day, a single cape did what the Protectorate and PRT had been unable to do for years. Even until now, people would still fearfully talk about that incident, which was then on called the ‘Halloween Hell’. No one really knew who she was. All that was certain was that she was so strong that she could take out Lung. The same Lung who fought Leviathan to a draw.

And that very cape was approaching them right now.

In an attempt to distract himself from such nerve-wracking thoughts, Gallant decided to observe the Armored Maiden’s appearance. It may prove crucial in the debriefing later.

She wore an indigo dress that was covered by a steel-grey cuirass, gauntlets, and vambrace. Her skirt had a wide slit in front, giving them a view of her toned legs, stockings, greaves, and sabatons. On her waist was a longsword with a black sheathe. Over her shoulders, an indigo cape embroidered with a large cross billowed in the night breeze. It was when Gallant looked at the face did he stare – and stared harder.

Her beauty was, how was he supposed to say it? It was wondrous. It scarcely felt real. Unlike the norm for capes, the Armored Maiden did not wear a mask. Only a metal forehead protector, shaped like an ‘m’, framed her face and braided long hair. And her eyes, they were like pure amethysts, so pure Gallant felt like he could stare at it forever. This, in the back of his mind, would raise interesting questions come debrief time since he has a girlfriend.

“Oh, God,” he thought with growing dread, “Vicky’s going to kill me if she finds out.”
Another detail he noted was that he could not read her at all. And it wasn’t like Vicky’s effect either. He could still sense the emotions, but the general feel he got was that of righteousness. No anger, no sadness, no negative emotions at all. Like the Armored Maiden was doing only what it felt was the right thing to do. There was also this feeling of authority, like he’s standing in the presence of someone way above his rank. The closest comparison was when he personally witnessed Eidolon drive away The Teeth using his powers.

His thoughts were broken when the Armored Maiden spoke.

“Greetings, Gallant and Shockwave of the Wards. Nice armor, by the way. You would give assassins a run for their money.”

With a sigh, Gallant deactivated his camouflage. No point concealing himself then.

“I see you’ve come for the victims,” she added.

“V-victims?” Shockwave stammered, puzzled.

The Armored Maiden pointedly looked at their right. Only then did Gallant notice a pair of young women lying unconscious on the pavement. Shockwave did a double-take and quickly checked their condition, radioing an ambulance at the same time.

“You call yourselves heroes, am I correct? Then I assume you’re here for these two poor lasses that had been taken against their will by those cretins.”

“Is this the reason why you did all this?” he asked gesturing at the carnage around them.

“When you see a vile act about to be performed by godless men against powerless women, will you let it pass?” the armored cape replied.

“No, of course not,” he replied.
“I rest my case then.”

“But, this isn’t right,” Shockwave said, “You didn’t have to kill them. I mean, these men have lives of their own. Arresting them would have been better. They deserve their day in court.”

“Shockwave…” Gallant hissed in warning.

He knew Shockwave has a strong belief in the justice system, but saying that in front of the cape responsible for crippling a once powerful gang is just inviting a quick trip to the cemetery. The Armored Maiden slowly turned her head and stared at the female Ward, who began to squirm.

“When men refuse to give up their wicked ways, when they insist on continuing their vile acts of terror against innocents who cannot defend themselves, that is the time they forfeit their rights, and their very lives.”

The familiar rumble of a tinkertech motorcycle was music to Gallant’s ears. Out of a street corner appeared Armstmaster in his official vehicle. Seconds later, he had arrived beside them. Alighting, halberd firmly in his cybernetic hand, the premier Tinker of Brockton Bay approached the impromptu tableau.

“Good evening, Armstmaster,” the Armored Maiden called out, “Have you finally come to give your reply?”

“Armored Maiden,” the Protectorate leader said, “I suggest you give it up now. Your crimes will be met with the full force of the law. And I have the means to carry it out.”

“Careful there,” she chided him, “while I don’t doubt you can hold your own against me, please take note that you have two Wards with you, not to mention two drugged civilians. I would suggest you think carefully of what you intend to do next.”

“Are you taking them hostages?” Armstmaster’s grip on his halberd tightened.

“What gave you that idea? Aren’t they right beside you? But rest assured, if there will be an escalation of violence right now, it would not come from me. I only wish for one thing.”
“And what is that?” he gritted his teeth.

“Your answer to my question, before I left you the last time,” she looked at him eagerly, “What is a hero?”

“A hero is someone who upholds the law, who obeys the rules set down by the leaders, who does what is necessary to succeed, without risking lives,” Armsmaster stood straighter, “Someone who is definitely not you, given your known actions. Give up this villainy of yours, Armored Maiden, and put yourself under the auspices of the law.”

Hearing the reply, the Armored Maiden’s shoulders slumped, surprising the two Wards.

“Eighteen months,” she muttered, “I give you eighteen months to think it over and you still give me the same answer.”

“But isn’t that what being a hero really is?” Shockwave asked, Gallant nodding in agreement.

“To think that even the young ones here have the same mindset,” the Armored Maiden shook her head in disbelief, “None of you really do understand what a hero really is.”

“And what is your definition of being a hero?” Armsmaster challenged her, “Is it killing anyone you think breaks the law? That’s barbarism.”

“Maybe, but considering your revolving door policy of capturing and releasing criminals, I think I’m justified. Besides, your idea of punishment is merely a slap to the wrist.”

“There are rules to be obeyed, Armored Maiden. The law clearly states that all men have a right to trial and their side be heard. By killing these men, you take away their right to prove their innocence.”

“And their attempt to drug and rape these women is not proof enough of their guilt?”

“That’s for the courts and the jury to decide. Not you.”
“Oh, we’re going nowhere with this discussion,” she grumbled. “Why do you keep calling me Armored Maiden, anyway?”

“It’s the name people here gave you,” Shockwave volunteered, “I mean, you never did introduce yourself when, you know, you first went out.”

“Did any of you bother asking for my name? I mean, Armsmaster here could have asked before, instead of just hacking me with that toy of his. Sorry about that arm again, by the way.”

“It’s not a toy!” Armsmaster roared.

“Sorry, I say it the way I see it,” she shrugged, “You had to admit that toy of yours couldn’t even graze my armor.”

Gallant, determined to keep the discussion from breaking down, quickly intervened.

“May we know how you wish to call yourself then, milady?” he asked politely.

“My, my, such a gentleman! It’s rare to see such men these days,” the Armored Maiden planted her spear into the pavement and curtsied, “You may call me Ruler. It is the name I go by now.”

“Well, Ruler, are you going to give up?”

“No!” Ruler replied, pulling her spear up, “I have things to do, places to go. Storm’s coming soon, by the way. I suggest you brace yourselves.”

“Stop!”

Armsmaster launched a grappling line at the now-named Ruler but the other cape had faded away in motes of blue light.
“Next time, Armsmaster,” her voice could be heard in the air, “I expect you to give me the right answer. You just have to think about it some more.”

The Rig
Brockton Bay
10:45 p.m.

It was a somber pair of teenagers that entered the Wards common room. Armsmaster had already taken their verbal reports, secured the two civilians into the ambulance to be taken to Brockton General, and were now preparing to wind down for the night. The Protectorate leader had thought it prudent to cut their patrol short, considering just who they just met earlier.

After bidding Gallant good-bye, Shockwave headed to her room to change into civilian wear. Even now, she could still feel her body shaking. It was a close one, truth to be told. She only realized just how close she was from getting skewered herself once she and Gallant gave their reports. Sleep would definitely not be easy for her tonight. Changing her mind, she decided not to take off her costume and find some distraction instead.

Walking back into the common room, she was greeted by Shadow Stalker. No, she’s removed her mask and hood, so it’s her civilian name this time.

“Hey, Sophia!”

“Hey, survivor,” Sophia Hess greeted back, “Heard you got a front row seat at the Armored Maiden’s return. How was it?”

“Terrifying,” Shockwave sighed, “And that’s something I don’t want to go through again. She’s so different from what the books tell about her. And she calls herself Ruler now.”

“Presuming much?” the dark Ward snickered, “Well, if that’s how she wants to call herself, then who are we to question it?”

“True. Anyway, I’m looking for Oculus, where’s she?”
“Cutie’s back in her workshop, you know how she is. Looked really pissed with her drones being stopped or something. Want me to tag along? Reports could be done later.”

“No, finish your report first. You got a bad habit of forgetting it.”

A sigh, “fine, I’ll do it. See you tomorrow then, survivor.”

“See you, too. Bye.”

Shockwave left the common room and headed straight to Oculus workshop. While walking, she remembered how scared Oculus was the first time she and Sophia discovered that she was a Tinker a few months back. Seeing that look of fear in her face, yet there was a fierceness in it that promised retribution if her safety was compromised. That she would fight back with all she’s got. It was something she respected deeply. That was a mark of being strong - of being a survivor. It also brought a little sting in her heart as she was reminded of someone else that should have had the same expression.

“Why can’t she just fight us back?” she thought to herself, “I know she has it in her.”

She must have been thinking for a while, since she suddenly found herself staring at the locked door of Oculus’ workshop. Keying in her access code, she entered, and saw the young Tinker buried up to her arms in the guts of one her scanner drones. She was still in costume, but her helmet and scarf were placed on another table, with only her sky-blue pins securing her shoulder-length brown hair.

“How are you feeling?” Madison Clements looked up as her visitor sat on a bench, “I couldn’t get anything with my blasted drones being stopped by something.”

Shockwave sat on a bench and removed her helmet, shaking out her red hair, matted from sweat.

“Like I was in a fucking nightmare,” Emma Barnes replied with a sigh, "She's definitely someone I don't want to piss off."

Basement Gym

A Certain Mansion By The Hill
Taylor bent over the bathroom sink, coughing out more blood. She watched as the red liquid trickled down the drain. Groaning in pain, she sat down to the floor, resting her aching back on the bath tub.

Tonight was a mess. Sure, she got rid of the Merchants, destroyed their drugs, and rescued Sierra and Charlotte. It’s just too bad that the money was destroyed as well, but at least the gang doesn’t have it now.

She was also peeved that the Wards and Protectorate got to her quickly. She blamed it on those two Merchants that were so high they wouldn’t stop attacking her. Even after she’s dealt them killing blows. That’s drugs and its effects on the human body, then.

Sighing, Taylor tried to stand up, only to crash down, her body in great pain. She cursed the restrictions placed on her.

*Rule Number 1: You may Include only when another Holder is close, and Install only when you are engaged in the Duel.*

It was so hard to do anything effective. In hindsight, she should have just used Ruler in Include state. That would have kept things from being so ‘showy’, but there remained the problem of being exposed. Her initial clothing will not survive the kind of combat Ruler’s weapons tend to create. Besides, whether using Include or Install states, she’d still go through the same side-effect.

In order to activate Ruler even without another Holder nearby, she used her Command Seal to initiate the Install ritual. As the Class Card System’s Administrator, the Holy Grail did grant her this privilege. While this gave her a lot of power, the price was for her to suffer a backlash. Using a Heroic Spirit’s power without the protective framework the Holy Grail War provides caused a rapid degradation of her body. This was just the second time she used the Command Seal, but Taylor could swear that her condition was much worse.

“You used your Command Seal again,” a voice from the bathroom doorway spoke.

Taylor looked up with blood-shot eyes at Zelretch, who was looking at her with concern.

“I had to,” she weakly replied, and then coughed again, “I can’t let it happen. Not again. Sierra and
Charlotte don’t deserve such fate.”

A moment of silence, then a sigh, “Was it worth it?”

Looking back, seeing as how emergency personnel quickly attended to the two girls, and overhearing them assuring the Wards that they would be okay, a small smile formed in Taylor’s lips. What made it even better was that she felt no remorse. Not anymore.

“Yes,” she said, “It’s definitely worth it.”

AN: I’m putting below my version of stats for Ruler. In case some of you complain that I made her too strong, I’m also adding three more stats that will add greater dimensions to why Taylor may or may not use Ruler in a fight. For those who want to know more about the Noble Phantasms, you can go visit their wiki. So, here it goes:

**Ruler Class Card**

**Real Name:** Jeanne d’Arc

**Strength:** A++

**Endurance:** A+

**Agility:** A

**Mana:** B+

**Luck:** B+

**Noble Phantasm:** A+ to EX

**Mental Pollution:** A+

**Mana Cost:** A++

**Physical Cost:** A

**Noble Phantasms:**

Luminosite Eternelle

Type: Barrier
Rank: A+
Range: 1-10
Max. # of Targets: ??

Activation Chant:
Here’s the work of our Lord!
“My flag, defend our brethrens!”
“Luminosite Eternelle!”

By planting it into the ground, tightly grasping it, and activating it as a Noble Phantasm, it converts her EX-rank Magic Resistance into protection against all harm, both physical and spiritual. The protection is initiated by an angel's blessing, and it is centered around the flag within a range of 10. It brings about a light that completely isolates anyone within it and cuts them off from their surroundings, much like the divided water from the myth of Moses splitting the Red Sea.

The downside to the ability is that the damage accumulates within the flag, causing it to begin to tear as she uses it, so naturally, she can't withstand an Anti-Fortress Noble Phantasm multiple times in a row.

La Pucelle
Type: Suicide
Rank: EX
Range: ??
Max. # of Targets: ??

Activation Chant:
“O Lord, I entrust this body to you-.”

It is a crystallized Conceptual Weapon that acts as an offensive interpretation of her burning at the stake, a subtype of Reality Marble that has the imagined landscape crystallized as a holy sword.

By using this Noble Phantasm, Ruler loses her own life after the battle. But in exchange for her life, she can annihilate anything in existence. The EX Rank after activation is because its pure destructive
power cannot be calculated. These flames only destroy that which she thinks must be destroyed. In other words, this Noble Phantasm cannot be used against simply a strong enemy or out of emotions like hate. These flames exist in order to save something.
Edit (3/2/18): it has been pointed out that some of the class cards lack sufficient data to be used effectively in the story. For this reason, I'm reducing the total class cards in this story to 14, which includes Ruler.

-Queen Of The Cards-

“I must confess,” an elderly voice spoke out, “this isn’t what I had in mind when I woke up this morning.”

She spun, readying her spear to defend herself. Except that, the moment she saw who the speaker was, her entire body froze. Right in front of her was a man, no, a being, that she sensed was way beyond her powers. Like, with just a little twitch of his pinky, her entire existence would disappear from the world.

“Now, now,” the old man continued, amused, “no need to panic, dear. I come here to help. You’ve been placed in a difficult position. And I can’t let things go on like this.”

For some reason, she believed him. Deep within her soul, she could feel the being’s sincerity. Lowering her spear, she gestured him to come closer. Smiling, the old man began to stride towards her, his jewelled cane making dull thumps on the pavement.

“I had hoped that Alaya wouldn’t go this far,” the old man sighed, “Then again, I was playing a dangerous gamble when I arranged for the card to choose you. I just didn’t expect her interference to be this subtle.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I may be partly at fault for your current condition. But rest assured, I will do everything possible to help. After all, you are someone meant to save the world – a hero in the making.”

That statement was, what did Dad call it? Ah, yes, it’s bullshit. How can she be a hero? How can someone like her, whose hands are stained with the blood of hundreds, even those that have surrendered, who razed everything around her to the ground, who lets her emotions get the better of her, become a hero? How can someone consumed with vengeance be capable of saving the world?
There is no forgiveness for the things she has done today. She’s no hero at all.

“I can see you’re confused,” the old man said, “I suggest we take this discussion somewhere more – relaxing.”

He gestured at the flaming wreckage and dead bodies around him. He did have a point. She had just finished destroying the last warehouse of the ABB along the Dockyard, and the pungent smell of smoke and burned flesh was irritating to the nose.

“What I’m about to tell you may be too much to take,” the old man continued, “For your Class Card to summon the power of that particular Servant, I fear that you may not perform what I had hoped for you to do. The price is too high, in my opinion, for you to pay in order to save the world and everyone in it.”

Of course, there’s a price. Nothing’s free in this world. Even if it means saving it.

“What’s the price?”

A long, tired sigh, “Your life.”

Hearing the reply, a small smile began to form on her lips. Perhaps, this was the answer?

“I’m listening.”

Chapter 3: Her Life Seen Through Others’ Eyes (Part 1 of 3)

A Certain Mansion By The Hill

Captain’s Hill

11:41 p.m.

Kischur Zelretch Zweinorg sighed, a shot of whiskey in hand, while he stared at the fireplace.
Earlier, he had just seen to it that Taylor was tucked comfortably in her bed. Why the girl insists that she sleep in the servants’ quarters he had no idea. She could have her pick of the finest bedrooms upstairs and he would actually be happy. That way, at least they’re being used instead of gathering metaphorical dust. Then again, the young woman was quite humble. Too humble, in his opinion.

He looked back at the conversation they just had.

One Hour Earlier…

“You better be careful, dear,” he warned, “You’ve already used up two Command Seals on Ruler. One more, and you’ll be stuck to using the Card only during your Duels.”

“I know,” Taylor replied, wincing as she sat down on her bed, “But I figured that, with the War soon to begin, using a forced Install would become irrelevant. I just had to save Sierra and Charlotte. Now, can you hand me that drink? My whole body hurts and I need to get better quick.”

“You do realize that this won’t actually heal you, right?” Zelretch asked with a raised eyebrow, handing her a small flask filled with a golden liquid, “It’s just meant to trick your body that it’s all right, so you could move normally.

“Yeah, you’ve told me that countless times,” Taylor winced again as she swallowed the potion, finally sighing in relief as it began to work, “Wish you could make an actual healing potion. That’ll solve a lot of our problems.”

“I can make one,” he retorted, “It’s just that the moment I attempt so, I end up getting thrown out into a random dimension. You can’t imagine how hard it was to find my way back here.”

He shuddered at the memory. Honestly, the places he had to go through the last time was so bad, he wouldn’t even want it on his worst enemy. Well, not exactly. There are people he knew that would certainly deserve such fate.

Whoever said he wasn’t a prankster is an idiot. He is one, perhaps the best of them all. It’s just that he reserves his worst pranks for those with the biggest sticks up their asses. Or for those who plan on destroying the world. He’s got really special ones saved up for the latter.

“True,” Taylor sighed, “I hate it when the rules are like that. How can making healing potions be a
form of direct interference from you? You're not getting involved in the War through them.”

“Ah, well, you know how it is,” Zelretch grumbled, “Alaya here can be a real bitch.”

That brought up another sore point for the Kaleidoscope.

As a Magician, he stands above all the rest. Despite his vaunted rank, where everything he desired could be had with a snap of his fingers, he focused much of his work and attention, instead, on ensuring the continued existence of Humanity.

Just like the black guy in that Thor movie he watched a while back, Zelretch stands guard within the void of the Kaleidoscope, vigilantly overseeing the tapestry of countless worlds and threads in front of him, never losing focus on everything that happens in each one. But unlike that movie character, he can also intervene when he sees something amiss. Or when there is a looming threat on the horizon that threatens Humanity.

A good example was this world – Earth Bet.

How an inter-dimensional being in gold could grant powers to humans struck his interest when he first saw it. But his curiosity turned into rage when he realized just what this being was planning. By sending out these ‘shards’ to be used by humans, this entity hoped that these could learn and improve themselves. Except that the methods used was unacceptable in his eyes. Fostering conflict among people, letting death and destruction become an integral part of life, facilitating the existence of what the people of Earth Bet call ‘Endbringers’… And let’s not forget the method in which the shards connect to their hosts – the Trigger event. What’s even worse was at the end, once all the shards have gained sufficient maturity. This entity then takes them all back into itself, in the process stripping all life on Earth. And not just on this Earth, but all of Earths in that particular dimension.

This just would not do.

At that time, he had decided to use one of those special pranks for this particular prick. If this entity could grant powers to ordinary humans, then he could do so as well. Perhaps the Class Card System that young Julian Ainsworth had been heaping praises about would be perfect for this case. Unlike the Fuyuki-based system, this was actually very stable. Even a single Class Cards could also provide multiple combat options for the person that uses it. All he needed to do now was to choose his champion.
Oh yes, that would be the perfect prank. To be defeated by a power not of its own making, in the hands of someone it had marked for sacrifice; Zelretch could hardly wait to see the look of shock on its metaphorical face. Fucking up the plans of this one would be memorable.

That was when *The Incident* happened.

He was in the process of compiling his list of candidates, as well as which class card to be used (he was thinking that the Standard Servant load-out that little Illya used in the past would be perfect), when a huge surge of power swirled around him. The attack was so sudden that he was forced to let go of all the class cards he was holding at the time. In a desperate bid to regain them, Zelretch pulled power from the Kaleidoscope, but the swirling power would not allow him easy access. With a burst of effort, equal to that when he fought that damned Crimson Moon, he managed to get his hands on one card. Unfortunately, the rest were out of his reach.

He looked down at the one he had recovered. Oh, good, it was the Ruler Class Card. He could still work with this.

He then stared as the scattered cards flew towards the hand of a familiar being. It was a surprise. Normally, Alaya didn’t do anything when he’s on a troll. Still, it would be good to have the Collective Consciousness of Humanity helping him.

“Alaya, good to see you,” Zelretch greeted, “I see you’ve got my cards. So, what are you planning?”

“What is necessary…” came the reply.

That wasn’t the answer Zelretch was expecting.

“Uh, what?” he inquired, “I mean, I need those cards to save the world.”

“Exactly…”

“Oh, that’s good,” Zelretch breathed a sigh of relief, “at least the two of us saving humanity would be better.”
“That’s what I must prevent…” Alaya corrected, “You must not succeed…”

Zelretch’s blood froze upon hearing it. There was no way Alaya would say those words.

“What do you mean by that?” he demanded.

“Precisely as what I have said… You are not allowed to save mankind…”

For a moment there, Zelretch thought that he’s looking at an impostor. But no, the signature of power is the same. For it to have enough power to affect his Kaleidoscope, it meant that he really was talking to Alaya, at least this dimension’s version of it. It doesn’t make any sense.

Alaya’s purpose is to ensure mankind’s deepest desire: to continue their existence in the world. For the Collective Consciousness of Humanity to actively prevent his efforts meant that, what? Mankind wanted to die? No, that can’t be right. Alaya shouldn’t exist in the first place then. That’s totally counter to man’s instinctual need to live.

For Alaya to act like this – there’s something really wrong that’s going on here.

“Do you know what you’re talking about?” Zelretch asked.

“Yes…” came the reply, “Everything must come to pass… This is Mankind’s Wish… To be welcomed into oblivion’s sweet embrace… For there is no hope… no hope… no hope…”

Root be damned, Alaya’s not making any sense here.

“There is hope,” he countered, “Mankind is not meant to disappear, to go out without a fight. There are people who will rise to meet the challenge. Heroes who will protect all.”

“Are you talking about your champion…” Alaya tilted its head, “I doubt you shall succeed… Even she will fail in her destiny… I will see to that…”

“Not if I can help it,” Zelretch stated, gripping tightly the one class card still in his hand.
“You are not allowed to help mankind…”

“True, but that won’t stop me from helping my champion. The one I choose will save the world,” a moment’s pause, "Wait, what do you mean ‘she’?"

“Taylor Hebert is fated to save the world… She must be stopped… At all cost… The power of the Throne of Heroes will also ensure that…”

Alaya raised the Class Cards in her hand. Passing her power through them all, she then released them into the void. Zelretch watched as all thirteen cards disappeared into Earth Bet, beyond his perception and, most importantly, beyond his control.

“Man has always desired for conflict, for war…” the collective consciousness stated, gathering power into itself, “so let us settle this argument in a War as well…”

“Wait!”

Feeling a surge of dread, the Wizard Marshall tried to stop it but the entity ignored him.

“By the Power vested in me…” Alaya began, “I hereby instate the Holy Grail War… My Champions shall gather… Their Powers without limit… They shall hunt your Ruler… Who shall stand Guard before the Holy Grail… They shall lay the Guardian low… The Victorious shall gain all the Power of the Holy Grail… And thus be free to shape the World as they see fit…”

Unearthly energy, without doubt augmented by the Root’s as it was Alaya’s privilege to tap, swirled around Earth Bet, travelling through the various leylines of the world, all converging into each major point of intersection. Zelretch noticed that one of these is in the City of Brockton Bay.

“The Battlegrounds have been set…” Alaya continued, “My Champions have been Chosen… Their Powers great and true… Choose your Champion well, Kaleidoscope… For now, I shall ensure Taylor Hebert’s demise… Her birth is unacceptable… This I swear to fulfil Mankind’s Wish… Oblivion must be attained…”

Thinking quickly, Zelretch made his choice.
“Then I choose her as my Champion!” he said, allowing energy to form in his card and releasing it as well.

The card then hurled straight into Earth Bet, disappearing from his perception as well. Alaya looked at him again.

“Is that wise… She is meant to die… Your choice would be wasted… You cannot interfere directly…”

“I cannot interfere directly in the War, true,” Zelretch corrected, “But that shouldn’t stop me from helping her prepare for the War. Even you cannot directly touch my Champion.”

“Very well…” Alaya acquiesced, “But to ensure you follow the rules… A little insurance…”

Power surged again, this time around Zelretch. Before he could react, he found himself back in his mansion. The Wizard Marshall tried to summon the portal into the void, but he suddenly found himself collapsing on the floor. That encounter with Alaya had thoroughly exhausted him, greatly draining his powers. It would be awhile before he could perform Kaleidoscope again.

Zelretch spent several weeks of his time sequestered in his abode, gathering his power as fast as possible. He needed to get back to Earth Bet immediately. The moment he had enough, he quickly activated his Magic and willed his presence into Brockton Bay. Then and there, he realized that almost three decades had passed in his absence. And when he saw Taylor Hebert for the first time, cloaked in the power of the one Servant he never wanted her to Summon, his worst fears had been confirmed.

Alaya had rigged this battle in her favor right from the start.

His attention was brought back with the snapping of Taylor’s fingers.

“Hey, old man,” she said, “You looked lost there for a bit. Are you okay?”

“Sure, I am, dear,” Zelretch recovered, “You know how old age gets to us.”
“Not really,” she shrugged, lying down on the bed, “I’m still young, so I have no idea what its like.”

“Just you wait,” he retorted, “a couple of years from now, I will be laughing at your face when it happens to you as well.”

“Oh please,” Taylor rolled her eyes, “You and I both know that’ll never happen. I’m not going to live long, remember?”

That brought their conversation to an awkward stop.

“You’re not going to stop talking about that, are you?” the aging magician sighed.

“Why should I? You told me that I needed to die in order to save everyone and the world. I guess that’s just my lot in life. It’s not like anyone would care if I die.”

“Well, I do,” Zelretch said, “Your father does, so will your friends and Hannah-.”

“Okay, let me stop you there for a bit,” Taylor said, “One, you don’t originally live in this world, so you don’t technically count; two, my father is my father, of course he’d miss me, but I’m sure it won’t be for long; three, what have you been smoking to think that I’ve got friends in the first place? And four, don’t you ever, ever, say Hannah’s name in front of me again. Why do you think I spend most of my time here and in the other places I work for? I can’t stand her presence. Could you please not remind me of her?”

Another sigh, “You know she means well.”

“I know that, too,” Taylor spoke after a few moments, her eyes closed, “But with how happy Dad is whenever he’s with her, I just can’t help but think he’s finally replacing mom. Yeah, I know. It still hurts to remember her. Why do think I never use the ‘Anne’ in my name? But with Hannah, everything she does, the way she talks to me, the kind of things she likes and dislikes, it’s all Mom’s. Like, she’s back in our lives again, only with a different face and name. But it’s not. So, I’m sorry to say this, but I can hardly wait for my death to come. At least in exchange, everyone else will be happy and safe again. It’s a cheap bargain, if you ask me.”
The Wizard Marshall sighed deeply. He finished his drink in one shot, letting the slow burn calm his nerves before he does something he’d regret. This was getting out of hand. How could things have become this troublesome? He just wanted to troll an inter-dimensional parasite before seeing it destroyed.

“Damn you, Alaya,” he growled, “Damn you. When Taylor wins your War and saves the world, I am going to shove my whole foot way up your collective ass you’d taste the leather. And if possible, I’m going to troll you so hard that you wouldn’t recognize yourself anymore.”

When he first met his champion, he feared that the revelation of her eventual death would cause a rejection. To his shock, Taylor eagerly accepted her demise. He had wanted her to think things carefully before she commits. He would've found some way to change the Servant card she had bonded with (he was damned sure Alaya won't call him out since it would still be a Ruler class card) but the young girl was adamant.

Examining her past, he realized just how broken she had become. And how much Alaya had interfered, indirectly. He could see her hand in it.

Her mother dying, her best friend turning on her, the bullying in her school, her father spending so much of his time leading a now-flourishing Dock Workers Union, who is also in a relationship with a woman that was practically a copy of his wife, someone whom Taylor disliked. It comes as no surprise that she’d actually wanted to die. As for her psyche being practically damaged? From what he understood of Trigger events, the one who was supposed to trigger was her father, but because of the suddenly positive turn of events in his life, combined with the suddenly negative turn of events in Taylor’s own life, the Queen Administrator shard ended up linking with her.

It didn’t fully connect, though, thank the Root for that. The Ruler Class Card was able to intercept the connection and had suborned the shard, effectively deactivating it. But the integration of such a High Level Shard from the entity with her Class Card created restrictions that prevented Taylor from using Ruler to its full potential. And the process of integration had caused psychological damage to the young girl as well. She had developed an acute form of depression that he had no hope of reversing, lest Alaya accused him of interfering and ejecting him from this dimension again.

The only saving grace, if he could call it as such, was that Taylor’s desire to die is tied to her desire to save. It should come as no surprise then, that the Heroic Spirit she ended up bonding with was someone who became the Martyred Maiden of France.
Such a self-sacrificing attitude from both girls, the closest he could compare to that was Yeshua’s. Now that was someone he could definitely count as heroic. It’s also nice to know that there are plenty of people venerating him now for his actions. But he’s digressing.

He knew Taylor’s potential. For the past eighteen months, including those times he was forcefully ejected by Alaya when his actions were deemed as direct interference, he had been training the girl hard for the upcoming War. And she’s showing excellent results. Even without Ruler augmenting her skills, she’s improved so much that she could kill grown men with her bare hands.

That little scuffle at the Hillside Mall was a good example. Her ease in using armaments and various battle tactics also showed her keen mind. Considering how things are, she needed every help he could give before the War starts.

From his examination of Earth Bet’s history, the current holder of the Ruler Class Card is in a losing game of catch-up. Her opponents had a *century* to prepare. The enemies bearing the thirteen Class Cards had a lot of time to hone their techniques, gather their resources and, most crucial of all, select the best people to become Alaya’s Champions. And she’s preventing him from finding out their identities, the bitch.

How she pulled that off, he didn’t want to contemplate it anymore.

With another sigh, Zelretch stood up and prepared another drink. It’s going to be another long, sleepless night for the aging Magician. Good thing tomorrow’s Saturday. Taylor could sleep in. She needed the rest.
The first time she met Hannah was the last time Emma had a sleepover with her. The one before she went to nature camp.

“Hi, I’m Hannah Washington, you must be Taylor,” the olive-skinned brunette in the living room greeted her, “Danny had told me so much about you.”

“Oh,” she had difficulty looking at her, “I hope not everything. It’s got embarrassing ones.”

Hannah laughed. God, the way she laughed. The voice was different, the volume was different, but, oh God, the way it was done was exactly the same as someone she knew so well – her mom.

She loathed Hannah for it.

“Wow, Danny wasn’t really joking,” Hannah continued, oblivious to her simmering rage, “You really do have a quick wit. A sharp mind will serve you well in the years to come.”

“A sharp mind will serve you well in the years to come, my little owl,” her mom would always say that whenever they’d work on her assignments.

She clenched her fists tightly, trying not to show any sign of her outrage. To hear those words again, but from the mouth of a total stranger, has irrevocably stained her memory of her mom. Those precious moments together, getting garbled by someone trying to be endearing but ending up infuriating, it’s getting too much.

Is this the woman her dad was trying to replace her mom with?

“Hey,” Emma probably could sense her discomfort, as she gently held her arm.

“Are you all right?” Hannah came closer, “You don’t look good.”
“I’m fine,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Well, maybe you should get some rest,” Hannah gently caressed her shoulders, just like her mom did, “It’s been a hot day. You really are a precious one, Danny’s little owl.”

“Danny’s little owl...”

“Little owl...”

“My little owl...”

Hearing those endearments she so desperately wanted to hear from her mom again, but from an impostor’s lips, she snapped. How dare she sully her mom’s words? How dare she act like her mom, stealing her dad, steal the memories of her mom, how dare she intrude in their lives?

HOW DARE SHE?

Her vision blurred by the tears, she only knew what happened next when her hand met soft cheek with a loud smack that echoed all over the house.

Chapter 4: Her Life Seen Through Others’ Eyes (Part 2 of 3)

Hebert Residence

Brockton Bay

11:36 a.m.

The sound of the front door opening caught Hannah’s attention. Knowing that Danny was still too early to be back, she cautiously went to check, keeping the knife hidden behind her back. Once she saw who the newcomer was, she completely relaxed.
“Oh, hello there, Taylor,” she greeted warmly, “You’ve been gone for a while. How’s it been?”

“The usual,” the teenager muttered, still refusing to look at her, as went to the stairs.

“Well, I’m cooking pasta with pesto sauce for lunch. Want to join us?”

Taylor froze for a moment, “No, I’m not hungry. And I’ve got to get back to the City Library. I’ve got afternoon students waiting for me there.”

“You know that you don’t really have to keep doing this.” Hannah began, “And I could see that you need some fattening up, you look stick thin.”

Hannah was about to say more when Taylor whirled around and glared at her.

“Why do you keep doing this?” she demanded.

“What?” Hannah was shocked.

“You’re not my mom. You don’t have to take care of me or be concerned or anything like that. I mean, you’ve already got my dad. He’s the important one to you.”

“But I do care for you,” Hannah protested, “You’re important to me as well. You’re family to me.”

“Well you’re not to me.”

Hannah sighed in frustration. It was really difficult, this friction between them. She loved Taylor with all her heart. In her eyes, she sees a child still in deep pain, still feeling lost with the knowledge that someone precious is gone from her life. She wants to be there for her, to ease that pain, to be a mother for her. She wanted to give Taylor what she herself never got as a child.

“I knew I shouldn’t have come back today,” Taylor grumbled.
“What do you want me to do so that you’d get to accept me?” Hannah asked.

She knew exactly what the reply would be, but she had to hear it once more, no matter how much it hurts.

“Stop acting like my mom!” Taylor exclaimed, tears falling down her cheeks, “Every time you talk, everything you do, every moment you spend with me or with dad, you are exactly like her. Well, you are NOT her! Did you know that your pasta with pesto sauce tastes exactly like my mom’s cooking? Did you know that, just right now, when you greeted me at the door, you greeted me just like mom did? When you talked about how I looked, you spoke exactly the same way. You’re messing up my memories of her! And I hated that. I want my mom back. Not someone else who acts exactly like her. I DON’T WANT AN IMPOSTOR.”

She brushed past Hannah and rushed out of the front door. Hannah didn’t stop her, knowing how volatile the girl was at the moment. Besides, Taylor would just head straight to the City Library. If there is one thing that Hannah could admire the teenager for, it was her commitment to perform her tasks at her best. Not to mention her ability to compartmentalize her emotions. She’ll be all right when her tutorials begin.

Hannah was busy wiping her own tears when Danny Hebert himself entered the front door.

“What happened, hon?” he asked, “I saw Taylor disappearing at the corner and I figured she’d stop by here. Have you two been fighting?”

“No, no, honey,” Hannah dried her eyes, “It was, you know, the usual thing between us.”

Danny sighed, “I’ll go talk to her when she gets back here.”

“No, don’t,” Hannah stopped him, “It’s not something that you can fix for me. This is between the two of us - she as your daughter and still in mourning for her mother, and with me as your girlfriend and trying to enter her life. There’s bound to be a clash. Just, let me do my thing. I’ve handled teenagers before. Taylor needs more time to adjust.”

“This might take a lot of time,” Danny grumbled.

“It’s possible,” Hannah smiled sadly, “Danny, remember that Taylor is a delicate and sensitive girl.
The best way to handle this is to take things slowly.”

“It’s been more than a year now.”

“And it may take even longer. Have patience, honey. She’ll accept me some day.”

It was a quiet lunch between the two of them, with only a few words spoken in between bites. Taylor’s relationship with her had always been something of a rough spot. It pretty much started right when she had introduced herself, when she experienced the worst bitch slap in her whole life. She could swear that it hurt more than the hits she get whenever she does field work.

The sound of Hannah phone beeping caught her attention. Looking at the message, she sighed.

“Sorry honey,” she said, “office work. Accounting needed to balance some items and they couldn’t find the correct quotes. This could take me the whole afternoon.”

“It’s okay,” Danny smiled, “I know how troublesome it is to balance the books. Take your time.”

Kissing him good-bye, Hannah rode her car to her designated office downtown. After making sure that no one was looking, she used the secret access tunnel that allowed her to go straight her destination. It was only a work of minutes to reach her locker and switch her clothes to that of army fatigues. She was in the process of putting on the scarf over her mouth when another woman, this time wearing a white and dark-gray bodysuit with blue circuit lines, entered the locker.

“Hi there, Miss Militia,” the woman greeted, pulling out a new set of boots from her locker.

“Hey, Battery, you got called in the meeting, too?” Hannah Washington, or Miss Militia in costume, said.

“Yeah, it’s about the incident last night. We’re actually keeping it hush-hush for now to avoid panic. You probably didn’t know, you’ve got two days off.”

“Well, what happened?”
“The Armored Maiden has returned. Torched a Merchant base.”

Miss Militia froze, “What?”

“You heard me,” Battery shrugged as she laced up, “Details are kinda fuzzy and Armsmaster’s keeping a lid on it. Guess we’ll get to know more at the meeting, then.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We’d better go. The sooner we finish the meeting, the more things we could do about this.” Miss Militia tightened her scarf.

“Do about this? You were there when she first appeared, right?” Battery shook her head as they headed out, “We kinda looked like chickens without heads running around. We couldn’t get to her in time. And Armsmaster doesn’t count. He himself said that it was a stroke of luck.”

“Don’t remind me,” Miss Militia grumbled, “You know I can’t forget her handiwork.”

“Tell that to Shockwave and Gallant. From what I understood, they were the first to see her.”

“Oh, god, are they all right?”

“Define all right. The last I heard, Gallant’s seeking psychiatric help and Shockwave’s making an effort to forget the entire encounter.”

Battery grimaced in sympathy as Miss Militia swore in Kurdish.

This was going to be a long meeting.

*PRT Building*

*Downtown Brockton Bay*

*2:00 p.m.*
The meeting didn’t last long, not even an hour. Armsmaster gave everyone the synopsis of the brief encounter, using his recording of the encounter, as well as Shockwave’s and Gallant’s verbal report. Normally, more details could be had ever since Oculus joined the Wards, but her drone scanners couldn’t get close, seemingly lost. They first thought it was a Stranger effect, but given that Oculus detected the fight, and that the two patrolling Wards arrived at the site without trouble, it was quickly discarded. The encounter itself only lasted about five minutes, without the use of any powers at all, and no additional details could be gained, except for the facts that:

1. The Armored Maiden changed her name to Ruler;
2. Recognized the Wards and appeared to be friendly;
3. Can see through Gallant’s camouflage (which wasn’t exactly difficult if you know what to look for);
4. Was actually easy to talk to and appeared to be well-educated with a strong philosophical leanings; and,
5. Only showed up because of two civilian women that were forcibly taken by the Merchants, and had mounted a rescue using excessively lethal force.

Emily Piggot, the PRT ENE Director, took a pragmatic approach and had ordered everyone to stand down for now.

Considering that PRT forensics revealed no evidence of cape abilities at work (the fire was caused by gasoline stored in gallons getting spilled around the Merchant warehouse and the makeshift drug lab inside blowing up) and that there were no survivors, they decided to keep quiet about the feared cape’s return. Except for the corpses being charred, everything was par for the course when talking about daily life in Brockton Bay. For now, everyone was to observe the situation and only act when they have more concrete information about her.

With the situation as it is, Miss Militia decided to have a short coffee break at the cafeteria. By then, her thoughts had gone back to her handling of Taylor earlier.

She knew the teenager was still hurting from losing her mom, but for the life of her couldn’t figure out how on earth she kept pushing the wrong buttons. Everything she did was normal for her. Her way of talking, dealing with people, the books she enjoys, her cooking, that’s simply how she was as she grew up in the US. She had no idea how she ended up sharing the same attributes as Annette’s. It was too much of a coincidence, to be honest.

For a moment there, her thoughts turned dark as she wondered if that was the reason Danny asked
her to be his girlfriend.

No, that wasn’t it. Danny had absolutely no idea what Taylor was talking about. But considering how much time he spends at the Dock Workers Union, he may actually be losing touch with his daughter. It wasn’t surprising then that most of the encounters Taylor had at home were with her. Those two kept missing each other that she ended up acting as a sort of messenger between father and daughter.

Although, in those few occasions that Taylor was civil with her, the teenager had explained that she was actually glad for her dad. That his dream of getting the ferry working again was coming true, and that the dock workers wouldn’t be poached away by the gangs because there was good, long-term work for their families. That, despite how things are in the city, at least there was one positive note that her dad had a hand in. Her expression during those times showed genuine happiness and pride.

It was actually refreshing, considering the usual personal troubles she has to handle with the Wards. Vista, for example, the poor girl couldn’t decide how to best deal with her parents’ fights.

Clearly, the problem was just between her and Taylor. And Miss Militia was resolved that she’ll get the girl to finally accept her.

“Penny for your thoughts?” a familiar voice spoke beside her.

Looking up, she saw Ethan, or Assault in his cape persona, standing there with a tray in hand.

“Mind if I join you?” he continued.

Gesturing her acceptance, her fellow Protectorate member sat down with a sigh.

“Man, Puppy sure knows how to hit,” he complained, “that one in the head earlier actually hurt.”

“She wouldn’t have hit you if you hadn’t needled Armsmaster about his halberd being called a toy.”

“Hey, I’m not the one who started it. It was Ruler’s fault.”
“Shh!” Miss Militia shushed him, looking around the cafeteria.

While the name’s different, some people might be able to put two and two together and conclude that the Armored Maiden’s back. That would definitely cause mayhem.

“Anyway,” Assault began, changing the subject, “what’s got you all dark and broody this fine Brockton Bay afternoon?”

“Dark and broody?” she raised an eyebrow.

“You were looking at the table with a frown and you have this negative aura all around you. Like it’s all dark clouds and rain.”

Miss Militia snorted. Trust Assault to put a humorous spin on things.

“Nah, I was just thinking about Taylor.”

“Danny’s daughter?” Assault frowned, “Did you two fight again?”

“Why is it every time I mention Taylor, everyone assumes that we had a fight?”

“Well, that’s the usual thing that happens between the two of you.”

“No, it wasn’t a fight,” Miss Milita groaned, “It’s just a miscommunication of sorts.”

“How bad was it?” Assault took a sip of coffee, and then grimaced at the taste.

“Well, you know how teenagers are. Except that somehow, I keep pissing her off, no matter what I do.”
“Maybe it’s a sign that she doesn’t like, you know, you becoming her step-mom,” he shrugged, “if it ever comes to that.”

“No, Taylor doesn’t hate me per se. I could tell that much. What she hates me for is something else. Like that pasta with pesto sauce I made earlier for lunch with Danny.”

“Really? Lucky guy. You make a mean pasta dish.”

“Well, guess what? That triggered Taylor’s anger. She kept telling me that I cook it exactly the same way her mom did. Danny, when I told him that, said that it tasted different.”

“Maybe it’s something subconscious,” Assault suggested, “You know. Some kids may have a skewed interpretation of their parents’ work and they may have applied that same perception on others. You might want to explore that possibility.”

“Maybe,” Miss Militia shrugged, “I tried asking Emma about Taylor, they’ve been best friends since childhood, but she said they’ve drifted apart. She’s still keeping an eye on her, along with Madison and Sophia. I’m planning on checking with Madison herself; see if I could get a better idea on what’s going on.”

“Is Taylor still on her housekeeping gig?”

“Yes, and so with her volunteer teaching at the City Library every weekend, babysitting the mayor’s niece thrice a week, and a bunch of other part-time work. Honestly, the girl knows how to keep herself busy and mostly out of the house, even at night.”

“What?” Assault sputtered, “Then where’s she staying?”

“At her first boss’ house.”

“The Zweinorg Manor? You might want to double-check on the man’s background again. I mean, yeah, he’s clean. But you can never tell if someone’s Gesellschaft.”

“I did, and I got reprimanded by Piggot when she discovered that I was doing it every month. The
man’s eccentric, there’s no doubt about it. But as far as the investigation shows, he’s an up and up
gentleman. He simply travels a lot, and his house is usually empty. Taylor’s been handling its upkeep
ever since.”

“I don’t know, I mean, Taylor’s still a minor.”

“I talked to Zelretch himself, so did Danny. The set-up was actually pretty good. Taylor gets paid
well, like a professional housekeeper, and all she had to do was cook simple meals, clean the rooms
that were usually used, and hire extra help when required. The man doesn’t exactly care about the
additional costs if Taylor needed it. He also required her to come home every weekend and finish
high school to continue employment, even offered scholarship if she ever wanted to go on to
college.”

“Huh, neat,” was all Assault could say.

“Like I said, she’s a busy little owl,” Miss Milita smiled, then grimaced, “ah, shit, I said it again.”

“What?”

“Little owl. That’s a trigger word for her. Danny told me it was Annette’s term of endearment. And
that’s counter-evidence for your theory earlier. I mean, that’s how I really see Taylor. It’s natural for
me. This puts into question what else is natural for me which is actually the same as Annette’s.”

“That’s,” Assault began, and then slumped, “I don’t know what to say now.”

“I know,” Miss Milita sighed, and finally stood up, “gotta go. Need to meet Madison. Last I heard,
she’s deep in her work.”

Wards Common Room

PRT Building

2:30 p.m.

Madison Clements hurriedly entered the room. Seeing it bare of people, she checked the time and
quickly headed straight to the Wards' personal rooms. She knocked on one of the doors.
“Come in,” Emma’s voice could be heard inside.

Entering, she saw the other girl standing on a large mat, doing some Tai Chi exercises. Quickly taking her helmet off, she stared at Emma.

“Well, go on,” the redhead said, “You went through the trouble of going to my room. What do you want to say?”

“I-,” Madison paused, looking around.

“Relax, no one’s listening,” Emma assured her, “Even Armsmaster, socially inept as he is, wouldn’t dare bug the private rooms of Wards. And even if he does, he won’t get anything here. Not to mention that I can actually lie to him.”

Dropping her helmet on the bed, the petite girl exploded.

“I can’t go on with this!” Madison exclaimed, wiping her sweaty brows, “The shit we’re doing has got to stop – now. Did you know that Miss Militia dropped by my workshop and asked, bluntly and to my face, how Taylor’s doing at school? It took a lot of my self-control just to give her a satisfying answer. It was just lucky one of my drones began sparking so she had to leave while I fix it.”

“You’re welcome,” Emma said as she stretched a leg.

“That was you?” Madison was incredulous, “No, that’s not the point. My point here is that we’ve got to stop bullying Taylor. Who knows what she’d do if she snaps? We’ve been doing this to her non-stop for eighteen months, and yes, I checked. That’s how long we’ve been picking on her. I mean, I don’t see any purpose in this, except for getting our asses bit hard. Piggot’s going to demand our heads if this gets out.”

“It won’t get out,” Emma lifted her arms, “I know Taylor. She’ll never talk about it to anyone. She’ll take the moral high ground and try to take it all with quiet dignity.”

“And if Josie talks?”
“Our handler loves her cushy job too much, she’ll never make a report. And with Blackwell getting triple the amount of funds from the PRT for hosting three Wards, she’ll never reveal our actions, either. As you have probably known, our dear principal and her lackeys will do everything they can to keep our image squeaky clean. Thus suppressing any negative feedback about us.”

A pause, "And what’ll Miss Piggy do? She can’t exactly touch us. I’m a Blaster 9 with a Tinker 4 sub-component. You, on the other hand, have a Tinker 8, Master 5 sub-component. How you made your first surveillance drone using a box of cereals, permanent marker, a pair of glasses, and a coffee maker I don’t know, but Piggot can’t afford to lose us. Not when she had to deal with a hellhole like Brockton Bay. This is the only city in America that has even its Wards engaged in direct combat."

"It’s getting scary, Emma."

"Relax, the worst she’ll probably do is bench us, but I can assure you that the Chief Director will convince her to let us go. We’ll probably get reassigned to a different city then."

“What I don’t get is why we keep doing this.”

“It’s for Taylor’s own protection,” came the calm reply.

“What?!”

Emma sat back on the mat, turning her body so that she’s now facing a nervous Madison.

“Did I ever tell you how Sophia first knew about Taylor?” she asked.

“Not really, no, it’s when Taylor showed up in your house, right?”

“Sophia was looking at some of my scrapbooks at home, days before Taylor visited,” Emma elaborated, “She took one look at my best friend’s photo, and told me immediately that ‘this one’s a prey’. I told her she’s wrong. And to prove my point, I set up what I would later on call as D-Day, the Drive Taylor Away Day. God, that was a mess.”
She had stood up and sat on her bed now, closer to Madison, but staring blankly at the wall.

“I pushed all her buttons,” Emma sighed, “Said the words that I’m sure would make her lash out and attack me with everything. I was confident that I’d be getting a lot of bruises that day, but it didn’t happen. Taylor, she- she just looked at me, crying, and then walked away.”

Looking directly at Madison, who could now see that the redhead was actually crying, Emma continued.

“She walked away. She did nothing to me at all. And while I had my arm draped over Sophia, my heart was actually sinking at that moment. I knew, then and there, that I have to keep attacking Taylor.”

“But why?”

“Because Sophia will not stop picking on her, to show everyone that she’s the predator and my Taylor’s prey - that my best friend is ripe for the pickings for everyone else to target. That is something I can’t allow. Even if I stop, Sophia will just pick up the slack and keep attacking someone she had personally marked.”

“So, you bullied her, too?” Madison was incredulous.

“I was protecting her,” Emma corrected, “You know how Sophia’s mind works. She never attacks anyone that I’m picking on. It’s always me getting the first strike in, and her going with the flow. I can control the flow to lessen the blow. God, I’m telling you, Taylor is a delicate and sensitive girl. She could handle me, because I was her best friend, we still share a link. But she definitely won’t survive if she ended up in Sophia’s hands. You have no idea how much I die inside every time I do those things to her. But the alternative is much worse. You don’t want Sophia with her jocks. You know how all jocks in Winslow are. Gang-members or lackeys of one. And they always bring their shenanigans beyond school, which may include their target's families. I don't want Uncle Danny getting involved in the mess.”

“Maybe, we should report this,” Madison hedged, “I mean, I thought Sophia’s getting better. I heard the psych reports were positive.”

“Come on, Mads,” Emma groaned, “Since when did psychiatric help ever works? If you don’t want to become better, then you won’t become better. And Sophia’s pretty good at fooling the tests. To
her, it’s just a match between predator and prey. And you know which one she is.”

“So, we’re gonna let her be? Why don’t we talk to her?”

“And push her away?” Emma scoffed, “That’s the last thing we should do. Sophia’s behaving around us because we’re just like her. To tell her to stop picking on Taylor and be serious on her psych sessions will make us look weak to her. That we’re not the predators she thought we were. No, we’ll just have to keep things to ourselves, for now. It's bad enough I'm losing one friend, I'm not eager to lose another one.”

“What about Taylor?”

“I’ll just have to keep pushing,” Emma insisted, “One day, I promise you, she’ll step out of her shell and strike. And when she does, I’d have proven to Sophia that no, Taylor’s not prey, and that she should stay away from her, too. My Taylor isn’t prey. That’s impossible. She didn’t break when Auntie Annette died, and those two were really close. She didn’t break when Uncle Danny drifted away into work. Even now, when we pick on her, I could see the resolve in her eyes. She won’t break down at all. That’s why I’m sure she’s not prey. That she's a predator just like us.”

“Okay, fine, I’ll work with you this time, but you have to tone down your antics. Don’t make something like the locker again, will you?”

“Really, Madison, you think the Locker Incident was my idea?” Emma frowned, “That was only a joke.”

“You were laughing so hard when you told us about it.” Madison protested.

“Okay, did I, at any point during that talk, mention Taylor’s name?” she looked at her companion’s puzzled expression, “No, of course not. That’s the last thing I’d actually want to do, especially to Taylor. Do you have any idea how much shit will hit the fans if she got trapped in there? Heads in school will roll, and Josie can’t keep the PRT from checking closer then. Instead of us getting smacked down for bullying, we’d get slapped with attempted murder. I spent a lot of effort secretly arranging for the janitor to pass by the hallway just to keep that from happening.”

“Well, what happens if Taylor finally snaps?” Madison winced, “I mean, I’m sure she’s going to beat us up or something.”
“I’ll take it all with a smile, I’ll even take the hits that are meant for you, Mads,” Emma sniffed, “At least I’ve finally proven to Sophia that my Taylor’s not weak, that she isn’t prey. That she’s a survivor, a predator, like me.”

“And what happens when she gets brought to the principal? The truth will definitely get out. Expulsion is probably the least of your worries. At least your dad cares a lot about you. But what about me?”

“I’ll confess everything,” Emma replied with conviction, “I’ll take all the blame. I’ll make it look like everything was my doing, that I’m manipulating you two. I can handle it. You’re just an accomplice, following my orders to get a better position in school, so you won’t get too much heat. Sophia’s charges should be the same as yours, so, hopefully, she won’t get in trouble with her probation. But what’s most important is that she’ll finally back off from targeting Taylor anymore.”

“That sucks, to be honest. You’ve practically destroyed your friendship with your best friend. All of that just to prove you’re right? You do realize she’s gone from your life now? That’s forever.”

Emma gave her a sad smile.

“If it means showing the world that my best friend is a survivor, and obviously a better one than I am with what we’ve been doing to her, then I’d gladly pay the price. She won’t even need me anymore by then, so I doubt I’ll be missed. At least in exchange, she’ll be happy and safe again. It’s a cheap bargain, if you ask me.”
Chapter 5

AN: A little shorter than usual, but I was aiming for something lighter than the previous two chapters. Word of advice, though, butterflies are aflutter. Let me know what you think.

-Queen Of The Cards-

Lisa wouldn’t exactly have noticed it, if it wasn’t for that favor Brian asked her. Not surprising, since it would be embarrassing for him to accompany his sister in buying underwear. Aisha wouldn’t let him hear the end of it. She’s also supposed to keep the younger girl from buying anything risqué.

Well, she has her own ideas on what isn’t risqué. Brian should have known better.

She had been browsing some lingerie for herself when she glanced out the shop’s window. Three girls standing in front of another girl, whose picking up scattered groceries on the ground. Curious, she let the floodgates of her power open a bit:

Three girls bullying the girl.

Redhead bully is bullied girl’s best friend.

Tries to keep black bully from escalating abuse to physical.

Afraid physical bullying will destroy her friend.

Confident her mental bullying can be handled.

Cute bully merely follows redhead’s lead.

Redhead doesn’t know bullied girl could take the blows.

Redhead doesn’t know bullied girl’s true strength.

Huh, that’s something she doesn’t see every day. The way she views it, this would be an amusing comedy of errors once the misconception was lifted. Oh yes, it would be something like watching a train wreck in progress. Wish she could be there when it happens, popcorn in hand.

It was when she glanced at the bullied girl, who had already been left alone to pick things up, that Lisa forced her powers to shut off, like she had just held a red-hot iron poker. She began to hyperventilate, trying to forget what she just found out:
Bullied girl sees no reason to fight back.
Believes it’s her lot in life, sees no point in retaliation.
Has low self-worth, sees everyone else more valuable to her.
Others’ lives are more important than her own.
Suffering from depression, personal guilt.
Planning already on how to kill herself.

“Reggie…” Lisa whispered, not noticing her eyes getting misty.

She looked outside again, and saw the girl already standing up, shopping bags in hand and walking away. For a brief moment, she had a glimpse of the girl’s face, and saw the small smile on her lips.

“Oh shit, no…” she gasped.

It was just like her brother’s smile, before he committed suicide. That was something the teenager couldn’t forget. Those small clues she should’ve understood all those times. He wouldn’t have left her then. She wouldn’t be alone. Lisa couldn’t help but tremble at the thought of another one showing the signs she now knew the meaning of.

Before she could stop herself, she stepped out of the store and headed to the bullied girl.

“Hey, I’m Lisa,” she greeted, “looks like you needed help. Want me to carry some of those?”

Chapter 5: Her Life Seen Through Others’ Eyes (Part 3 of 3)

Lisa Wilburn’s Apartment
Brockton Bay
7:03 a.m.

The knocking on the door was like hammer blows to her throbbing head, but Lisa forced herself to
walk. Looking through the peephole, she frowned when she saw just who it was. Opening the door, she saw Taylor standing there with an eyebrow raised.

“You forgot I’m coming here early,” it wasn’t a question.

The blonde teen groaned. Of course, how could she have forgotten? Due to some mix-up of schedule with the rest of the Undersiders, Lisa found out too late that Taylor hadn’t scheduled any housekeeping work for her for an entire week. Considering the mess her apartment was, and the work the slimy bastard kept giving her that’s eating up so much of her time, she begged Taylor to spend even just an hour helping her clean the place. She didn’t offer to increase Taylor’s pay, since she knew that would be a turn off, but promised herself to triple the amount on her friend’s pay check.

Taylor was just so good at this job. Not to mention the other perks.

“You look like a mess,” Taylor said as they entered what was supposed to be the living room, not a trash paper jungle, “Just like this place. What on earth did you do to your apartment?”

“Sorry, Taylor,” Lisa winced, “A lot of ‘work’ came up and I ended up using my own place to set stuff up.”

“Don’t you guys have a hang-out for you to use?”

“It wasn’t enough. These are the extras.”

Lisa gritted her teeth as her Thinker headache worsened. She had spent a good part of the evening early morning profiling more of the data Coil had ‘requested’ of her. The bastard wanted her to identify the civilian identities of every villain in the city, and she had no way of refusing. It was a slow process, but the list was getting complete. But she was getting worried. It was pretty much a direct violation of the Unwritten Rules as it is. She feared that whatever Coil had planned would create civil war in the city.

She just couldn’t figure out the other reason for the slimy bastard to make her use a special, Tinker-encrypted video call to give her findings. All she could get was that even Coil is afraid to leave hard or virtual copies of the profiles, in any form, and that he’s memorizing them all. He also didn’t want her report in person, something about him getting spooked.
“Oh, you poor thing.”

A pair of cool hands caressed Lisa’s temple and forehead. Unsurprisingly, the pain slowly receded. It was something Lisa discovered during those few times that her Thinker headache almost incapacitated her and Taylor offered to give her a brief massage. Right now, she simply closed her eyes and basked at the feeling of all the pain going away.

“Okay, why don’t you take a seat here,” Taylor led Lisa to the couch, lifting her feet on a stool, “I’ve brought some breakfast, since I figure that if you’re that desperate for my help this weekend, then it means you haven’t had the time to cook your meals. Honestly, too much take-out is bad for your health.”

Lisa smiled as she was handed a lunch bag. Opening it, she noted that it was home-made hamburger sandwich with TLC, a small, covered bowl of vegetable soup, a thermos of hot cocoa, and a slice of apple pie. Yep, these are some of the perks she really enjoys.

The blonde teenager was just savoring the apple pie for dessert when Taylor came out of the bedroom with a strange look on her face.

“Lisa,” she began, “What is this?”

Looking up, Lisa’s expression paled. With the pain from her headache earlier, she had forgotten to hide some personal stuff from her ‘work’. And right now, Taylor was holding the spare costume she uses as Tattletale.

“Oh, that,” Lisa said, “it’s a bodysuit.”

“I can tell,” Taylor deadpanned, “and it’s a pretty sturdy one. Kevlar tri-weave, this thing is practically stab-proof and bullet-proof, except for a straight shot. What is it for?”

“Spelunking,” Lisa replied, inwardly wincing at the lame excuse.

“Spelunking?” Taylor raised an eyebrow, “You expect a lot of gunfire in caves?”
Oh shit, of all the ways in getting outed to someone you see as a friend. A normal one, at that.

“Look, Taylor,” Lisa began, “If you’re uncomfortable-.”

“Lisa,” Taylor interrupted, “if you don’t want to tell me exactly what you’re doing, when I’m asked, I don’t have to lie. But don’t think of me as an idiot.”

The older teen swallowed, “Fair enough.”

“Anyway,” Taylor smiled, “I’m on the clock, and I need to be at the City Library at ten.”

“Wait, what? I thought you’re free Sunday morning.”

“Not anymore. There’s a special case a fellow tutor of mine referred to me a month ago. Smart boy, pretty good at electronics and mechanics, but has a severe case of dyscalculia. I figured out that he does well if he uses visual cues for calculations. Hence, special lessons using the soroban. I’m pretty much the only one who could teach it well. He’s actually not that difficult, considering previous cases like Aisha.”

“Oh,” Lisa blinked, “Yeah, good point. You have no idea how relieved Brian was when Aisha’s math grades got better.”

“Some kids simply need extra attention,” Taylor sagely stated, “There are times that standardized lessons may not meet their specific needs. Aisha simply needs to pay more attention to the lessons. And I have ways to make sure she does.”

Lisa grinned as Taylor went back to cleaning, humming an indistinct tune. Yes, it’s good to have her friend here. She looks so alive, free from the cares that seemed to weigh on the younger teen’s world.

It was times like these that she was so glad she stepped out of the store to help.

_Brockton Bay City Library_

_Downtown Brockton Bay_
Chris Markham looked up, a pale hand pushing away a few brown strands from his eyes, as his tutor sat beside him.

“Hey, Chris,” Taylor warmly greeted him.

“Hey, Taylor,” he smiled.

“How’re the exercises I gave you last week?”

“Awesome,” a thumbs-up, “I mean, I never thought something that’s been around for thousands of years could actually help a problem like mine.”

“Well,” a shrug, “sometimes, the old ways are the best. Now, let’s take a look at your worksheets.”

Eagerly watching as his tutor graded his work, Chris had always wondered how he’d turn out if he hadn’t been introduced to Taylor.

Admittedly, it was just once every week, but the girl simply took one look at how he did the test exercises she gave him, and then proceeded to teach him how to use the soroban for the past month. It was an odd device, constructed like the abacus, and the processes were actually very simple. But, when applied to equations that’s been forever stumping him, he realized just how powerful it was. No one else has been able to help him before that.

Colin does his best, but the guy’s not exactly teacher material. Sure, he’d be able to explain the concepts clearly to him, but his attention to efficiency tend to make him focus on shortcuts for the calculations. Man, he gets in trouble there.

Maddie means well, no doubt about it, but you can’t exactly understand everything when all she could say was that practically “Number 1 gets inserted to Number 2 in order to produce Number 3”. Wow, that was awkward, and they both have no idea how they got there. Dennis, overhearing their discussion, wouldn’t stop laughing until Missy slapped him upside the head. He’s so not doing that session again.
In Taylor’s case, well, it felt like she was an older sister he never had. Like she’d never fail to help him up if he stumbles and falls. Perhaps put a band-aid on the scratches. Well, that’s just his imagination talking. The fact is that Taylor had been a big help.

“Okay, I’ve checked your papers,” Taylor began, “And congratulations, you’ve got perfect scores on three-digit addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Now, let’s proceed to the next level: four-digit problem solving. I’ve devised some exercises to serve as warm-up.”

Accepting the sheet of paper with some equations written on it, Chris then pulled out the soroban that Taylor loaned him. His parents were so impressed with his progress that they actually made an effort to explore the Asian section of the city, looking for a genuine device. They ended up with a made-to-order purchase, which they were to pick up next week.

It took Chris a good thirty minutes to finish the exercises, but he was confident that he got them all correctly. Handing back the paper, he discovered Taylor fiddling on some objects that he had actually forgotten on her arrival.

“What are these?” she asked, gesturing at the oddly shape mini-sculptures.

“Oh, that?” Chris cleared his throat, “Uh, it’s a mental exercise that a friend of mine recommended. For visual analysis, you know.”

Actually, it was sort of test that Maddie had recommended him. Until now, he still couldn’t figure out what he wanted to focus on. He first thought that it was lasers, but the countless number of items he builds but couldn’t finish was aggravating. She told him to try doing art, since that’s how she had figured things out for herself, when she decided to make racing paper planes. So, he decided to take woodcarving as a hobby. Except that, just like his projects, he could just not finish them as well.

“They’re well made,” Taylor critiqued, “I had no idea that you had an artistic bent as well.”

Face reddening, “Uhm, they’re not actually done, couldn’t see a way to finalize the designs.”

“Hmm?” Taylor looked up, “What are you talking about? Aren’t these transforming puzzle pieces?”

“Puzzles pieces?”
“You didn’t know what you’re doing?” she raised an eyebrow, “Here, let me show you.”

She then fitted all the pieces together, forming a sphere. Dismantling it, she reformed it into a cube. Three more rearrangements got him a pyramid, a tube, and a tripod.

“Really, Chris, these are a marvel,” Taylor commended, “Hey Chris, are you listening to me?”

He could barely hear her voice, as his mind began to whirl at the possibilities. Looking back at everything he had built, he realized that some parts seem to connect with others. It seemed that, no matter the problem, he actually had something that could solve it. Everything that he had wanted, it was actually there. The pieces are all in his place. Reconfigurable. Interchangeable.

“Modular,” Chris breathed.

“Hey Chris, are you still with me?” Taylor snapped her fingers.

“Oh, yeah, right,” he blinked, “Sorry, I got pre-occupied with something.”

“Well, I hope it’s got something to do with our lessons today,” Taylor smirked, “We’ve got a long way to go. We still haven’t reached the part where you use a mental soroban.”

Rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment, Chris returned to their lessons. But he could hardly contain the excitement he’s feeling right now. Everything made so much sense.

He really needed to reach his workshop later.

Undersiders Hide-out
Near the Docks
5:30 p.m.

The sound of laughter greeted Brian’s ears when he entered the base. Looking around, he saw Alec
frowning in front of flat screen TV, game controller in hand, while his sister Aisha was sitting beside him whooping in joy. Lisa, who had been sitting at the La-Z-Boy was the one doing most of the laughing.

“I warned you, Alec,” she giggled, “Do not underestimate a woman’s focus.”

“Bullshit,” Alec shook his head.

A familiar face came up to him.

“Hey, Brian,” Taylor greeted him with a smile, “How’re you doing?”

“Good, you?”

“The usual.”

Their attention was drawn to the front door opening again, Rachel coming in with her dogs. Seeing Taylor, Rachel’s companions bounded to her in excitement.

“Oh, hello, guys,” Taylor cooed at each canine, “I miss you, too. Are you good boys and girl? Yes, you are! Yes, you are! Just wait a little more, and I’ve got some treats for all three of you, ok?”

“Bark!” “Arf!” “Woof!”

She stood up and went to Rachel, “Hey Rachel, remember what we talked about last week? I spoke with Dr. Chiklis, the vet I told you that I clean house for. Yesterday, he gave me the formula for home-made dog food when I mentioned Brutus’ diet problems.”

Rachel accepted the piece of paper Taylor handed to her. Looking at what was written for a long while, Rachel said:

“Cheap.”
“Well, the prices were based on meat shops along Lord’s Street Market. If you look around there carefully, you’d actually find bargain prices for ingredients that can be used for dog food.”

“Give me list?”

“Sure. Just give me a sec.”

Even now, Brian still marvelled at how Taylor pulled it off. Rachel may be a dependable member of their crew, but her inability to read and write was something that they considered a problem. Many of their operations require specific information, and the rest of them had to take turns verbally informing Rachel all about it. Most of the time, she simply ended up as their exit strategy.

Until Taylor showed up.

He had no idea what Lisa was thinking when she brought a stick-thin girl to their lair. What had him worried at the time was how Rachel will react to a newcomer that, from what Lisa had said, was completely normal. The moment he saw the dogs, he was about to cover them all in darkness when all three bounded to the girl, excitedly wagging their tails, and being friendly. That got to Rachel to stop short, then shrugged, saying that she’s okay.

In the privacy of his room, had Lisa confessed to Brian that Taylor was contemplating suicide. She could not just let it happen, now that she knew about it. Sensing something deeply personal in his team mate’s voice, he decided not to ask more.

Of course, there was still the problem of their hide-out, and their identities as supervillains. The funny thing was he shouldn’t have bothered. Taylor explained that she has a strict policy of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ with her clients. It was her point of pride as a housekeeper. Hearing her words, Alec had joked if she’d clean their place up if they hire her. To his surprise, Taylor said yes.

That began the gang’s strange relationship with this teen-aged housekeeper. She comes by their place thrice a week to clean up and cook their meals, not to mention pitch in at the kennel for free. Maybe it was her cheerful personality when doing her work or her contribution to the group’s various needs, but it had Brian thinking that things won’t be the same without her around.

Alec, the annoyance he is, had actually began to mellow down under Taylor’s care. Sure, there’s still the sarcasm and one-liners, but the intensity had, somehow, softened up. He even behaves whenever
Taylor is around. Lisa had told him that Alec sees Taylor as the older sister that he wished he had. He had issues, she said, and somehow, Taylor was helping him deal.

Rachel’s case was notable, in itself. Finding out the older girl’s inability to read and write, Taylor took it upon herself to teach Rachel. She even presented it is such a way that these skills would help Rachel keep her dogs safe and healthy, and be able to access resources that were only available in print. It kind of helped that Brutus, Judas, and Angelica, Rachel’s main dogs, liked the attentive housekeeper very much.

For example: right now, he was watching Taylor serve freshly prepared dog food and water to the trio, while Rachel took her time reading and memorizing the list given to her.

Brian had bet that it would take Rachel a year to learn, but by some miracle, Taylor did it in four months. She merely focused on the topics that were crucial the dog master. The rest, she reasoned, they could pick up slowly.

Even he was not spared. He had no idea that the tutor that Aisha had been raving about as a genius in math, the one that volunteers every weekend at the City Library, was the same girl that could clean their hide-out spotless in an hour (he had no idea how she does it). In any case, his sister’s performance in school was improving was something he’d be forever grateful.

“Hey, guys,” Taylor called out, “Supper’s ready.”

“Yes! I got dibs,” Alec jumped up and rushed to the kitchen table, “Lasagna is the best!”

“Hey, wait for me, dweeb!” Aisha laughed as she chased him.

Taylor simply laughed as she began serving portions for everyone.

“Do they have any idea that Taylor prepared extra?” Lisa shook her head as she followed.

“I don’t think so,” Brian finally said as he sat down.

“Idiots.” Rachel muttered, joining the group.
Brian snorted in agreement.

Whenever Taylor’s around, a festive air seemed to take place. It’s like, despite the difficulties they had in a city like Brockton Bay, they were able to get a brief moment of respite. It was during these times that they could freely laugh, even Rachel, just be themselves, and simply be happy with each other’s company.

It was something that he never got to feel from groups he had joined before. Maybe, it was due to Taylor being there. Somehow, this simple, unassuming girl was able to bring them all together; forming something he wished he had already – a family. And knowing his teammates’ measures, earning each other’s trust, going through thick and thin as they do what their unknown boss wanted them to do, he was sure that they’d stick together until the end. That’s how the Undersiders work, watching each others’ backs, and getting away with their latest scheme.

Somehow, the image of Taylor welcoming them home after their latest shenanigans turned up in his mind. He chuckled at the thought, luckily coinciding with a joke Lisa said.

He wished that it could be like this forever. But then again, this is Brockton Bay. Shit happens all the time. For now, he’d bask at the brief period of joy that tonight’s supper brings.

They’ll deal with whatever tomorrow brings. They’re the Undersiders, after all.
As The Night Goes On

AN: Sorry, took me a while. I was working on the intricacies of Nasu-verse Servant mechanics. Special thanks to Golden Lark and fallacies for helping me with it.

Word of warning, this chapter is fresh off the press, so no beta. And speaking of beta, is there anyone interested to help? You can PM if you want. Thank you very much.

*Trigger warning as well for a short scene in the story below.

Now I can go to sleep.

-Queen Of The Cards-

The voice kept going in her head, of the Lord weeping in sorrow for his people. Of a world being changed and going straight to hell. Of his people being unable to live simply. Of being reduced to being either beast or food. Of a never-ending conflict that soaked the land with the blood of the slain.

At first, she thought it was her imagination, but as days passed, the voice came back more and more insistent. Even in her slumber, the voice could still be heard.

But what could she do? She was just a simple farmer’s daughter. She had no skills whatsoever that could help turn the tides of the war. She could not even read or write.

It was simply madness to charge straight into the battlefield, where men either kill or were killed. There was neither reward nor compensation to be had in the end as well.

Still, the Lord’s lamentations continued, and the suffering of the people remained. So, she did what she had to do. She had clad herself in armor, hung a sword on her waist, and carried the Lord’s banner into battle. She gave up her life as a simple village girl, gave up the chance to love someone, and the joy of being loved back. She faced the scorn of allies and enemies alike.
In the end, she became a hero.

Even so, this was not the end of her journey, nor was this where her ultimate victory lay.

Her greatest achievement was to stand tall on a bonfire, flames burning her skin, scorching her flesh, and charring her bones. Cursed into damnation by the enemies surrounding her, she only spoke the name of the Lord and the Holy Mother. As she burned, flashes of her life passed by, of what she was, of what life could have been had she not been the “fool who ran away and tossed all of that aside”. Of becoming a loving wife and doting mother.

She could have had that life, if she just ignored the voice, ignored the lamenting soldiers. But her decision was not a mistake. The lives she had saved, the people she had inspired, the nation that was grateful for her actions. These were all worth it. She did this all with the full knowledge of what fate has in store for her. That she would die at the hands of her enemies.

Her past, her impossible future, and the cruel reality before her were all meaningless before her prayers. She offered everything she had, even her very self. Despite everyone betraying her, she would refuse to betray herself. She saw no point in going back to a past she had abandoned, or desire another chance for a future that was impossible. It had been a long journey for her, and all she desired now was to rest.

As the end came near, her last words were, “Oh Lord, I entrust this body to you.”

Thus ends the dream of this simple girl, and the dream of La Pucelle has begun.

This is now yours, Taylor Hebert.

Raise her banner once more! Carry on her dream! Save the people of this world!

Chapter 6: As The Night Goes On

A Certain Mansion By The Hill

Captain’s Hill

7:00 p.m.
Taylor Hebert woke up with a start.

Looking around, she saw that she was still in Zelretch’s Library, and that she had slept on the couch.

“Nightmare? That was a pretty long nap.”

She turned, and saw Zelretch sitting by the lamp light, a tablet on his lap.

“No, just a dream,” she answered.

“Want to tell me about it?” He leaned forward.

“It’s, uh,” Taylor began, “I dreamed about Jeanne D’Arc. Of how she began, and how she ended. And how I’ve got to raise her banner and carry on her dream.”

“Hmm,” was the reply.

“It’s starting, isn’t it?” Taylor sat up and stared at the old magician.

“Perhaps,” Zelretch rubbed his chin, “But the dream cycles aren’t exactly a good indicator of whether a battle is about to begin or not. It merely shows the bond between Master and Servant, or in your case, Host and Class Card.”

Lightning flashed outside the window, followed by thunder. Glancing out, Taylor could see that it was still raining.

“It’s been three days,” she commented.

“Well, that probably explains why the kitchen sink isn’t draining.”
“What?” Taylor stared at him, horror-struck, “That shouldn’t happen. We’re at Captain’s Hill. The drainage system is good here. Let me check for a bit.”

She made to get up when Zelretch gestured for her to stop.

“I’ve already called the plumber earlier and they said that someone will check on it tomorrow.”

“But I could fix it,” Taylor insisted.

“You, my dear, are going to rest,” Zelretch raised an eyebrow, “You’ve had a hectic week, and that lengthy nap you had now is not enough. You just gassed an underground casino of the ABB last night. And you’re still dealing with the aftermath. How much did you get again, three hundred thousand dollars?”

“Three hundred and eighty,” Taylor corrected, “I missed a bundle composed of hundreds that were in a side pocket. Still, it’s a good haul, for my ‘life insurance’.”

“And the ABB is still in uproar. We’re keeping our heads down. And relax for now. If you insist in your housekeeping work, then I will also insist that you wear a maid uniform as well.”

A sigh, “Fine, you annoying troll.”

“Only to my enemies, dear, only to my enemies. The ones that have earned my rage. You? I’m just getting a rise out of you.”

Taylor rolled her eyes in response. A moment of companionable silence passed between them.

“What were you doing anyway?” Taylor inquired.

“Reading PHO,” Zelretch grinned, “There’s a lot of things you can learn here. Like this girl who could control bugs. I know some very good applications for that kind of power. You should try visiting this site once in a while.”
“That’s a waste of time,” she sighed, “It’s nothing more than a gathering place for people full of adulation for who they think are heroes. I think it’s an exercise in stupidity.”

“Of course you’d say that,” the old magician nodded, “you’re a hero after all.”

“Old man,” Taylor groaned, “I’m not a hero, I’ve told you that countless times. I just know the true definition of one.”

“Yes, yes,” a chuckle, “But I will still say otherwise.”

Taylor threw a cushion at him in mild irritation, which Zelretch gamely caught.

“Ah,” Zelretch said, setting aside the cushion, “I almost forgot.”

Taylor watched as the Kaleidoscope snapped a finger and a lumpy clothes bag fell on her lap.

“What’s this?” she asked as she opened the bag.

“A gift from an apprentice of mine,” Zelretch chuckled, “Or rather, made by the idiot boyfriend of an apprentice of mine.”

“If he’s an idiot, how’d he end up being the boyfriend of someone brilliant enough to be your apprentice?”

“Well, it’s a long story, which started when the young man accidentally joined-.”

“Ok, you can stop there,” Taylor interrupted, “You have a bad habit of getting into tangents whenever you’re telling me tales. Some which I doubt is true. Whether you’re doing that to annoy me or distract me, I don’t care. Let’s just not go there.”

A chuckle, “But it did get a reaction from you. For an old man concerned for your well-being, it is a good sign. You’re not exactly in a good place, as you have admitted before.”
Taylor had nothing to retort there. He did have a point. He may annoy her occasionally, but all it did was provoke a reaction from her. To get her away from her existential funk. Otherwise, she’d just end up going through the motions, without exactly realizing where she’s heading. But how could she forget what was coming to her in the end? Even her dreams were reminding her of it.

She shook her head a bit and brought out the bag’s contents. It was a red hooded trench coat, a grey scarf, a black turtleneck shirt, black slacks, and black leather boots and belt.

“Hmm, nice,” she admired the craftsmanship of the item.

“Of course,” Zelretch smiled, “While my apprentice calls him an idiot, the boy himself has some talent in Reinforcement magic. Those clothes, while looking and feeling completely ordinary, are actually sturdy enough to resist tearing, fire, water, and dust. I even added a few exotic spells I learned from my travels that allows you to switch between that and your civilian clothes. They will serve you well whenever you use Ruler in Include state. My apprentice was of the opinion that you should have a uniform of sorts, helping you create a different persona when in battle, thus separating your civilian identity. The clothes make the man, or woman, after all.”

“Wait, wouldn’t this count as direct assistance?”

Zelretch raised his arms wide, “I’m still here, so Alaya’s obviously permitting it. Besides, it’s completely useless when you’re fighting other card holders. Still, they’re actually pretty handy if you want to be more discrete in your battles with capes and normals.”

“You call a red trench coat discrete?” Taylor asked incredulously.

“Were you hoping for a spider silk bodysuit? We don’t do stuff like that anymore.”

“You really are an annoyance, you know that?”

“But I do get results, right?”

A small groan, “All right, I get it.”
“Ugh, I hate the rain,” Shockwave grumbled, trudging along the wet sidewalk.

“Like you’re the one to talk,” Shadow Stalker snorted, “You can still electrocute anyone you want even with all the water around.”

“It’s the drumming on my helmet!” she retorted, “It’s like the buzz of bees, only that you feel the annoying thrum.”

“All right you two, cut the chatter,” Oculus interjected on the radio, “You need to be alert. Historical crime patterns clearly show a twenty percent increase in violence whenever it rains here. So I suggest preparing for attacks on you, or attacks on civilians, by criminals.”

“Fine,” Shockwave muttered.

Glancing up, she noticed one of Oculus’ drones flying just a few feet above her. Despite being incapable of physical combat, thus being assigned to permanent console duty, Oculus has shown herself to be a powerful asset in the Wards. And proof of that was right within Shockwave’s sight.

Completely spherical, the bright pink drones were equipped with the latest scanning technology that could be fit inside a one-foot diameter area. Rainfall, heat, magnetic effects, noise, anything that could be measured, were crammed inside each device. But perhaps its greatest asset, the one that made Oculus an indispensible cape even for the Protectorate, was the ability to detect cape presence.

Designed by Oculus herself, the scanner could detect within three blocks the presence of any cape. It could also provide information on the cape’s power classification, whether it’s shaker, blaster, a combination, etc. This proved invaluable for both Protectorate and Wards on patrol. Numerous ambushes and attacks had been avoided thanks to Oculus’ warnings.

It was also a big help when transporting cape prisoners out of the city. Stormtiger and Cricket were just the latest example. The cape convoy at that time simply used the routes that Oculus cleared.
There were only three drawbacks.

For some reason, the drones would not function or explode when an attempt is made to attach any kind of visual device. This was a pet peeve of Oculus. Without visual confirmation, the patrol either had to face the unknown capes in waiting or change their route all together. When going in an encounter, more often than not, a fight breaks out.

Shockwave winced, remembering a certain fight.

Triumph and Dauntless were patrolling a Merchant area one time. Oculus had then warned them that a Changer was laying in wait up ahead. Deciding to visually check, since they thought it was Mush, the duo ended up on a running battle when the Changer in question turned out to be Fog, with Night turning up soon after. The damage to the surrounding properties, not to mention injuries from civilians caught in the crossfire, was significant. Director Piggot was so furious about the incident she was actually in physical pain.

The second drawback of the drones was its refusal to work when cloaking or stealth tech were installed. Given its ‘cute’ color, they always drew unwanted attention from enemies, which resulted in even more fights erupting. Oculus had been tearing her hair out trying to make her drones less eye-catching, without success. Even a simple paint job would cause the device to fail.

Lastly, any attempts to install any kind of weaponry or defense system would always cause the drone and said system to explode. Poor Armsmaster, it took him an entire month to repair his lab and replace all the halberds he's got the last time he attempted to put a taser on Oculus' drone.

To counteract these problems, the drones were usually spread far out in the city, only occasionally coming near the patrols as a form of status check. Oculus can mentally control as many as two dozen units, as long as she could see their plotted location in a digital map.

“Hmm, I’ve been with you guys long enough,” Oculus spoke on the radio again, “I'll be moving ahead to a new location, a couple of miles north. Historically, there's a forty percent increase in crimes committed in that direction. Continue the patrol and you’ll soon be nice and dry again back in the PRT. See ya!”

Both Shadow Stalker and Shockwave paused long enough to confirm that the drone was far away enough from them. They then looked at each other, grinning at their third partner-in-crime’s hidden message and unspoken signal.
Tonight, they’re hunting new prey.

_Apartment Area_

_Brockton Bay_

_10:39 p.m._

Despite the nonstop rain, the dank weather wasn’t enough to stop the two dozen men, with a young woman in the lead, from walking down Cranston Street by the corner of Wilson Avenue.

“I’m telling you, mom,” the woman grumbled on her cell phone, “an advanced party is pointless, we should have all just arrived here.”

A pause.

“No, I’m not being lazy. I also want to get this over with. I just got plenty of stuff to do.”

Another, longer pause.

“Yes, I know this is a priority, but this shouldn’t stop me from doing something else. Okay, I know our family’s spent decades preparing for this, but you’d have to admit, I’ve got a life of my own.”

Another pause, this time, the indistinct chatter from the phone’s speaker could be heard despite the downpour. The woman actually held the phone away from her. She waited for the sounds to die down before speaking again.

“Fine, fine,” she said, “You want our family to get the opening salvo, I’ll give you the opening salvo. But don’t say I didn’t warn you that this is a bad idea. She’s here, remember?”

A shorter pause.

“If you say so,” the woman sighed, “send my love to my sisters, okay? Bye, mom.”
Hanging up, the woman led the group to a nearby nature park. She was a statuesque blonde, standing just over six feet. If there were people around, she would have certainly been an eye-catching sight.

Umbrella still in hand, she began to address her followers.

It should be important to note that all the men have the same features: blue eyes, strong jaws, white skin, and a muscular build, all standing at a height of seven feet. Their blond hair was cut in a classic undercut, slicked-back severely. They all wore black business suits and fedoras, with some carrying briefcases or umbrellas as well. They also wore brown horn-rimmed glasses that gave them an educated air.

Looking down at them, the woman breathed in deeply.

“Can you smell it?” she asked, blue eyes narrowing, “This is the stench of animals polluting this fine city. They come in all colors, and breed like the pests they are. They are the same as the pests we deal with in our homeland, the ones who steal our resources, our jobs, our livelihoods, everything that is our birthright! That is why we are here. This is our duty as Ubermensch. We are the hammer that will crush these animals, and the flames that will wipe them from existence. Only then will our pure blood flourish and nourish this world.”

One of the men shouted, “Das Reinblut!”

Everyone else replied with, “Ja!”

“Das Reinblut!”

“Ja!”

The woman allowed them to repeat their chants for a few moments before raising her hand for silence.

“I have been told that the blood of blacks here are the same color as their skins,” her red lips twisted into a predatory smile, “why don’t we find out the truth for ourselves? After all, they’re nothing more
than prey. And we are the hunters that will enjoy spilling their blood."

With a roar, the men pulled out pistols from their jackets and released the safeties.

“Boys, let’s go hunting!” she exhorted.

With another shout, the men began running to the nearest apartments from the park, kicking doors open and shooting the sleeping residents inside.

Amidst the mayhem, the woman grinned in anticipation.

“Oh, the sweet sound of dying prey,” she savored, “How I love it.”

Jumping down, the woman began walking towards the heaviest gunfire.

“I wonder if these cape freaks are prepared for Henrietta Hoss,” she spoke, hunger heavy in her voice, “I hope so, otherwise my lucky talisman would be wasted.”

She held up in her hand a golden card. It showed a man dressed in hunting gear, holding a bow and arrow. Written below it was one word: Archer.

Along A Sidewalk

Near the Residential Area

10:42 p.m.

Shockwave watched as the injured woman was secured inside the ambulance and brought to the hospital. The police had already left, carrying the beaten up robbers to jail. The small crowd had also left, and with the rain, the street was finally devoid of people except them. She turned to Shadow Stalker.

“Next time,” she began, “You attack immediately. Not dilly-dallying when you see a crime in progress.”
“What, and fail to see if the woman was strong or weak?” Shadow Stalker huffed, “You know that was a test for her.”

“That’s irrelevant, Shadow Stalker,” Shockwave shot back, “We’re on a hunt tonight, remember? We deal with the preys that think they’re the predator, and those two assholes were the prey we’re supposed to put down. If I hadn’t been looking for you, things could have gotten worse.”

“And the woman? How can we be sure that she’s strong?”

“Strength isn’t all about fighting back, it’s what you do after the fact. The woman’s still standing, right? The true test would be how she’d deal with it tomorrow.”

Shadow Stalker snorted, “That’s lame.”

“Really,” Shockwave leaned closer to the shorter girl, hissing, “You think that’s lame? Is that how you saw what I did? That I was lame?”

The two had a brief staring match, with Shadow Stalker turning away first.

“No,” she acquiesced, “That’s my bad.”

“Let’s stop hunting for the night,” Shockwave said, “The mere fact we’re a bit far from our scheduled route is bad enough already. At least her screams can be used as alibi.”

They resumed their walk, going back to their original patrol. It was times like these that Shockwave wondered if all her work was paying off. Come to think of it, Shadow Stalker did make a better effort to assist the injured woman. In the past, she’d just leave the victim be while she calls for an ambulance. But what got under Shockwave’s skin was the way the robbers were manhandling the victim.

It was just like what the ABB did to her, on That Night.
Eighteen Months Ago…

Emma Barnes curled further into herself by the wall, mind still in shock over what happened. She barely felt the sting of the rough pavement on her bare bottom, as the lingering agony between her thighs was the one at the forefront of her mind. Surrounding her were the burning remains of the men responsible for her defilement.

Clutched in her good hand were the broken pieces of her cell phone, the dead link between her and her best friend.

She had tried so hard to reach the phone when it fell out in her earlier struggle to run away. Just one press and she’d reach Taylor. Her friend would know what to do then. Help would arrive. As long as Taylor knew what was going on, Emma would not be alone. Taylor will help her endure. She won’t be left alone to suffer this shame.

It was when she just regained her phone and was about to hit the call button, when a knife stabbed through the screen and into her hand. Emma stared at the knife in shock.

“Ha, think you can call for help?” one of the men sneered, “No one’s coming for you, bitch. You’re all alone, ya hear me? Alone.”

“So, better lay back and enjoy it,” the next man joked.

“We’ll be gentle,” another added.

There was uproarious laughter from those bastards.

Emma ignored the taunts, the jeers, the sound of pants being unzipped, ignored her skirt being torn away. She ignored the pain from the knife and the agony as her tarnishing began.

She just stared at her phone. Was it so bad to call her friend? She knew what was going to happen and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She just wanted Taylor to know what’s going on. Her friend, even far away, will find a way to get back to her. To stay with her. To not be alone to endure this.
Emma didn’t want to be alone here. She wanted to see her friend. She wanted to hear her friend’s voice. To hold her hand. To cry on her shoulder. To be told that she’s not alone.

Not Alone.

The next thing she knew, she was staring blankly at the black sky, the air smelling of ozone and burning flesh. Looking around, she saw all the men dead, burned by something she didn’t recognize.

“Holy shit!”

Emma’s musings were cut by the sudden voice. Looking up, she saw a figure wearing a cloak and carrying a crossbow slowly approaching her.

“When I saw the light show a few blocks away I thought it was Purity blasting the chinks again,” the stranger, a female, said, “Wow, do you know who did this?”

Emma couldn’t answer. No sound would come out of her throat. The stranger tilted her head in thought, and then cursed. She removed her cloak and draped it over Emma’s shoulders.

“Shit, it must have been that bad, huh,” the stranger said, “Hey, look at me.”

Emma stared back. The other girl gestured around them.

“What you did here? It’s proof that you’re strong. That you’re a survivor. You went through shit and still came out strong. That’s something to be proud of. Now, let’s get out of here.”

Present time…

“Console, this is Battery,” Shockwave’s radio crackled, jerking her out of her thoughts, “Assault engaging in a fight along Cranston Street, I count half a dozen hostiles wearing suits and- shit!”

A loud crash, then shots were fired. Sounds of agonized breathing were soon heard.
“Damn it,” Battery hissed, “I’m hit. Be advised, guys in suits are Brutes, I repeat, guys in suits are Brutes.”

“PRT Squad 23 inbound.”

“PRT Squad 11 inbound.”

“Miss Militia inbound.”

“Velocity inbound.”

“Dauntless inbound.”

“PRT Squad 2 inbound.”

Shockwave stared at Shadow Stalker, who had stood still as a statue. Cranston Street was where the latter’s home was located.

“Console, this is Shadow Stalker,” she barked, “I’m en route to Cranston Street.”

“Stay where you are, Shadow Stalker,” Armsmaster’s voice was heard.

“Fuck you, my family is there!” she hissed.

“That’s the point, you’re getting emotionally compromised-.”

Shadow Stalker pulled her comms off and was about to shift into shadow when Shockwave grabbed her arm. The other Ward stared at her, feeling betrayed.
“Are you going to stop me?” Shadow Stalker sounded incredulous.

“No, I just want you to wait for me,” Shockwave replied, “Blaster 9, remember? Besides, we need Oculus’ scans for the place. Our targets are the capes wreaking your home. They’re our prey. We’re going to hunt down those preys.”

Behind her mask, Emma Barnes faintly smiled. Finally, something to get her out of her funk. Getting stressed over the past wasn’t healthy. She’s got bigger problems to deal with now.

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**A Certain Mansion By The Hill**

**Captain’s Hill**

**11:00 p.m.**

“Huh?” Taylor looked up from her book, frowning a bit.

“What is it, dear?” Zelretch asked, putting down his journal.

“I just got a feeling, like there’s this pressure in the air,” she replied.

The old magician stared at her, his face grim.

“Summon your card,” he ordered.

Still frowning, Taylor complied.

“Are the combat restrictions still in place?” he asked.

“No,” Taylor’s face became serious.

A moment passed between the two.
“It’s finally starting,” Taylor said.

“Indeed, it has,” Zelretch nodded, “I believe this is the opening salvo for those going to hunt you down.”

Taylor took a deep breath, “Do you think I’m ready?”

“What does your heart say?”

A few second of silence, “That I’ve got a job to do right now.”

“Then so be it.”

Taylor stood up. With a little hand gesture Zelretch taught her, the civilian clothes she wore were replaced with the uniform gifted to her earlier. With a nod, Taylor walked out of the Library.

Tonight, the first Duel of the Holy Grail War will commence.
AN: The following narrative covers the time period between 10:58 p.m. until 11:58 p.m. Most of these scenes may overlap with each other.

*Again, this chapter is released without beta. Anyone interested to help can pm me. Thank you.

-Queen Of The Cards-

“Ow!”

“Stop being a pussy, Jordan, this is just a scratch,” Sophia said, cleaning the wounds none too gently with disinfectant, “You did good, though. Family looks after each other.”

Looking over her work, making sure no dirt was left, she then took out some gauze and plaster. It was a work of seconds to finish bandaging her little brother’s arm.

“But he still got to hit back,” Jordan complained.

“And so? What’s important is that you fought. You showed him you’re not weak. Unlike Betsy here, who just cried when that moron tripped her.”

She gestured at their youngest sibling, ice bag on her forehead.

“But he’s too big, Sis,” Betsy protested.

“So what if he’s big?” Sophia crossed her arms, “Just kick him in the shins, bite him, punch him where he’s soft. You could’ve asked your brother to hold him down while you do it. All you had to do there was to show him you’re not weak.”

She leaned over the younger girl and spoke quietly, “Are you weak?”
Betsy cowered a bit, and then sat up straighter, “No.”

“Good,” Sophia affectionately ruffled the girl’s hair, “No sibling of mine is weak. Mom’s shown us she’s strong. Even with Dad gone, she still kept fighting. Let’s show her that we can fight as well. That we’re not a burden to her. No one else can help us except ourselves. ”

“What if he does it again, Sis?” Betsy asked.

“You beat him up then,” Sophia replied, “You keep beating him up until he doesn’t fight back or pick on you anymore. Push him down with everything you’ve got. That’s how the world works. The strong ones stand on top of the weak ones. And our family’s not weak.”

“So, what do we tell Mom?” Jordan asked, “She’s going to ask questions.”

“Ugh, just tell her that if you look this bad, she should see how the other kid looked.”

“She’s going to be pissed off, Sis, big time. I might get called by the principal.”

Sophia snorted, “Let her rant all she wants. You know what she’ll do after that. And don’t start with the principal, he ain’t going to side with that moron, what with all the witnesses. Heck, Mom would probably bake a cake later to cheer you up.”

“I like cake,” her little sister smiled.

“We all like cake,” her little brother retorted.

They all laughed together.

Chapter 7: A Shadow Shall Fall

Cranston Street

Brockton Bay
Shadow Stalker gritted her teeth, tightening the bandage on her leg. Earlier, she had been shot while attempting to act as bait for the civilians to escape.

“Fucking Nazis!” she growled, angrily wiping away rainwater from her eyeholes, “No one shoots me like that. Fuck!”

She and Shockwave were forced to split earlier when they reached four responding PRT squads and Dauntless, pinned down by three blonde men wearing black suits. It unnerved her to see how each one of them looked exactly the same. What made the sense of unreality worse was the way the men fought.

Dauntless had charged at one of them, using his Arclance to disable his target. For some reason, his attacks don’t work at all. Each hit to the limbs or torso were deflected like a basketball hitting a wall. When he tried to block the bullets fired, the force of each hit kept pushing him back a few meters at a time. The PRT squads attempted to ease the pressure on him, spraying containment foam on the others, to no effect.

One of the men unfolded his umbrella, blocking the spray. Unbelievably, the foam simply slid off, staying inert. The last one jumped on one of the armored vans, pointing his pistol down the roof and began shooting inside. Seeing no one stepping out, and blood seeping through the holes, it was clear that they had just lost an entire squad. And it looked like it was getting worse.

“Go ahead,” Shockwave had ordered her, “I’ll catch up as soon as I deal with these bastards.”

Complying with the order, Shadow Stalker darted through the roofs and walls in her shadow form in order to reach her destination. Upon her arrival, the whole place was in total uproar.

Several more men in suits were scattered about, charging inside apartments or outside the streets, shooting anyone in sight. The few PRT troops assisting civilians tried to attack these men. In response, one of the men simply shook his head and holstered his gun. With a speed that Shadow Stalker could hardly see, the man went straight to the troops and began punching their torsos. All the troops flew straight into the building walls, crumpling to ground and not rising again.

Witnessing these abilities, the Ward decided to draw their attention instead of engaging them directly. At least she could avoid the hits while civilians can escape. Pointing her automatic crossbow, a Kid
Win original tech, she began firing rapidly at the attackers.

Her plan almost worked.

One of the men in the apartments simply walked towards her, firing his pistol at the same time. The rest of the men ignored her and began to shoot or clobber more people. Shadow Stalker turned into her shadow form, letting the bullets pass through. She pointed her crossbow again and used her phasing ability to get the tranquilizer arrow past the man’s defences.

This time, it worked.

The man stared at the arrow stuck to his arm, swaying a bit. Shadow Stalker was about to congratulate herself when she saw the man shake his head and focused on shooting her again.

“Fuck it!” she cursed.

She turned again into shadow form to escape, but her reaction was too late. A bullet went through her thigh, taking a huge chunk of her flesh with it. It took some effort for Shadow Stalker to escape, as the man began to run after her, shooting all the time and using his body to break through the walls.

It took her some time, passing through buildings and corridors to confuse her pursuer, but she was able to get away. This resulted to her current predicament, sitting on an apartment rooftop. Despite the slight haze she got from the painkillers, she was able to think back to what she observed of the enemy. Shadow Stalker decided to put on her comms again, to share her findings. The sudden explosion of chatter blared into her ear.

“Console, this Squad 9 along Dalton Street, we are pinned down, I repeat, we are pinned down! Requesting back-up!”

“Console, this is Squad 36 at Wilson Avenue, we lost Squad 2, I repeat, we lost Squad 2. It was just one guy with a suit, but he kept shooting at them.”

“Miss Militia here, Velocity and I are holding our line at Florsheim Street. Route the civilians here to escape. I repeat, route civilians to Florsheim Street to escape.”
“All units, be advised, I cannot enter combat zone,” Oculus spoke, “I repeat, I cannot enter combat zone. Is there anyone there who could provide ground intel?”

Shadow Stalker quickly spoke, “Shadow Stalker here, Suits are high-level Brutes strong enough to go through walls, also suspected regenerators, my tranq arrows don’t work. Appears to use mundane looking Tinker-tech. Umbrellas neutralize con-foam, business suits neutralized Dauntless’ strikes, and guns use unlimited armor-piercing ammunition.”

“Noted, Shadow Stalker,” Oculus acknowledged.

The injured Ward was about to turn to shadow again when the sound of familiar voices reached her ears. Hobbling over the adjacent ledge, she saw Jordan pressing some bloody handkerchief over their mother’s shoulder.

“Mom!”

Shadow Stalker jumped down, letting her Breaker state absorb the impact. Turning solid again, she checked on their mother’s condition.

“I’m all right, Sophia,” her mother said faintly, “this is just a scratch.”

“Just a scratch, my ass, you’ve been shot,” Shadow Stalker growled, pulling out her medkit and began treating the wound, “It’s still bleeding.”

“Sorry, Sis,” Jordan cried, “I really tried, but it won’t stop, the rain’s keeping it wet.”

“Cut it out, Jordan. What did I tell you about crying? The strong don’t cry. And you did your best. I got this now.”

It was after Shadow Stalker sealed the wound that she noticed someone missing. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Where’s Betsy?” she asked.
“She was running ahead of us when I got hit,” her mother winced, “She’s probably in hiding right now.”

“Oh, fucking hell!”

Shadow Stalker was about to move when her mother grabbed her arm and looked at her grimly.

“Sophia, Betsy is a smart girl, she won’t go anywhere dangerous,” the older woman began, “Your job, right now, is to stop those fuckers messing up our home. Stop them fast, and that’ll help keep your sister safe. You got me?”

Shadow Stalker swallowed, “I got you, mom.”

The probationary Ward faded into shadow again, her mission clear in her mind.

Had she been more aware of her surroundings, she would have noticed a tall, blonde woman standing just by the corner, watching her with interest.

*Console*

*PRT Building*

*11: 13 p.m.*

“What do you mean you still can’t get in?” Shockwave spoke through the radio.

“Like I said, I can’t move my drones into the area,” Oculus replied.

She was looking intently at two screens, one displaying the locations of all her drones, and another displaying the various data collected by each device.

“It’s not blocking per se,” she continued, “it’s more like the coordinates I’m telling them to go don’t exist.”
“Oh, for God’s sake, Oculus, do something, please,” Shockwave pleaded, “We’re running blind here. These guys keep popping up everywhere, delaying us.”

“I can’t find out what’s wrong unless I bring my drones back, even then there’s no guarantee,” Oculus explained, “And the situation right now makes that a very bad idea. At least I’m still getting peripheral data on the capes still active in the area.”

“Okay, fine,” Shockwave said after a moment’s pause, “I’ll think of something else. Just keep trying.”

“You know me.”

*Apartment Area*

*Wilson Avenue*

*11:15 p.m.*

Shockwave ended her call to Oculus, her mind running non-stop over her options.

Earlier, she had stunned the man attacking Dauntless with a high-voltage electrical blast. This gave the older cape the chance to get away, safe from Shockwave’s second blast, which burned the man from the inside.

She had used the same strategy earlier on the two other men attacking the PRT Squads, allowing the soldiers to proceed towards the main conflict. Dauntless joined the departing vans, with Shockwave going into another location, hoping to meet up with Shadow Stalker. Unfortunately, her travel kept being halted by more of these men in suits. Some of them were actually harder to kill, like the one wearing an overcoat. She had to use multiple shots to bring him down. This was going to waste her time and effort.

Sighing, she made her choice. Pressing her transmit button several times in a specific sequence, she waited for the three long beeps to end, signalling her connection to a secure communicator.

“Talk to me,” Director Emily Piggot’s voice ordered.
“Multiple hostiles with mundane-looking Tinkertech weaponry,” Shockwave reported, “Anything less than a high-level lethal attack will not stop them. It appears their strategy is to split our forces, whittling our numbers down, and preventing us from assisting the civilians. We could not reroute because Oculus’ drones could not enter the area and provide us a clear path. Regrouping is also out of the question as any attempts are being delayed by hostiles showing up at random. What we need right now are eyes supporting troop movements.”

She inhaled deeply and exhaled.

“Director Piggot, requesting permission to activate the Arachne Protocol.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Granted, Shockwave. Keep an eye on our men.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Call ended, Shockwave hurriedly climbed up into an apartment roof. Seeing that it looked secure, and conveniently had a gazebo, she knelt down in seiza under the roof. She closed her eyes – and then opened her mind.

A lot of people knew her as a deadly cape due to her Blaster 9 ability. What they did not know was that this was merely her secondary ability. If they knew what her primary ability was, panic would ensue.

She’s actually a Master 10.

Shockwave’s true power was to control any device running on electricity, turning it into an extension of herself. It could be anything, from hair clippers to power plant generators. Her electro-magnetic blasts were actually an offensive offshoot of her power spreading out to take control of all devices within her range, which she could extend beyond Brockton Bay. Her control was so absolute that she could use any phone to eavesdrop on a nearby discussion, CCTV cameras to spy on people, and even automated gun turrets to shoot enemies. Everything that touches her wave goes under her control.
The only downside was that she could only maintain continuous connection for three hours, after which she’ll have a massive migraine.

It was so useful, and dangerous, that PRT Chief Director Costa-Brown had classified her Master ratings, only letting Piggot and Armsmaster to know the truth. And right now, she’s using it to help the troops and people being attacked.

Inside Shockwave’s mind, she saw herself at the center of a vast spider-web, with all electrical devices stuck on each thread. With a mental gesture, she commandeered every camera available in the area, hundreds of lens becoming her eyes for the fight.

What she saw was complete chaos.

She could count more than a dozen men in business suits spread out, shooting civilians, blocking Protectorate capes, or killing off the PRT troops.

Gesturing at all the PRT vans, the hybrid ones with electronic drive systems, she moved the vehicles into a blocking position. The enemy’s bullets could still go through, but it will prevent them from aiming right. She then turned on the automated foam sprayers and began shooting at the ground and the adjacent walls. The foam expanded rapidly, creating a makeshift wall. Hopefully, it will delay the suits further.

Connecting now to the PRT troop’s comms, modulating her voice to match her console operator ID, she spoke:

“All PRT units, be advised, PRT vans are now under remote control and spraying con-foam to block suits’ path. Regroup at Florsheim Street with Miss Militia and Velocity. Squad 23, pass through Fuller’s Junction and turn left. Squad 2, run straight through Carson Road. Squad 16, turn right to Emry Avenue. All other units, go through Stanton Road.”

She repeated the instructions and then turned her attention to the cellphones held by the fleeing civilians and PA systems near them.

“All Attention citizens,” she began, “This is a PRT emergency broadcast. Evacuate to Florsheim Street, I repeat, evacuate to Florsheim Street. Protectorate and PRT personnel are securing the area for your escape.”
Her focus was then caught by something the CCTV cameras all over the streets captured. There was a small gathering of suits in the middle of a street. She saw one of them open the briefcase he carried, pulling out something resembling a hip flask made of glass containing blue liquid. He placed it on the middle of street, uncorking the stopper, and then joined the rest of the remaining men surrounding it. Through her lens’ eyes, she saw the flask begin to glow.

And suddenly found herself back on the roof.

“What the-?” the Ward was shocked.

She tried going back again, but her powers refused to work. Trying to send out an electric blast produced the same results.

“Director?”

“What happened?”

Shockwave swallowed, “We have a Shaker/Trump effect in the area. It had just cancelled my powers.”

A pause, “God damn it!”

Due to the unexpected development, and the ensuing headache from the use of her power, Shockwave failed to notice a man in a black suit pointing a gun behind her head.

**THUCK!**

Turning around in shock, she saw a man in a suit on the ground, head pierced by a familiar spear. But the person wielding it was different. This one was wearing a red trench coat with its hood up. When the person turned, she saw the lower part of the face covered with a scarf, with the hood’s shadow concealing the rest.

“Are you all right?” even the woman’s voice was different.
“Ruler?” Shockwave asked uncertainly.

“Yep,” came the reply.

“Uhm, where’s your costume?” the Ward swallowed nervously.

“Would you believe me if I say that I was just strolling around tonight?”

“If it’s your thing, you know, walking in the rain.”

“It helps me relax. You should try it.”

Ruler pulled the spear from the man’s head. Looking around the area, Shockwave could still hear the screams and sounds of pistols rapidly shot.

“Aren’t you going to help?” Ruler asked.

“I can’t,” Shockwave replied, “There’s some kind of Shaker/Trump effect in the area, some mundane-looking tinkertech in a bottle. It’s nullifying my powers.”

“I see,” Ruler lowered her head, “I’ll take care of it then.”

Shockwave shouted at Ruler to stop as the latter jumped from the roof. Looking over the edge, she saw the cape landing on a crouch and then running towards where the fight was believed to be thickest. She pressed her transmit button again, dreading what she’s about to say.

“Director?”

“What?”
“Ruler is on site, and appears to be unaffected by the power nullification. She’s also joining the fight.”

There was a longer pause, “GOD DAMN IT!”

Bowman’s Pizza Place

Wilson Avenue

11:25 p.m.

Battery and Assault were currently in a bind.

Earlier, Battery had been punched by one of these men in suits. She flew through the restaurants window and crashed in a messy heap on table. It was only instincts that saved her when she dodged the bullets, only getting her hip grazed. It was an unpleasant surprise by itself, since her costume was bullet proof. Assault had stayed close to her ever since, serving as her shield. The PRT squad that came with them were the unfortunate first casualties.

They had good system going on. Battery would use her power to charge Assault, and then Assault would attack the men in suits, like a pinball hitting all the counters. It didn’t make any damage, true, but they were able to keep them at bay. It was working well, until a few minutes ago, when their powers suddenly went out. A report from Shockwave warned them that some kind of tinkertech was used to create a power-nullifying Shaker effect. And that Ruler, wearing a different costume and seemingly unaffected, was going to help in the fight.

Right now, they were arguing on how to best leave restaurant, as it now became a kill box for the de-powered couple.

“I’m telling you, Puppy,” Assault insisted, “You better get ready to run through the back door. I can draw their attention away from you at the front.”

“And leave you alone?” Battery exclaimed, “You’re an idiot if you think I’d let you. What we need to do is escape together.”

“Uhm, excuse me?”
“Well, from the way things look, we can’t escape together,” the husband shook his head, “Those suits outside are going to chase us down. Someone has to draw their attention.”

“I’m not going to change my mind,” the wife crossed her arms, “You’re going with me, whether you like it or not!”

“Ahem, uhm, guys?”

“That’s the problem with you, you always think there’s a way out,” Assault huffed, “Sometimes, sometimes, things just get bad, like right now.”

“You’re recklessness is a problem, too,” Battery pointed at him, “And my mind is made up.”

“Hey, guys, hello?”

“That’s the problem with you women, your stubbornness can be your undoing.”

“And what about the stupidity of you men? Sometimes, I wonder what I saw in you.”

“HEY!”

The two jumped in shock and stared at the source. Based on Shockwave’s description of the new outfit, the newcomer was Ruler. She was waving at them awkwardly.

“I just decided to stop by to tell you that I’ve fixed the problem,” she said, “That tinkertech nullifying your powers is gone, and the men guarding it are all dead. And that Dauntless, Miss Militia, and Velocity are with the rest of the surviving PRT squads at Florsheim Street evacuating the civilians.”

“Uh…”

Assault was gobsmacked by the development, while Battery discovered that her powers had indeed returned.
“Thank you, Ruler,” she said gratefully.

“No problem,” the hooded girl shrugged, “It wasn’t much of an effort. I mean, it wasn’t that hard to get rid of the guards. Even the ones here.”

Peeking outside, the two could see the five suits that they couldn’t get rid lying on the ground, dead.

“Well, that’s saying something,” Battery thought to herself in fear, being reminded once more just who it was that helped them.

“Anyway, I’d be going now,” Ruler continued, “I recommend that you stay with your wife, Assault. I can handle it from here.”

The two capes froze.

“W-what made you say that?” Battery asked grimly, faint lines of power coursing through her costume.

Assault crouched a bit, ready for anything. Seeing their reaction, Ruler shook her head.

“Oh, please, my parents were married, too, you know,” she sighed, “It’s easy to notice with your antics. I mean, just look at the way you argue earlier. That’s typical behavior for a young, married cape couple living in a city like Brockton Bay. In any case, good-bye.”

Ruler waved at them, and then jumped out of the ruined window, leaving behind the gaping Assault and Battery. They were still too shocked to stop her.

“I’m so going to talk to Glenn about this,” Battery finally muttered.

“What else has she figured out?” Assault added.
Shadow Stalker was a predator, no matter what. She refused to accept the fact that these Nazis were making a mess of her neighborhood. Even before she joined the Wards, she had carved a territory for herself around her home, keeping the E88 from entering. Shockwave and Oculus had been a help, too, giving her a chance to go off-patrol to check if another upstart prey decided to act like a predator in her own territory.

Still, even predators have to take care of their own.

Right now, her attention was focused on Betsy. Her mother told her otherwise, but with the fighting moving further and further away from the street she’s in, she decided to prioritize finding her sister first. Betsy wouldn’t be far, knowing the little girl.

As her eyes roamed every nook and cranny, she finally noticed that she wasn’t alone. A tall blonde woman, with a supermodel’s body, stood just at the end of the street. She was twirling an arrow in one hand, while a huge bow was on her back. Shadow Stalker was about to call her out when the woman held up an object – a gold apple.

No, it was *The Golden Apple.*

Yes, it was beautiful.

Shadow Stalker wanted it. She wanted it so bad. Her hands were twitching, her mouth was drooling, her heart was rapidly beating, even her thighs were rubbing together. All these sensations filled her whole being.

It was so desirable.

Irresistible.

“Fuck it,” she breathed, “Let me have you, baby. Come to mama…”
The woman turned and began to walk away, with Shadow Stalker quickly following.

The Ward’s mind was filled with thoughts of *The Golden Apple*. Oh, yes, she has so many plans for it. She could see herself softly caressing its delicate skin. Her fingers could almost feel its delectable curves. Her lips would cover it with gentle kisses. Her tongue would savor every explosion of flavor as her teeth sunk into its tender flesh. Not a single morsel of it would be wasted. All of it will be hers to satisfy her deepest, darkest desires. Her whole being craved for it.

The *whizzing* of an arrow above her head rudely brought her back to reality.

Looking at the source, she saw the woman with the bow again, standing on a tree branch. No wait, it’s the same bow, but the woman looked different. And were those *cat ears and a tail*?

“Apologies for the interruption,” the woman began, “I only wish to observe the formalities before we begin.”

“The fuck?” Shadow Stalker growled, “Who the fuck are you?”

“I am called Archer,” the woman bowed, “Consider this a great honor, for an Ubermensch to waste her time with a freak like you.”

“What, do you know who I am?” Shadow Stalker glared at her.

“Shadow Stalker, Wards ENE,” Archer replied, “Breaker 3, Stranger 2, Mover 1. Has a weakness against electrical attacks. Has labelled herself constantly as ‘strong’ and a ‘predator’. Consistently goes for lethal shots against Grue of the Undersiders. Started out as a vigilante who got caught for almost killing a man, and then put on probation in the Wards.”

The Ward stiffened. How the hell did she know about Grue and the electricity? And how did she know about her almost killing someone? Those records were sealed.

“And most importantly,” Archer finished, “you are my prey for tonight, freak.”

“Fuck you, Nazi!” Shadow Stalker retorted.
“Corrections, I'm a racist, not a Nazi.”

Shadow Stalker looked around, finally realizing that she was in a thick forest.

“Where am I?” she asked.

“I believe this place is called Franklin Nature Park,” Archer answered, “For tonight’s hunt, I felt that a forest setting would be ideal for both of us.”

“What?!”

That was impossible. Franklin Nature Park was six miles away from her apartment. How the hell did she get here without noticing?

“You’re a Master!” Shadow Stalker accused.

“Is that how you label it?” Archer smirked, “Then perhaps I am.”

“Kidnapping a Ward will get you in huge trouble,” Shadow Stalker said, “Everyone will be looking for me.”

“Ah, you seem to have misunderstood,” the woman laughed, “No one will be looking for you. My boys are having a merry good time with your PRT and Protectorate. Besides, no one would be looking for someone they don’t know is missing. Also, what made you think that I’m here to kidnap you?”

Archer then grinned savagely.

“I’m here to kill you.”

_Franklin Nature Park_
“Where am I?” Betsy Hess asked, fearful of the dark surroundings.

She remembered hiding behind a dumpster, waiting for the shooting to stop. It was scary, and Mom and Jordan weren’t with her. When she felt it safe enough, she stepped out of her hiding place, deciding to retrace her steps as much as she could remember.

Luckily, she saw her big sister Sophia, standing a couple of feet away. She was in her costume, with her back turned. Betsy began to call her but, to her surprise, her sister began to walk away. Trying to gain her attention, the little girl began to run, planning to cut her off, when she saw that blonde woman carrying an apple.

*The Golden Apple.*

The next thing she knew, she was stumbling in a middle of a forest. Betsy wanted to cry, but big sister told her that only weak people cry. She wasn’t weak. She was strong.

At that moment, the skies were lit up, like it was daytime. Looking up, Betsy saw something like a lot of arrows that began raining down somewhere far from her. Smoke and dust began to rise up in the air. For some reason, the little girl felt that she needed to go there. That she needed to do something, or else she’ll regret it for the rest of her life.

She started walking, towards the plumes of smoke and dust.

*Residential Area*

*11:44 p.m.*

“Where, oh, where could you be?” Taylor muttered, holding tightly on her spear, as she looked around the buildings and streets.

The Card Holder of Ruler had been searching for her opponent for some time. Earlier, she had killed the men in suits that were attacking the PRT and civilians earlier. She had also disabled the Mystic Code that seemed to prevent capes from using their powers. The device itself she had hidden in her person. Zelretch would be very interested in it. It looked quite different from the ones the old man
had been teaching her about.

Her heart broke as she walked past the corpses of the civilians and PRT troopers alike. Such a waste of life. Had the PRT and Protectorate responded with lethal force fast enough, then this would not have escalated to this level of carnage. Sometimes, she had wondered why so much effort was expended to save the lives of villains and criminals. Was it because of the Endbringers? Perhaps. But if the official policy of the PRT kept creating these kinds of scenarios, then there must be something wrong with their policy-makers.

The PRT would also need to improve their physical and combat training of capes and troops. She couldn’t exactly understand the problem they were having with the suits. The protective Mystic Codes were, on the average, C rank. Sure, the men were strong, but as long as you got past their defences, or aimed for the head, they’d die easily. All they needed to do was aim for the kill. Heck, if they had Shadow Stalker phasing bombs or poison inside the suits' bodies, the problem would have been solved already.

“This is getting me nowhere,” she grumbled, “I should’ve been attacked by now or something.”

Stopping for a moment, she pulled out a small vial of holy water. Pouring it into her right hand, Taylor then sprinkled it into the air. The droplets stilled, and light flared, forming a three-dimensional map of Brockton Bay. Looking at the indicators, she noted her position in the map, then the position of her opponent. The Class Card in question was in Franklin Nature Park, about five miles from her.

“Why there?” Taylor was puzzled.

Her question was answered when the sky was briefly lit up like it was day time. Seeing as it was in the same location as where the Class Card was, and the fact that it was alone, Taylor realized one thing:

Someone else was fighting this Servant.

She began to run.

*Franklin Nature Park*

*11:45 p.m.*
The world revolves over one thing: predator versus prey. The strong devour the weak, and the weak keep to their lowly station.

That was the reality Shadow Stalker believed in her whole life. Even before she got powers, she knew that life would always revolve around the strong. So she made herself strong. There was no doubt in her mind that people would see her someone to respect, to fear, a predator amongst prey. She was at the top of the food chain.

Right now? She doesn’t feel that way anymore.

When the woman who called herself Archer stated that she would kill her, the Ward had scrambled to run away. Using her Breaker state, she flew amongst the trees and shadows, hiding and preparing for her counter. She was forever grateful for Shockwave, for providing her with more lethal ammunition. Thanks to Kid Win’s modular design of her crossbow, she only needed to swap her magazine of tranquilizer tips with another magazine containing steel arrow heads. Shockwave had been safekeeping it, since no one would think of searching her things. She had given Shadow Stalker the magazine once they went out for their patrol earlier.

Shadow Stalker moved further into the shadows, when she saw *The Golden Apple* again.

Oh, so beautiful. So delectable.

Wssh!

“AH, FUCK!”

This was her main problem. Every time she saw the fucking apple, she kept going to it in her normal state.

This was the ninth arrow that had hit her. What’s more, it was the ninth arrow to hit her in the exact same spot, all the way through her right wrist, through the first entry and exit wound. Earlier, she had been hit by the third arrow to her thigh, straight through the gunshot wound, embedding itself into her bone. Had it not been for the painkillers she’d been injecting herself up until now, she’d be howling in pain. Those shots were fucking hard to remove. And she had used up all her bandages already.
“She’s playing with me,” Shadow Stalker gritted her teeth as she pulled the arrow out.

This Archer must have a Blaster rating, considering how accurate her hits were. Probably Mover as well, when the Ward tried to actively fight back. Not only did Archer move around in seemingly impossible angles, she seemed to know just where Shadow Stalker’s attacks would be. A step to the left, a tilt of the head to the right, a playful crouch, etc. all her shots missed. She’d have to add Combat Thinker into the mix.

“I told you, didn’t I?” Archer’s voice echoed in the forest, “You are prey and I am the hunter. There’s no escaping this.”

The enemy cape emerged through the brushes, bow and arrow lowered. She was smirking at Shadow Stalker.

“Had enough?” she asked.

“Fuck you, Nazi!” Shadow Stalker raised her crossbow and pulled the trigger.

_Click!_

Archer laughed as the young cape stared at her weapon in disbelief.

“Oh, the look on your face – priceless!” she giggled, “Too bad I still have more.”

Shadow Stalker turned back into shadow, fleeing.

“You should be honored, freak,” Archer called out, “I was reserving this attack for a very special foe. I suppose you count, since you’ve lasted this long.”

The woman raised her bow towards the sky, two arrows with pieces of paper stuck on them already nocked.

_“With my bow and arrows,” Archer intoned, “I respectfully ask for the divine protection of the sun”_
She released the arrows, “I offer this calamity – Phoebus Catastrophe!”

The sky was suddenly bathed in sunlight. Shadow Stalker looked up as she fled. To her surprise, the light was from hundreds, no, thousands of glowing arrows.

“How would she fire something like that?” Shadow Stalker thought, “I can avoid them all in my shadow state.”

Too late, she realized with horror what Archer’s strategy was.

Jerking her head to her front, she saw The Golden Apple once more.

In that brief moment, between now and agonizing pain, a revelation came to Shadow Stalker’s mind: She was never a predator to begin with.

She was prey.

*Franklin Nature Park*

*11:58 p.m.*

Taylor ran towards the direction of the attack. If there was indeed someone fighting her opponent, then that someone was most likely a cape. And if it was a cape, then he or she was most likely in big trouble, if not dead already.

There’s a reason why Servants could only be handled by another Servant. Their various powers and combat skills made them a bad match-up for the usually specialized capes. Eidolon may be able to handle them, but he’s Triumvirate. Heck, the entire Triumvirate may be able to hold their ground, but other capes may be in trouble.

She reached her destination, which had been reduced into a large crater. Looking down, she saw two people. The one holding the bow and arrow was most definitely her opponent, while the other
“Sophia Hess?!” she bit back a curse.

Her costume tattered, her mask gone, arrows stuck in several places in her body, but there was no mistaking the cape persona of Shadow Stalker. For her long-time bully to be wearing the raiment of a hero, Taylor couldn’t accept it.

Was that the reason why Winslow ignored her complaints? How much was the PRT paying them to turn a blind eye? Was that why the students ignored her whenever she’s harassed? Did Emma know that the girl she replaced her with was a cape? Was that why they kept picking on her? Because they knew they had a Ward that can cover for them? Was this proof of how deep the PRT’s corruption goes?

She was right. The Protectorate capes were no heroes at all. Otherwise, Sophia would have been caught already.

Looking at the sorry state of her bully, Taylor felt a sense of vindictiveness in her heart. What Sophia got right now was just appropriate for everything she had done. Maybe more, since she’s the reason Emma left her. Oh, yes, just let that Servant kill the bitch now. It really made no difference. No one would know.

The world would be a better place without someone like Sophia Hess.

For a moment there, Taylor was about to do so. After all, she wasn’t a hero. She had stained her hands with the blood of hundreds. What’s one more death to her conscience? The only reason she’s been doing all this was because fate was being a bitch to her.

She was just human. All she had ever wanted was to live in peace, happy in the company of her mom and dad, and her best friend Emma.

Thinking about her lost dreams, Taylor remembered something her mother had taught her:

“To uphold courage is to shelter cowardice. To protect the innocent is to spare the guilty. To save good is to preserve evil. To nurture love is to encourage hate. To defend friends is to embrace enemies. Man is composed of all these things. To save only one aspect would mean giving up on
Taylor closed her eyes, and took a deep breath, and opened them again. She wanted Sophia to die. But what happens after? What if something like this happens again? Will she keep letting those who have offended her die? Will she close her heart and abandon them? Will she lower herself to their level?

She was just human. That’s the truth. But Sophia’s human, too.

As Taylor’s conscience struggled on how she should act on this revelation, fate didn’t seem to be in a mood to wait. Her eyes widened as Sophia’s death was delayed by an unlikely source.

_Down at the crater…_

“No!” a young voice shouted, “Don’t hurt my sister.”

Sophia, shocked by the new arrival, forced herself to sit up. Standing in front of her, arms outstretched protectively to block Archer’s shot, was Betsy.

“Betsy, you idiot!” she shouted, “Get away from here.”

“No, I won’t,” her little sister cried, “We lost Daddy already. I’m not losing you, too.”

“Oh, don’t worry, dear,” Archer smirked, drawing her bow further, “You’re not going to lose your big sister. I’ll make sure the arrow goes all the way through you to hit her.”

Sophia roared at the threat, forced her broken body to move. She grabbed Betsy and embraced her tightly. If they’re going to die, they might as well go together.

“Now say bye-Ow!” Archer cried out.

Sophia risked a glance and saw the Archer hunched back and holding her head in agony.
“N-not again,” she growled, “Sh-shut up, Archer! I’m the boss here and you do what I w-want. The Ubermensch d-demands this c-cleansing of filth.”

Seeing the chance, the Sophia tried to go into her Breaker state with Betsy. But try as she might, her powers didn’t seem to be working. She then tried to crawl away, her little sister helping by pulling her by the collar.

“SHUT UP!”

Archer’s scream made them freeze. Looking back, they saw the enemy standing tall again, bow and two arrows now pointed at them.

“Oh, you’re not going anywhere, you freaks!” she said.

“Fuck you, Nazi!” Sophia shouted in defiance.

“Again, wrong label,” Archer sneered, “I’m a racist, not a Nazi. There’s a huge difference between them.”

Archer let loose her arrows. Sophia’s heart skipped seeing her and Betsy’s death coming when a swirl of indigo cloth blocked her view, at the same time hearing the sound of metal hitting metal.

“The fuck!” she heard Archer curse.

Their rescuer slightly turned her face, and Sophia saw the stern expression of the Armored Maiden. No, she’s called Ruler now.

“’Evil indeed is the man who has not one woman to mourn him’, Ruler quoted, addressing Sophia, “It says a lot about you if your little sister would go this far to protect you.”

Their attention was called back to Archer, who was now growling with barely-controlled anger.
“You…” her face was twisted in pure rage, “It just had to be you, you bitch.”

“What?”

For a moment there, Sophia’s savior was bewildered. Then her expression changed to shock.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me!” Ruler exclaimed, “You’re that Archer? Are you still pissed off over what happened? That was so long ago.”

“What you did to Assassin and those children is unforgivable, Ruler!”

“They were suffering! Do you really think I’d let that go on? And I thought you’ve made peace with it?”

“Shut up and die, you impostor of a saint!” Archer raised her bow to the heavens, nocking two arrows with a piece of paper each, “Phoebus Catastrophe!”

She released her arrows once more.
And A Ruler Will Rise

AN: Visualizing fight scenes can be a pain at times. I hope you enjoy this latest chapter. I'll be adding Archer's stats later.

Once gain, this is released un-beta'd.

Edit: Replaced Multiplayer with Spree and added a few more lines in the Miss Militia interlude.


-Queen Of The Cards-

Her lungs were on fire while her limbs felt like jelly as she crashed down on the training mat. She swore that the staff she’s been wielding has become glued to her hand by now, with how long and how hard she’s been gripping it.

“Oh, is that how far you can go?” Zelretch teased her with that annoying grin again.

“Shut it, old man,” she groaned, “There’s only so much that flesh and blood could take.”

“Yes, I know,” the Kaleidoscope said as he leaned on his cane, “But I did tell you that we’re making you go beyond your limits. To be better today compared to yesterday.”

“Just let me take a break.”

“I’m afraid not. I need to physically break you down until you can’t function anymore. Only then can I safely build you up. Remember, you are not going into this war through your own strength. A mortal body may not be able to handle the power possessed by a Heroic Spirit for long.”

“Remind me again how I became Ruler for the first time.”
“For the simple reason that you employed a Command Seal. It allowed you to use Ruler’s power for an extended period. And don’t forget how you looked after you deactivated the card. It took me a good while to bandage you up.”

More groaning again. She and Zelretch had been at it non-stop for three hours already. Her trying to hit Zelretch while he either dodges or strikes back with his cane. It was something he had explained before, of how improving her base states, namely, her ordinary body, would be a big help in boosting the physical condition of Ruler when in Install state. Improving her body and skills would actually reduce the amount of Mana needed in order to perform some of the moves that Ruler could do.

She could see the logic of it pretty well, but god, it hurts like hell.

“Now come on, dear,” Zelretch urged, “Get up, I’m still not done peeling you yet. I could still see your aggression there, running wild. I will have to properly channel it so that you can be the warrior that you need to be.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. It was a bit of a struggle to rise up once more, but she was able to stand on her two feet again.

Training with Zelretch was an experience she’d likely never forget. He may look really old, made worse with the way he held his cane, but the power he exudes, and the quickness of his movement, was simply proof of how deceptive the old man’s appearance was. It was a learning experience.

“All right,” she pointed at Zelretch with her staff once more, “here I go again, Zelretch.”

Once more, student learned from her teacher. Movements mastered, attacks refined, defences strengthened. These are just some of the things that she needed to learn before the war begins. Because if there’s one thing for certain about this: there’s a huge chance she’d lose.

And she can’t afford to lose.

Chapter 8: And A Ruler Will Rise

Franklin Nature Park
Ruler glanced up to the skies, following the direction of Archer’s arrows. A moment later, the entire sky was bathed in light again. But she could tell that this time, the attack was different – a single attack coming from the heavens. It was strong enough to mutilate Berserker, before he regenerated, the last time she saw Archer use it.

Then again, Ruler could tank it, no problem. It’s the two people behind her that couldn’t.

“Oh well,” she muttered, “I better deal with it.”

She spun her spear, unfurling her banner at the same time. Planting it on the ground, Ruler began her chant:

“Here’s the work of our Lord! My flag, defend our brethrens! Luminosite Eternelle!”

Divine light shone, surrounding all three of them. At the same time, Archer’s attack reached its target. Ruler held fast onto her spear, banner fluttering from the force of the strike. The enemy Servant must have poured a lot of her Mana in the Noble Phantasm, since it took five minutes for the attack to dissipate. Considering just who exactly this Archer was and what she wanted to do against Ruler, it shouldn’t have come as a surprise.

Still, she couldn’t believe that Atalanta still remembered what happened. Zelretch would need to know this complication as soon as she got back.

As the attack finished, Ruler could finally see the extent of the damage.

Franklin Nature Park was a product of the rare time that Brockton Bay’s elite actually did something constructive with their money. It was supposedly a large-scale reforestation project aimed at providing greenery for the denuded Mount Franklin. The mountain reforestation portion fell through, but the trees planted around it were able to survive the test of time and weather for years. Too bad it all went to waste in just a few minutes tonight.

Half the forest, including a third of Mount Franklin, was erased by Phoebus Catastrophe. The force
of the attack actually carved a valley through it. Only the area surrounded by Ruler's Noble Phantasm survived.

“Seriously, Archer’s got it really bad for me,” Ruler shook her head.

“I should’ve known,” Archer growled, “Damn EX-rank Magic Resistance.”

The Servant of the Bow jumped away and disappeared into the forest. Ruler turned towards Soph-no, Shadow Stalker. She’s still pissed with her bully but thinking of her in her cape persona helped take the edge off. There were more pressing matters to deal with.

“I suggest you two stay here,” she began, “I cannot guarantee your safety with the kind of combat I’ll be facing.”

Sophia nodded jerkily, still stunned over what happened. Her little sister was hugging her.

Ruler quickly launched herself into the forest, intent on her quarry.

“Okay,” she thought, “Archer’s more focused on her long-range abilities. Getting close to her will remove that edge. I’ve also got to consider home court advantage. A forest would be an ideal battlefield for her. Then again, I got something better.”

One of the advantages of being Ruler is her ability to sense the location of Servants. This enabled her to avoid ambushes.

Case in point:

She quickly ducked down, missing the arrow launched at her head with inches to spare. Raising her spear up to deflect a few more shots, Ruler quickly went after Archer again. It was practically a game of cat and mouse, a dangerous one at that. Due to the sheer force from the arrows launched from Tauropolous, there was significant damage to the environment. Trees shredded, rocks shattered, ground cratered, etc. It took all of Ruler’s skill in high-speed maneuvering to avoid all the shots.

Even *The Golden Apple* was used against her. Ruler snorted at that. It wasn’t that hard to ignore it,
honestly. She wasn’t exactly human anymore in Install state. In any case, she was getting close to her target.

This Duel shall end tonight.

*Back at the crater…*

“Sis,” Betsy spoke up.

Sophia Hess forced herself to glance down at her little sister.

“I’m scared,” she shivered.

“I know,” she hugged her, “It’s okay, it’s gonna be okay.”

Sophia knew that her words were empty, just trying to assure a little girl. Looking around her, witnessing just how extensive the damage was from just two attacks from that Archer cape, made the probationary Ward realize just how lucky she was to still be alive. She could feel Betsy flinching every time sounds of explosion occurred in the forest. Even she would jerk whenever a shot passed them. It made her realize:

Archer had been holding back against her.

Her gaze fell on an arrow stuck on what was now a cliff on Mount Franklin. It created a small crater upon impact. She felt chills down her spine.

It was exactly like the arrows that had been used against her earlier.

Once again, Sophia realized just how much she had been toyed around with, and how close she was to actually dying.

If it wasn’t for her painkillers wearing off at the same time the initial barrage of arrows hit her, she wouldn’t have been brought back to her senses and switch to her shadow form in time. If it wasn’t
for Betsy delaying the woman, and Ruler blocking the killing shots, both of them would have been dead.

She hated owing someone, to be honest. She didn’t like the thought of strangers having something over her head. But for Ruler, whom she idolized from the start, she could easily make an exception. Her actions against the ABB, and most recently the Merchants, cemented the rogue’s status as a predator in Sophia’s eyes. And now that she was able to meet her in person, there was no doubt of the woman’s superiority. But there was something else that caught her attention, earlier.

Ruler’s eyes – they weren’t the eyes of a predator.

In fact, aside from the brief annoyance expressed during her arrival, her eyes were just plain blank. The way she looked at Sophia, there was really no expression there. No hate, no disgust, no anger, no strong emotions whatsoever, just a sense of determination to see things through to the end. And that someone like Sophia shouldn’t even be involved, that she wasn’t even good enough to be involved.

The Ward felt that she had just stepped on something sacred here – and had barely lived through it to tell the tale.

The sounds of metal clashing against metal continuously rang through the air.

*In the forest…*

Ruler was closing in. She could see Archer jumping backwards on tree branches, bow and arrows pointed at her pursuer. Ruler simply used her spear to deflect all the shots as she twisted around to flank her. With a burst of speed, Ruler launched herself, spear pointed at Archer’s heart.

Spear clashed against bow as Archer blocked the strike. Ruler kept pushing, trying to not lose her earlier momentum. They crashed through several trees before stopping.

“You bitch,” Archer snarled, pushing back, “How the heck did you get this strong?”

“Practice,” Ruler replied, reinforcing her position.
It was true. With all the extensive training that Zelretch gave her, Ruler, in her base form as Taylor, was pretty strong. When translated to channelling her powers through the Install state, her basic parameters would naturally go up. That was why Taylor was so intent on physical training and stamina build-up.

With a cry of rage, Archer broke the stalemate, pushing Ruler back and getting enough slack to jump away.

“You're going to die tonight, Ruler,” Archer declared, “For everything you’ve done, you will pay!”

“Archer,” Ruler gritted her teeth, “you weren’t helping them at all. Letting them attain peace was the best gift you could have done for them.”

“Shut up! When you die, I can finally be sure that all children will be saved. The pure bloods will flourish on earth.”

“What?”

Ruler’s brief moment of confusion gave Archer the opening needed. Faster than a blink of an eye, she rushed towards the Guardian of the Grail and kicked her midsection. Pain exploded in Ruler’s mind as she flew away.

“Oh, man,” she thought in frustration, “of all the times Host and Class Card would synchronize, it just had to be now. Their wishes are getting mixed up already!”

She stood up again, only to see Archer pointing her bow to the sky once more.

“Phoebus Catastrophe!”

“Just how much Mana does her Host have?” Ruler asked incredulously, “That’s the third time she’s using it.”

Seeing as there was no one near, Ruler decided to tank the blow. As the anti-unit attack descended upon her, Ruler braced herself, getting ready to strike back once it ended. This time, the attack didn’t
last long. She was about to launch herself again when pain blossomed on her stomach. Looking down, she saw the end of an arrow, and could feel the arrowhead sticking out of her back.

“I almost forgot,” Archer smirked, “A pretty strong physical attack can actually hurt you.”

“Yeah, you got me there,” Ruler gritted her teeth.

She avoided another hail of arrows as she escaped into the forest. After making sure that Archer wasn’t near, Ruler grasped the arrow and pulled. She gasped in pain as it came free. It would take a while for the wound to close, and Ruler needed all the time needed to heal. Unfortunately, due to the pain distracting her, she failed to notice a fist heading to her jaw. The force of the uppercut had her flying high into the air.

She crashed on top of Mount Franklin, with Archer landing close by.

“So, how does it feel, bitch?” Archer snarled, “I put a lot of effort in that punch.”

“If that’s all you’ve got,” Ruler shot back, standing up, “I guess I’m going home the winner tonight.”

“Oh no,” Archer grinned viciously, “That wasn’t everything at all.

Ruler’s eyes widened as Archer made the gesture of putting something on.


Purplish aura surrounded Archer, with a spectral black pelt covering her body. The pelt began to transform along with her body. The head of a monstrous boar emerged on her right shoulder, her dress disappeared and was replaced with fur covering, her hands and feet became claws. Her blond hair also changed to light purple as well.

“I just had to open my mouth,” Ruler grumbled.

In her new form, Archer became a feral beast.
“Even if I die,” she snarled, “I’ll make sure to take you with me, bitch. And when that happens, I can have my vengeance.”

Florsheim Street
Brockton Bay
12:20 a.m.

Miss Militia glanced at the PRT troops and civilians around her. Assault and Battery were attending to the civilians, Dauntless was with the BBPD and EMS personnel assisting the wounded, Velocity running the perimeter while Shockwave was holding the lines in case stragglers showed up.

Tonight was a complete mess. They weren’t expecting the kind of combat that they just experienced, and the rapidity of events had caught them all unprepared. Due to prioritizing the suppression of attackers with containment foam or disarmament, the attackers were able to gain the upper hand in the battle.

She winced again upon hearing the cries of the civilians when they saw the bodies of their loved ones. By their latest count, almost a hundred people died in the attack. Not to mention that the PRT just lost eight of their squads.

Director Piggot was going to be very furious over this.

What annoyed the military-themed cape was the tinkertech used by the attackers. Business suits that could shrug off bullets and umbrellas that neutralize containment foam? And not to mention whatever it was that neutralized their powers. The moment her gun fizzled out had her worried because that was the only reason she could hold the line for evacuation.

If it wasn’t for the fact that these men seemed like the longer-lasting, Brute version of that Spree cape, she would have thought that she was just imagining things.

In any case, she owed Ruler big time for fixing the problem. Not only did she destroy the tinkertech nullifier, she was able to kill all the men in suits attacking them, and probably the Master cape that produced them as well. That had completely turned the tide in their favour.
Then again, and she was sure of this fact, there was going to be talks on how to deal with the latter’s actions. They dropped that topic after Ruler disappeared without a trace almost two years ago. She only appeared for less than a day at that time, but the aftermath was significant, and could still be felt even now.

Killing capes was a blatant disregard for the Unwritten Rules, and it would cause negative effects on cape dynamics in Brockton Bay. It didn’t matter if authorization for lethal force, late as it was, has been granted. The fact that Ruler showed up again, after such a long time, and still first acted with intent to kill people would paint a huge target on her back once more.

The ABB and the Merchants will certainly aim their guns on her now, if only for revenge. The collateral damage could be epic in scale and cause mass chaos in the city. They’ll have to either recruit her for the PRT or arrest her. Or, if this keeps up, a Kill Order might finally be issued.

Heaven help them if the E88 manage to recruit her instead. It would be a disaster.

“Miss Militia, I’ve detected multiple EMS vehicles approaching,” Oculus reported on the radio, “ETA one minute.”

“Copy Console,” she replied, looking up and confirming the presence of the pink drone.

That was also another mystery. During the fighting, when they desperately needed information, Oculus’ drones couldn’t get in. From what Shockwave relayed, it was like the entire area they were in was invisible to the drones’ sensors. The young Tinker would definitely be working non-stop to find and fix the problem.

Her musings were disturbed when she noticed the sky turning bright somewhere. Had she not been looking up, she wouldn’t have seen it due to the tall buildings.

“Oculus, can you check what’s going on around northwest from my position?” she requested on the radio, “I think it’s at the direction of Franklin Nature Park.”

“Okay,” Oculus began, “Oh shit, not again.”

“What?”
“My drones,” the Tinker explained, “they’re like telling me that Franklin Nature Park doesn’t exist. And the ones that I could get closest to it aren’t detecting anything at all.”

Thinking rapidly, Miss Militia decided on a course of action.

“Velocity, I need you to head straight to Franklin Nature Park,” she barked on her microphone, “I suspect that there’s a major cape battle in progress there. Observe the situation cautiously and report immediately. There may be some Shaker power in effect there.”

“Copy that.”

“I’ll be joining Velocity,” Armsmaster piped in.

There was a brief pause before a crash was heard on the radio, followed by Velocity cursing.

“Damn it!” Armsmaster’s voice was very annoyed.

“What happened?”

“Armsmaster, I hit his bike,” the speedster groaned, “Ugh, and I think I broke my leg.”

“And my bike broke down on impact,” the Tinker added.

“How did that happen?” Miss Milita was incredulous.

“Intersection,” Armsmaster replied gruffly, “Didn’t see Velocity crossing.”

"The same," Velocity confirmed.
Miss Militia wanted to tear her hair out. This was not a good night for everyone.

On Top of Mount Franklin
Franklin Nature Park
12:37 a.m.

Ruler avoided another slash from Archer’s claws, trying to gain some distance to control the situation. Her earlier plan to get close in order to land a killing blow was shot the moment *Agrius Metamorphosis* was activated. It would be a suicidal move at this point in time.

“DIE!” Archer screamed.

Another duck and then Ruler struck back with her spear. She took it as her chance to run away.

“Okay, how did Achilles defeat Atalanta the last time?” Ruler asked herself, “Never mind, they both actually died back then.”

Her instincts flared. She quickly ran away from her spot as fast as she could. Looking back, she saw countless black arrows stabbed right where she was standing previously. The flapping of wings caught her attention. Tilting her head up, she saw Archer with wings sprouting from her back, her bow now attached to her hand.


She began dodging again as more and more arrows flew towards her. One got a lucky hit on her leg, which caused her to stumble. Another arrow knocked her spear away. More arrows rained down on Ruler, further pinning her down.

With great effort, Ruler tried to stand up, only to get her face smashed into the ground by Archer’s foot.

“How does it feel, bitch?” Archer snarled, “Had enough?”
She began kicking Ruler, forcing the latter to defend herself while on the ground.

“This is so not good,” Ruler thought.

If this was going to become par for the course when fighting other card holders, Ruler’s card holder would definitely be in trouble. Never had she felt so unprepared like now. Zelretch did his best, but this fight was on a whole different level.

“So, this is all you’ve got,” Archer said, “You’re really a sorry piece of shit. An impostor, no more, no less. You can’t even beat me.”

Ruler tried to punch her, but over-extended. Archer took advantage of it, grabbing her arm and twisting around, breaking it. She then punched Ruler in the face. The force sent the latter flying and creating a crater on the side of the mountain top. The Guardian of the Grail slid down in a pained heap.

“Well, I guess this is it then,” Archer laughed, “After I’m done with you, I’m going to finish what I’ve started. Then I’ll go back to the city and wipe out the filth infesting it. I suppose it is your fate to die tonight, and your soul is mine to claim.”

Nocking multiple arrows, Archer then pointed her bow at Ruler, who was struggling to rise up.

“You’re wrong,” Ruler breathed, “I am the queen of my fate, the mistress of my soul.”

The arrows were let loose. Ruler watched the approaching attack like it was in slow-motion. With a burst of strength she didn’t think possible, she struck the projectiles to the side while she jumped at the opposite direction. She used the momentum to carry her straight to her spear. Grabbing it with her good arm, Ruler had it pointed just at the moment Archer was about to pounce at her, stabbing straight through the heart.

A moment passed between the two combatants.

“How?”
Archer gasped in disbelief before collapsing to the ground. Her body began to dissolve in golden light before surrounding Ruler, and then disappearing.

“…”

Words simply refused to come out of Ruler’s lips. At last, after what seemed to be an eternity of fighting, she finally won. But there was no joy in this victory. No dancing over her fallen foe. All that Ruler felt was the immense relief that it was over. This was her first fight, and given just who exactly she fought, it was certainly a totally exhausting encounter. Deep down, she knew that things would only get worse later on. But that was for a later time to ponder.

With head bowed and shoulders slumped, she began to trudge down the mountain, forcing her tired body to move some more. There were things she still needed to take care of.

Back at the crater…

Sophia had Betsy try to patch up some of her wounds, at the same time, trying to gather strength so that she could finally move. The sounds of approaching footsteps on gravel caught their attention.

“Betsy, stay behind me,” Sophia ordered.

The little girl obeyed, burying her face into the older girl’s back. Sophia held tightly on a broken arrow she managed to retrieve earlier, thinking it better than having no weapons at all. Once she saw who was, she felt relief. Relief that turned to shock once she saw Ruler’s condition, who was looking worse for wear and gingerly holding a broken arm.

“Ruler,” she acknowledged.

“Shadow Stalker.”

“You, uhm,” a pause, “You look terrible.”

“You should see the other one, then.”
A snort, and then an awkward silence.

“Hey, I,” Sophia began, “I just want to thank-.”

“I did what I had to do,” Ruler interrupted, “This has nothing to do with you. Archer had to die. That’s the only way to stop someone like her.”

“Oh.”

“Your mask’s gone.” Ruler pointed out.

“Couldn’t find it, probably destroyed by now,” Sophia lowered her head, “Hey, I know it’s not discussed in the Unwritten Rules, but-.”

The sound of fabric being torn off was heard. Sophia looked up and saw Ruler handing her a piece of her fabric. It was large enough to act as a make-shift scarf to hide her head.

“The less questions asked, the better for both of us, then,” Ruler stated.

Sophia gratefully accepted. Ruler was about to leave when Betsy came out and hugged the departing cape. For a moment there, Sophia almost swore that Ruler looked uncomfortable.

“Thank you,” the little girl said.

“It’s nothing, little one,” Ruler finally said, rubbing the girl’s head.

She gently pried Betsy off, giving the girl a small smile before disappearing into blue motes of light. Leaving the two girls alone in the forest. From a distance, sounds of approaching police sirens could be heard. Sophia snorted.

How typical of BBPD.
Zelretch carried Taylor towards the couch, gently placing her there. Despite the blood staining the fabric, the magician’s mind was more concerned with dealing with the injuries. Taylor had appeared at his door steps, bloody, and had collapsed upon confirming that the old man was coming for her. It seemed that some of the wounds Ruler sustained in Install state still carried over to her host.

He began wrapping bandages around Taylor’s wounds, silently cursing Alaya’s refusal to let him provide the girl with healing potions. What was the Collective Consciousness of Humanity thinking? The enemy most likely had been using such stuff by now. They had a hundred years to develop that.

The sound of Taylor groaning caught Zelretch’s attention. Looking at the girl, he saw Taylor’s exhausted eyes looking back.

“Old man,” Taylor said, “I think I just got a backlash again.”

“What?” Zelretch was surprised, “How? I mean, you didn’t use your last Command Seal, right?”

“I didn’t,” Taylor replied, “But I could swear that I could feel my body tearing apart. It was just like when I activated Ruler back in nature camp. It hurts like hell.”

Zelretch frowned. For Taylor to specifically cite that experience meant something. An errant thought began to take a more concrete form in his mind.

“Taylor,” he began, “I need you to bring out your Ruler Class Card. There’s something I need to confirm.”

Taylor frowned a bit, and then did as requested. A moment later, her eyes widened and Zelretch’s eyebrow rose, both surprised at an unexpected development.
“What the fuck?” Taylor whispered in shock.

“Hmm,” Zelretch began to rub his chin, “This wasn’t exactly discussed in the rules.”

Emerging from Taylor's summoning circle, instead of one, there were now two cards. One was the usual, Ruler.

The other was Archer.

Class Card Update:

Archer Class Card

Real Name: Atalanta the Chaste Huntress

Strength: C
Endurance: D
Agility: A+
Mana: B
Luck: C
Noble Phantasm: B to B+ / A
Mental Pollution: D
Mana Cost: B
Physical Cost: D

Noble Phantasms:
Phoebus Catastrophe - Complaint Message on an Arrow

Type: Anti-Army/Anti-Unit

Rank: B to B+

Range: 2-50

Max. # of Targets: 100

Activation Chant:
"With my bow and arrows, I respectfully ask for the divine protection of the sun god Apollo and the moon goddess Artemis."

“I offer thee this calamity — Phoebus Catastrophe!

Nocking two arrows, a complaint to the gods, she aims them at the sky as they begin to shine, before releasing them at a great enough speed that they pierce through the clouds while leaving behind a glittering trail. Shortly after, there comes a faint light filling the sky and a sound similar to falling rain, but instead of it being a rain of water, it is a rain of arrows of light as if the enemy is immersed in a downpour. It is possible to control the range of the downpour, letting it spread over the battlefield or focusing it all onto a single enemy. The single arrows are powerful enough to pierce through even Caster of Black’s golems, but are able to be evaded and blocked by Servants. Though the damage dealt by each individual arrow is small, they attack in great numbers, so the Noble Phantasm is strong against Servants who have low Endurance and high Agility.

Concentrated targeting to purify a single enemy is much stronger, reducing even the durable Berserker of Red to a near-death state before he regenerates. The option to switch between raining arrows over a wide area or a narrow area makes it a very convenient Noble Phantasm.

Agrius Metamorphosis - Boar of Divine Punishment

Type: Anti-Unit

Rank: A

Range: 0

Max. # of Targets: 1

It is a cursed Noble Phantasm that grants the power of the Monstrous Beast to whoever wears the pelt. Rather than becoming a Monstrous Beast herself, wearing the pelt causes Atalanta to become a "Monstrous Human." All her parameters rise with the exception of Luck. She gains the equivalent of
A-rank Mad Enhancement and an A-rank Transformation Skill, able to bestow various characteristics depending on the environment. She shows the ability to transform the pelt into bird wings and fuse with her bow to shoot arrows weaved from magical energy. The power is gained in exchange for losing her reason, and it can be possible to even become unable to discern the identity of her Master in certain situations.
AN: Here's an interlude after the battle. I'm aiming to give readers a glimpse of the kind of world Ruler!Taylor lives in.

She had never been in a castle before, but she could tell that this was the throne room of one. Wearing a deep red gown, she spun over the marble floor, dancing to a silent music in the air.

Two people stood in the middle of the room, dressed in the raiment they wore in life. One, she knew for a long time, the other was someone she had just met. She stopped in front of them.

“Greetings, Taylor,” Jeanne D’Arc smiled at her.

“Hey, Jeanne,” she smiled at her partner, “And it’s nice to finally meet you, Atalanta.”

“The honor is mine,” the Chaste Huntress bowed, “I wish to express my gratitude for what you have done. Taking me away from that awful woman was the best thing to have happened.”

“Is that a common problem with others?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” Jeanne replied, “Then again, there are some of us who may find joy in participating in this war, regardless of who their card holder was.”

“I wish I knew who I’d be facing,” she grumbled.

“You will,” Jeanne assured her, “Just wait until you see them face-to-face.”

“Like that would be easy,” she sighed, “Say, this place looks nice. Good work, Jeanne.”
“What do you mean?” her original Servant asked, “This is yours, a reflection of your soul.”

“Oh, I didn’t expect that. Anyway, why are we actually talking now? It hasn’t happened before.”

“To give you advice,” Jeanne sighed, “You cannot use me for now. Atalanta will be your card for the moment. Despite not being as strong as I, Archer does have her advantages.”

“What? Why?” she asked in dismay, in betrayal, “Are-are you going to-?”

“No, no, it’s not what you think, dear,” Jeanne gently held her face, “It’s just that, as Ruler, the power I possess is too much for a mortal body to handle. And you, my dear, are mortal.”

“What are you talking about?” she was confused, “I mean, I’ve trained to improve my stamina and strength. And I don’t see any ill-effects in my body yet.”

Jeanne and Atalanta looked at each other, then stared at her in pity.

“My dear,” Jeanne began.

“Please look down, child,” Atalanta finished.

Puzzled, she did look down. All she saw was her red dress- no, this wasn’t a red dress. It was a dress stained red with her blood. Blood that she now knew came from the wounds on her mangled body. A body mangled from using the Ruler class card too much.

With that realization, she could now FEEL ALL THE AGONIZING PAIN!

Chapter 9: Plans Made And Errors Displayed

A Certain Mansion By The Hill

Captain’s Hill
“So, in summation, I can’t use Ruler for an extended time due to the extent of damage my body’s suffering, but Archer is available for me to use. I have to wait for at least two weeks before I could safely use Include or Install with Ruler.”

Taylor sighed in frustration, sitting up on her bed. Just when she thought an edge over the enemy has been gained, a speed bump had to show up. Although, truth be told, her meeting with Jeanne and Atalanta in her dream was a pleasant surprise. She did wonder about the throne room being a reflection of her soul. What did that mean? Never mind, something to think about for another time.

“Well, considering the fact that you’ve been using my potion that merely tricks your body that it’s okay, Jeanne’s revelation shouldn’t come as a surprise,” Zelretch sighed, standing by the window.

“I’ve wondered how my body came to that extent and why I never noticed anything,” Taylor frowned, “I mean, there should be symptoms, right?”

“Supposedly, then again there is a possibility that no signs would show,” Zelretch approached her, “Think of your body as a vase that was shattered. It can be put back together with glue and papered over to hide the defects. You don’t see the cracks anymore, true, but the damage is still there.”

“And every time the vase is shattered, the more cracks appear until it can’t be repaired anymore,” Taylor finished, “Damn, what do we do then?”

“Simply put, take a break,” Zelretch shrugged, “I’m certain that the previous card holder of Archer was testing the waters for the others, in order to gauge your skills. They will take their time showing up in the city. It means that you have the time to rest.”

A pause, “Now that I think about the way this war operates, it’s a blessing in disguise that I haven’t been giving you healing potions.”

“What? Why’s that?”

“The potions I make restore your body to its prime condition, removing damages or changes in its physical make-up and magic circuits. If I had given you a healing potion after your battle with Archer, I’d actually be hindering the integration of the new Class Card. Remember, each Class Card
is basically rewiring your magic circuit in order for you to use them. My healing potions would actually give you trouble. Then again, it's strange for something like this to happen. It's quite possible that this is due to your status as Administrator. Possibly another aspect of yourself that Alaya meddled in.”

He glanced at Taylor.

"If you'd like, I could reexamine the condition of your soul so we could get a better idea of the why."

Taylor's eyes widened. Crossing her arms in an X-shape, she began to furiously shake her head.

"No way! Nuh-uh, never again," she declared, "That one time was enough. Do you have any idea how violated I felt when you did that?"

"Okay, okay, dear," Zelretch raised his hands, "I won't. That's your choice. For the meantime, let's just wait until Archer has fully fused with you and Ruler becomes available again."

“So, I'm stuck with the traditional way of recuperating – resting,” Taylor sighed, “Why didn’t you have that problem before? I mean, you’ve been using Class Cards in other dimensions."

“That’s because I have the Kaleidosticks to do the job,” Zelretch replied, “Honestly, aside from you getting hurt every time you battle, this process is much simpler. Though it’s true that Ruby and Sapphire are sweet, but they can be a handful at times.”

Both chuckled, being reminded of the shenanigans of the two Mystic Codes.

“Still, I’ve got to ask this, old man,” Taylor began, “Were you actually listening to Alaya when she laid out the rules? How can you miss something this important, of me actually getting the cards of my opponents after I kill them?”

“I was,” Zelretch answered defensively, “I’ve been looking back at that scene countless times and she never mentioned it. It makes me think that this occurred due to your position.”

“As Ruler?”
“As administrator,” Zelretch corrected, “You may be the Grail’s Guardian now, but it doesn’t erase the fact that you also function as the Class Card System Administrator. Your battle with Archer last night could be interpreted as Ruler taking control of a wayward Class Card. There’s a precedent for that, although not to the extent that you had to capture thirteen cards. Do you still remember them all?”

“Saber, Archer, Lancer, Rider, Caster, Assassin, Berserker, Saver, Shielder, Beast, Avenger, Alter-Ego, and Foreigner,” Taylor recited, “I’ve got Archer now, so I’ve only got to deal with twelve more. Can you really not remember who were the Heroic Spirits imprinted in each card?”

“No,” Zelretch sighed loudly, “Like I’ve said before, I was just at my initial planning stages. I only took those cards out to decide which class to give my champion. Hell, there wasn't even a Beast Class Card until Alaya began fiddling with a blank one she stole from me. All I can tell you is that each card contained the imprint of a female Heroic Spirit. The fact that Archer remembered her past is actually a surprise to me as well. It may not apply to all.”

“Damn,” Taylor shook her head, “This is a mess. Well, at least there’s no Funny Vamp.”

She chuckled while Zelretch stared at her.

“That’s not funny, Taylor. If Arcueid finds out that I still have that Class Card of her, she’s going to tear me apart.”

_PRT Conference Room_

_Brockton Bay_

_9:00 a.m._

**CAPE BATTLE! FRANKLIN NATURE PARK DESTROYED!**

**WILSON AVENUE MASSACRE: WHERE’S THE PROTECTORATE?**

The slamming of the two newspapers on the table rang loudly inside the room. All the capes in attendance winced at the sound as the person heading the table glared at them.
“I want to know what exactly happened there,” Director Emily Piggot stated, “How did we end up with such a mess in such a short period of time last night?”

Miss Militia cleared her throat.

“Standard protocol required us to employ non-lethal combat tactics and containment foam first,” she began, “Unfortunately, these men in suits were able to shrug off all of our strikes, including my own bullets, and their umbrellas were able to neutralize containment foam. By the time lethal action became the only option, they already got the upper hand, terminating half of the responding PRT squads and isolating the rest of the Protectorate, preventing coordination and getting further inside the area.”

“They all exhibit Brute/Striker capabilities,” Dauntless added, “I’ve been using my Arclance at them all the time, but they just shrug it off and continue moving. Their punches were also capable of deforming steel.”

“Their guns were also a problem,” Velocity reported, “If I wasn’t running so fast, I would have been shot several times. And they clearly didn’t need to reload.”

“I’m more concerned about the umbrellas,” Assault said, “We lost those squads because they used containment foam first. By the time they went for their side-arms, they’ve all been shot.”

“Definitely armor-piercing,” Battery added, “It penetrated my suit and the armor of the troops.”

“Armsmaster? Where were you and Triumph during this time?”

“Triumph and I were responding to a bank robbery led by Squealer and Skidmark at the other end of the city,” the Protectorate leader replied, “By the time we were finished, the situation in Wilson Avenue was already stabilized. The best I could do was to leave the clean-up to Triumph while I proceed to Franklin Nature Park to assist Velocity.”

His voice dropped off as he said the last part.

“Yes, I’d also like to know what happened,” Piggot read the report, “You and Velocity were
supposed to find out what was occurring in the park. Instead, I’m reading a note here stating Velocity had a broken leg and your bike broke down. How did that happen?”

Her glare left both men fidgeting, “Well?”

“I, ah,” Velocity began, “I was crossing the intersection when I hit Armsmaster’s bike. I was looking at the left while he was coming in from the right.”

“But that shouldn’t have broken your leg.”

“It wasn’t the bike hitting me that broke my leg, Director,” the speedster seemed like he wanted to shrink in shame, “I had stopped to check the situation and, uh, I walked backwards to an open manhole.”


“I didn’t see the warning signs, I swear, Ma’am!”

“Of course you didn’t see it,” the director glared at him, “You were walking backwards.”

“It’s the truth, Director,” Armsmaster said, “I was able to record the entire incident.”

“All right, then what about you,” Piggot turned to the Tinker, “How on earth did your tinkertech motorbike break down? You said the impact was at fault?”

Armsmaster swallowed, “I was manually adjusting the fuel intake valve for the engine when Velocity’s impact caused a shift in the vehicle. I… I ended up turning the dial all the way up. It caused a fluctuation in the ignition system that shut the whole bike down permanently.”

“And why were you fiddling with your bike, when you’re still riding it?” both Piggot’s eyes were twitching now.

“The valve was partially choked, possibly due to my earlier encounter with Squealer’s vehicle,”
Armsmaster lowered his head, “Skidmark may also be at fault after he sent several high-velocity objects at my bike. I didn’t notice it until I had responded to Miss Militia’s request.”

“This is ridiculous!” Piggot declared, “If it wasn’t for the fact that it actually happened, I’d have thought you two were playing a very tasteless joke. It’s not even funny at all. Unbelievable! So this means we practically have no cape on scene at the park. Oculus’ drones couldn’t get in. No one saw what exactly happened, no one saw who precisely were involved. What’s worse, the BBPD were the first to respond. And they’re pretty much slow in sharing data with us.”

“Shadow Stalker was on site,” Dauntless said, “Wasn’t she kidnapped or something, along with her sister?”

“No help there,” Miss Militia said, “I talked to her, she said she didn’t see exactly what happened. It was too fast, and that she was too injured. And her injuries were extensive. There were also traces of high-level painkillers that may have contributed to the dulling of her senses.”

“Unbelievable,” Piggot massaged her temples, “Not only did we fail to respond properly to a racially-charged murder spree by capes, we also failed to gather sufficient data on who were involved in the wholesale destruction of public property.”

No one could give a reply. Last night was a complete fuck-up for all of them.

“Well, what are the post-mortem findings on the attackers?” Piggot finally asked.

“It’s confusing, Ma’am,” Miss Militia said, “Scans showed the absence a corona pollentia or gemma. Aside from their unusual heights, their bodies are simply typical of professional, and completely ordinary, athletes.”

“What?” Assault exclaimed, “That’s impossible! Puppy was almost killed by those Brutes.”

“And I agree completely, Assault. But the results don’t lie. Our scientists ran the tests five times because even they could not believe the data. It’s all the same. Even Spree’s clones have a copy, if inactive, of the original’s powers, so this was surprising. In addition, they have no finger prints, their DNA is fragmented, and they have no identifying marks, tattoos, or blemishes at all. I’ve ran facial recognition, but they do not have records of their existence.”
“How about the tinkertech used?” Piggot asked, turning to Armsmaster “There’s got to be something there that could be our lead.”

“If you could direct your attention to page 37, Ma’am, there’s a brief summary of my findings.”

Piggot flipped to the specified page. Moments later, she looked up.

“Is this a joke?” she demanded.

“Not a joke, Ma’am,” the Tinker replied, “I ran the test three times. I’ve even requested Dragon’s help in the tests. She sent her more advanced scanners via high-speed carrier as well, and conducted her own tests six times. The results were all the same.”

“Are you telling me that the men’s suits,” Piggot began, “the same suits that repelled Dauntless’ Arclance and ignored Miss Militia’s bullets, were simply made of pure wool? And the rest of their clothing was made from pure cotton? And the umbrellas that neutralized the containment foam were made from polyester, plastic handles, and cheap steel?”

“That is correct, Ma’am.”

“And that the guns were simply Walther PPK’s firing a maximum of nine .32 ACP bullets? That the guns do not have any markings or serial numbers, and that the magazines do not replenish their load? And the bullets are not armor piercing at all?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Fuck it,” Piggot finally said after a few moments of tense silence, “I don’t know if I want to scream or laugh at the situation we’re in. So, what you’re all saying is that we have no concrete answers at all about these two incidents. And that we cannot provide any satisfactory answer both to the Central Office and the Mayor’s Office.”

“Well,” Assault began, “We’re sure that Ruler helped us at Wilson Avenue.”

“Yes, and that brings us to our next topic,” Piggot sighed, “Ruler. What do we do with her?”
“We should bring her in,” Miss Militia promptly answered. “With her actions as it is, the ABB will want to strike back in revenge. The Merchants as well, if her actions against them ever come out. That will also reduce the risk that she ends up getting recruited by the E88.”

“I think we should consider first the reaction of the Mayor once he finds out that Ruler is back,” Armsmaster said, “He did push for the issuance of the Kill Order against her the last time.”

“It didn’t help that the mayor had actually contacted the Chief Director at that time to make the same demand,” Miss Militia sighed, “Honestly, if it wasn’t for the fact that Ruler disappeared after that day, the order would have been released by her.”

“That was a surprise, in itself,” Piggot admitted, “The rapid lobbying for a Kill Order to be issued against Ruler was unbelievable. Honestly, she was just attacking criminals at that time. We, for a fact, know that she actively avoided civilian casualties and in fact had facilitated their escape from the conflict she was waging against the ABB.”

“Fear and panic can be powerful motivators,” Assault said, “What we saw back then was probably a fresh Trigger who may have been attacked by the gangs. What the politicians and the wealthy here saw was a mass murderer, instead.”

“That’s why I recommend that we bring her in,” Miss Militia insisted, “If we could convince her to join the Protectorate, or the Wards if she’s underage, then we’d be able to stop those pushing for her immediate death. That will also shut up our detractors who keep saying that our methods are not effective.”

“ Fucking Tagg,” Battery muttered.

Everyone in the room nodded in agreement.

PRT Director for Arizona James Tagg was a rising star in the United States, boasting of a zero percent villain cape presence in his area of responsibility.

Tagg was famous for his brutal, and oftentimes lethal, response to capes causing trouble. He was also credited for a one hundred percent recruitment rate of all capes in his vicinity. If you Triggered in his territory, you either joined the PRT or left the state. Otherwise, his team of elite Protectorate capes and PRT troopers would capture you either for incarceration or death.
It didn’t help that many were praising his decisive style; and PRT branches along the West Coast were slowly adapting to his methods with very positive results. It was the East Coast PRT branches, including PRT ENE and Canada, that adamantly refuse the implementation of the Tagg method, citing humane reasons.

Unfortunately, there was increasing pressure from politicians and the general public to adopt Tagg’s way of handling super-powered criminals. The current situation in Brocken Bay was constantly being used as an example of weak PRT leadership. And Emily Piggot was constantly vilified for her seemingly poor handling of the situation.

“For the record, Director,” Dauntless said, “I think you’re doing a good job. The situation in Brockton Bay is unique, and Tagg’s method may actually make things worse.”

“Agreed,” Velocity said, “I mean, we’re the only city that has a dragon, Nazis, and druggies constantly vying for supremacy here. Those villains in Arizona? They’re just a bunch of pansies. None of them are organized at all.”

Piggot snorted. She was in agreement. Not to mention that she has an intense dislike for Tagg. She may have trust issues with capes, but even she wouldn’t do what Tagg’s been doing to the capes under his command.

“I, for one, am in disagreement with my dad,” Triumph finally spoke, “He’s not the one constantly on the streets dealing with the gangs. We are. We know how hard it is to keep the peace here. Hell, we’re perhaps the only city that has its Wards actively engaged in combat. That’s how difficult the situation is. And the mere fact that things have not yet blown sky high just shows your capability as a leader, Director. You have my support.”

The young man’s declaration was echoed by the rest of the Protectorate in the room. Piggot’s mouth twisted into a tiny smile. Despite her personal issues, she was thankful for the support of the people in front of her.

“In any case,” Piggot decided, “We will implement Miss Militia’s recommendation. But we’ll approach this slowly. Remember, we are going to deal with someone who beat Lung up to a bloody pulp and erased the majority of his gang. It’s possible that she may have Trump abilities, but until we have more concrete information, a complete assessment is not possible at this point. Being overly aggressive or pushy may not be taken lightly. Understood?”
“Yes, Director,” everyone answered.

“Good, now, on to the next topic…”

_Cauldron Meeting Room_

_Location unknown_

_Time unknown_

“What’s the status of our operations in Arizona?” a dark-skinned woman wearing a lab coat asked.

“Everything according to plan,” a younger woman wearing a suit answered, “Tagg’s leadership style is actually reducing the deviations we’re encountering in our predictive models. At this rate, we will experience a 40% increase in natural Triggers in areas under his influence.”

“Excellent.”

“I’m just not sure about Brockton Bay, Doctor,” a middle-aged blonde man spoke up, “The numbers I’m getting are not very good for the experiment. Our probabilities there are getting unreliable.”

“Is that so?” Doctor Mother said, “Then again, Brockton Bay is simply one of our many experiments, Number Man.”

“But this one is meant to study the success of cape feudalism. From the numbers I’m gathering, external factors appear to be negatively affecting the outcome.”

“Contessa,” Doctor Mother turned to the younger woman, “Do you have a path for dealing with this?”

“Path to Stabilizing the Brockton Bay Experiment,” Contessa began, “Step One: Do Nothing.”

“What?” Number Man frowned, “Do nothing?”
“The situation will stabilize by itself.”

“Very well,” Doctor Mother said, “Number Man, I need you to open some throw-away accounts that we can…”

Unnoticed by the two, Contessa’s mouth formed into a thin line.

“Step Two Complete,” she mentally said to herself, “Step Three…”

Office of the CEO
Medhall Building
3:45 p.m.

Max Anders turned away from the window as James Fleischer entered. Victor Smart and Brad Meadows looked at the newcomer as well.

“I received word from the mainland,” James reported, “They’re not happy with how you’re handling things here in the city, Max.”

“Like they could handle the PRT here,” Brad snorted, “Let’s see them deal with a Ward that can turn metal to slag.”

“Enough Brad,” Max chided, “I know you’re still pissed off with the kid, but letting your temper get to you will not help.”

He turned to James, “Inform the Gesellschaft that I’m doing everything I can to ensure the supremacy of our group.”

“Uhm,” James fidgeted, “The message is not from Gesellschaft, it’s from Das Reinblut.”

Hearing it, Max’s face began to pale. He fell back to his seat and covered his face with both hands.
“Oh, fuck!” he cursed.

“Das Reinblut?” Victor asked.

“It’s an old organization, very secretive,” James said, “It’s got ties to Nazi Germany. They’re credited with the creation of the first super-soldiers, the Ubermensch, during World War 2. They also bankrolled Gesellschaft and organized the cape network during its infancy.”

“Wait, super-soldiers? Why am I hearing that only now?”

“Why do you think Hitler was able to expand rapidly in Europe during the War?” James replied drily, “The only reason it didn’t sustain momentum was because the process was too expensive, too many volunteers died, and the Allied Forces got wise and began more aggressive action against the Ubermensch. And do you really think the Allies would admit that Germany succeeded where they failed?”

“Hmph,” Brad sniffed, “So they’re just a bunch ordinary folks with a lot of money. They can’t hurt us. Just send them a message to not mess with us.”

“Brad,” Max quietly began, “one more stupid word from you, and I’ll kill you myself.”

“Max,” Brad was surprised, “You can’t possibly be that affected. What can they actually do?”

“The same thing they did to Iron Rain,” Max answered, “and Marquis.”

“Wait, what?” Victor was shocked, “I thought Marquis killed your sister.”

“Do you really think my father and I are stupid to believe that lie?” Max glared at him, “My sister was a warning to him: Do not ignore Das Reinblut’s wishes.”

“And Marquis?”

“A good father will do everything he can to protect his daughter.”
“Max, there’s more to the message,” James swallowed, “They’re sending people here, to take over. They didn’t say when, only that they will.”

A moment of stunned silence, and then the sound of shattered glass and cursing were heard from inside the room.

**PRT ENE Director's Office**

**Brockton Bay**

5:30 p.m.

Thomas Calvert was completely pissed off.

Right now, he’s sitting in front of Emily Piggot, keeping his temper from showing. He spent an entire hour talking to her, convincing her to finally release the Kill Order on Ruler. It would benefit him in two ways: one, the PRT and Protectorate would be forced to waste resources trying to kill someone he knew would be hard to kill; and two, he could offer Ruler a safe haven as one of his cape subordinates.

The kind of fighting power she displayed, plus the possibility that she was a Trump that could go against power nullifiers, was something he could not pass up. He had lost his chance with the Alcott girl; he refused to miss this one as well.

The problem right now was Piggot. She kept refusing his recommendations, citing the dangers of antagonizing the cape. He was very close to pulling out his side-arm and shooting her in the face. She just wouldn’t cooperate with him. At least, in the other timeline, Coil was making progress in his negotiation with the Travelers.

“That’s the reason why I recommend releasing the Kill Order, Emily,” Calvert insisted, “By making it official, we can get more help from other agencies, even bounty hunters, in order to put this murderer down.”

“Is that how you see it, Thomas?” Piggot glared at him, “What I saw back there was someone consumed by grief. She may very well be a new Trigger, most likely someone who was hurt by the gangs. What we should be doing is bringing her in peacefully, possibly recruit her.”
“But that doesn’t excuse the lives she’s taken, even now,” Calvert replied, “Think of the families and people deprived of their loved ones.”

“Oh please,” Piggot scoffed, “those men she killed? They’re practically the lowest of scum. Had she not killed them, they could very well be among those who would be shooting us down. We were very close to having a major street war. You know very well that Lung was starting to expand his territory at that time.”

Calvert couldn’t take it anymore. He’s not going anywhere with this discussion. He might as well finalize his talk with the Travelers. At the same time, release some his pent-up stress.

“You know what,” Calvert stood up, “Fuck your policy and fuck you Emily! When my plans are finally implemented and I sit on that chair of yours, I’m going to rub it in your face that I’m a better PRT Director than you.”

He relished the sight of an enraged Emily Piggot as he dropped the timeline – and still continued staring at Emily Piggot’s reddening face.

Sweat began to drop at the back of his neck. This was impossible, but it actually happened. For some reason, he ended up dropping the wrong timeline. His meeting with the Travelers, one that he could not duplicate due to their wandering ways, was forever gone.

He kept staring as Piggot pressed a button, and two PRT troopers entered the office, foam sprayers cocked straight at him.

“I believe you have some explaining to do, Mister Calvert,” Piggot smiled, “And I think it’s about time we re-discuss your services as consultant for our agency.”

No, she wasn’t smiling, she was showing teeth.

_PRT Doctor’s Office_

_Brockton Bay_

_6:00 p.m._
Dr. Jessica Yamada was about to leave the office when someone knocked on the door.

“Come in!” she answered.

The door opened, and Sophia Hess, sans her costume, entered.

“Oh, Miss Hess,” the psychiatrist was surprised, “Fancy seeing you today. I believe our schedule is next week, right?”

“Yeah,” Sophia was subdued, “I heard from Dean that you were here today. I thought that I should see you as soon as possible. If that’s okay…”

Worried by the sudden change of her behaviour, the Jessica waved her to the couch.

“That’s no problem,” she said, “My door is always open. What can I help you with?”

For a long moment, Sophia didn’t answer, only looking down at her hands. Jessica noted that she seemed to be holding an indigo scarf tightly.

“Have you ever had this feeling,” Sophia began, “That you’re standing tall and proud on your living room carpet, and then getting it yanked under your feet? You then discover that, under the solid carpet, there was actually nothing underneath? That there’s nothing stopping you from falling down, down, down…”

“Once or twice,” Jessica said, “We all have our bad days. What happened to you? What made you ask that?”

Tears began to fall down the Ward’s eyes. She hugged the scarf tightly to her chest.

“I’m s-scared,” Sophia stammered, “There’s nothing under my feet, and I’m scared. I’m falling down, doc. I need your help. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know where to start.”

She began to bawl.
“Please help me, doc!” Sophia begged, “I’m scared. I’m really scared right now.”

Jessica was completely shocked. This was not typical behavior for the teenager. Whatever happened last night certainly had a huge effect on her.

As what any human being would do, the psychiatrist went over the sobbing teen and gave her a reassuring hug.

*Notre Dame Cathedral*

*Paris, France*

*12 o’clock midnight*

The belfry was certainly an ideal location for the meeting. From her spot, she could see the twinkling lights of Paris’ night life. Oh, how she wanted to destroy it all.

“Honestly, I have half the mind to destroy this place,” a woman’s voice spoke behind her, “Why are we meeting here exactly, Foreigner? I don’t exactly like the wind.”

“Because this is a place none of us would want to fight in, Lancer,” she answered.

“Oh? I suppose you have a point,” another woman, this time with an Asian accent, stated, “I heard that the opening salvo was done by Archer, and that she was killed by Ruler.”

“Yes, while I’m annoyed that she was killed,” Foreigner answered, “You understand the meaning of this, right, Alter-Ego?”

“Ruler is ready for battle,” Alter-Ego confirmed.

“Anyway, let’s get this over with,” Lancer replied, “I got a trip to Australia while I have Berserker heading to Brockton Bay in a couple of days.”
“Oh, aren’t you afraid of the collateral damage she’ll be creating?” Alter-Ego smiled, “That’s bad for business.”

“Who cares about business?” Lancer scoffed, “As long as there are Glorious Kills to be had, we can do anything we want.”

“Oh? Typical of war-mongers like you.”

“Says the bean-counters. We’re just after the path of Nirvana.”

“We just like money, what’s wrong with that?”

“Enough ladies,” Foreigner intervened, “We are gathered here in order to formalize our agreement regarding the Holy Grail War. I know that the revelations have explained the rules to each of us, but I’d rather we confirm our knowledge with each other.”

“Agreed,” Lancer said.

Alter-Ego nodded.


They all nodded in agreement.

“Oh, I must state, however, that our organization will not be assisting yours,” Alter-Ego said, “731 Global Traders have invested heavily in businesses that will be affected by your group’s operations. Besides, we’d rather die or win by our own merits.”
“I’m of the same opinion,” Foreigner said, “Das Reinblut spent decades collecting all the class cards we could get our hands on and gathering our resources. All for destroying Ruler. So, no, we will never assist you.”

They both turned to Lancer, who simply snorted.

“Do I have to say it?” she said, “Whether you assist each other or not is irrelevant. The Fellowship of True Nirvana only aims for Glorious Kills, with Ruler the most Glorious Kill of all. I think we’re all in agreement of absolute non-cooperation and non-interference, right? We’ve got our own groups to rely on.”

The nods were unanimous.

“No witnesses?” Foreigner asked.

“Not really,” Lancer replied, “I mean, we could do our battles in broad daylight and no one will bat an eye. Thank the gods for the existence of capes and their stupidity in fights.”

“I also feel it’s neat,” Alter-Ego, “To let the people see how we kill the savior they’ll never know.”

“Provided that one of us actually kills Ruler,” Foreigner said, “Remember, she is the only one allowed to possess more than one card. The more of us she kills, the stronger she becomes.”

“Well, that one actually sucks,” Lancer agreed, “Guess killing her is more important than ever.”

“At least when she dies, all the cards she has will be released once more,” Alter-Ego stated.

“Not to mention the winner gets to make a Wish,” Foreigner smiled.

Seeing as they had nothing more to discuss, the unholy meeting between three factions has ended. Each disappeared in motes of blue light.
Chapter 10

AN: Again, another chapter. Bragging rights to anyone who could guess the Servants mentioned here.

*Word of warning, this is another chapter un-beta'd. I might look over this later, since right now, it seemed all right in my eyes.

-Queen Of The Cards-

“So, I have to die in order to save the world,” she mused as the old man finished bandaging her.

It came as a shock for both of them that, upon deactivating her powers, wounds began to appear all over her body. Good thing there was a well-stocked medical kit close by, otherwise, the bleeding would have continued. Right now, she was lying on a couch, the covers now dyed red with her blood. She had probably spent an hour listening as to how much her world is in danger; and the secret war that she had unwittingly become a part of.

“Afraid so,” the man, who introduced himself as Zelretch, confirmed, “The power sealed inside that sword, if released, has the potential to destroy anything that you deem to be a threat to what you care for. The only problem with La Pucelle is that the requirement for its activation is your life. Personally, I think that is too high a price.”

“Hmm…” she merely hummed, deep in thoughts.

“Look, let me try changing the Servant imprinted in the Class Card,” Zelretch offered, “There is still another Ruler I could exchange it with. It’s still the same class and gender, and the fact I haven’t been booted out yet meant that I’m not committing any violation.”

“No,” she replied, “I’m keeping this card. I can feel it. This card is meant to be mine.”

“But the price-.”

“I will pay the price,” she looked at him straight in the eye, “I doubt anyone would miss me. I have
no friends anymore, Emma’s left me, my dad often leaves me and spends most of his time at work, I can’t stand staying at home with an impostor of my mom, and school doesn’t really matter to me anymore. So yeah, I can afford to sacrifice myself. Maybe, this way, I can finally do something useful with my life. It’s just pitiful for me, as it is.”

The old man stared at her, mouth agape.

“I- I don’t know what to say,” he was shocked, “that’s pretty heroic of you. Such sacrifice.”

She glared at him

“Don’t think that I’m doing this because I want to be a hero,” she said at him acidly, “There’s nothing heroic in what I’m doing. I just want my misery to end. I’m not a messiah like Scion.”

Hearing the last word, Zelretch winced.

“Yeah, about that,” he hedged, “There is something else you need to know, aside from the War.”

“And what’s that?”

“The real enemy, the one whose ultimate aim is to destroy not just your world but all the worlds,” Zelretch began, “is Scion.”

She blinked owlishly, “…what?”

“I haven’t reached that part yet of my narrative. Please bear with me, dear.”

Chapter 10: A Glimpse Into Their Actions

Das Reinblut Headquarters

Location Unknown
Stepping through the massive double-doors, Foreigner walked steadily towards the alcove that served as the gathering place of her family. Dismissing her Install state, the card holder fluffed her shoulder-length blonde hair.

“How did the meeting go, Mother?” a young woman greeted her.

Except for her age and pixie cut, the speaker was practically the mirror image of her mother.

“Just as expected, Tiffany,” Karla Hoss replied, “Lancer and Alter-Ego will be making their own moves against Ruler. While it irks me that we have no follow-up action against her for Henrietta’s defeat, it does give us time to implement some more of our plans. Just be ready to handle the takeover of Medhall once you’ve dealt with Max.”

“Don’t worry, Mother,” Tiffany bowed, “I’ll endeavor that my actions meet your approval.”

“Good,” Karla smiled, “You really are one of my daughters.”

Tiffany smiled at her mother’s acknowledgment.

They both turned as another young woman entered, this one sporting braided hair.

“I hope those plans include mine, Mother,” Laura Hoss called out, “I’d hate to discover that I’ve wasted my time talking to investors and not see a single penny.”

“Is money all that you’re concerned about, Laura?” Tiffany scoffed, “That makes you no different from the Traders.”

“Oh, dear sister, let me tell you this,” Laura draped her arm over the other woman’s shoulder, “The world is too brief to not be enjoyed to the fullest. It so happened that my desire for money is my greatest form of enjoyment.”
“Says the CEO,” Tiffany shrugged the arm off, “I can’t tell if it’s you that’s talking or your Class Card.”

“Why not both?” Laura grinned, “We both like money a lot. Greed is good for your health.”

“That’s enough, you two,” a third young woman entered, whose hair was tied in a ponytail and was wearing a lab coat.

“Ah, Emilia,” Karla greeted, “Good to see you, I take it that the vector has been finalized.”

“Yes, Mother,” Emilia replied, “Unfortunately, there is a complication. You should read this.”

She handed Karla a folder containing a thick bundle of documents. The Hoss matriarch began to scan the pages, abruptly stopping on one page.

“Are you serious?” she glanced at her daughter.

“Very.”

“Why was this not factored in? We cannot make any changes now, with the War in full swing.”

“I just got the full results of our research,” Emilia grimaced, “We made a mistake. She’s not a Bio-Striker focused on healing, she’s a Bio-Tinker that spends time healing. What’s worse, she’s not only immune to our vector, she can immediately create a counter for it.”

“Well, the answer’s easy,” Tiffany sniffed, “Let’s just kill her then.”

“And give Ruler the chance to rally allies to her side?” Emilia glared at her sister, “Our plans hinge on depriving Ruler of that very advantage.”

“Hmm,” Karla was pensive for a moment, “No need to worry. Let’s just implement Plan Delta, using variation seven.”
The three other women stared at their mother.

“What?” Tiffany was gobsmacked, “But that would give our opponents the advantage, Mother. Please reconsider. Let me deal with this problem. Ruler’s death can be ours.”

“No,” Karla looked at them all, “If Henrietta’s defeat is any indication, Ruler can overcome whoever the Fellowship and the Traders send against her at the moment. Besides, if we implement this plan, we can guarantee that Ruler loses her home field advantage and whatever support she has. She’ll be wasting all her energy and effort defending herself against the PRT and Protectorate. At the same time, she’ll be drawing the attention of the two agencies away from what we’re preparing in Brockton Bay. Two birds with one stone. We just need to wait.”

“Maybe we should ask Beatrice for help,” Emilia suggested.

“Not for now, Emilia,” Karla replied, “One should not awaken a sleeping Beauty, lest the Beast comes out to play. Let your sister slumber some more. Her task is yet to come.”

_Brockton Bay South Cemetery_  
_Downtown Coast_  
_7:00 a.m._

Zelretch sighed as he entered the side door of the old chapel. When he woke up that day, he was fully expecting his housekeeper to be eating breakfast with him. Except that, on the table was a covered plate with a note that she’d be in her Base, which meant that she had left at least two hours earlier.

“Doesn’t that girl know the meaning of sleep?” he muttered.

Just as he stepped down to the basement, where Taylor’s workplace and armory was located, he heard a loud _twang_ which was followed by an arrow getting lodged on a wall beside his head. Staring at the arrow and then turning to the source, he saw a wincing Taylor holding a bow.

“That wasn’t on purpose!” she said.
“And, what was it that you had in mind?” Zelretch raised an eyebrow.

“Well,” Taylor began, “since I’ve got Archer now, I should start polishing my archery skills. I know I’m good with guns, but the tactile feel of the bow and the manual aiming with it is something I’m still working on.”

“And you thought it a good idea to practice shooting in your laboratory?”

“I was doing something else earlier!”

“Let me guess,” Zelretch crossed his arms, “You got distracted by the bow and decided to start shooting on the spot. What about the rule of no violence on sacred ground?”

"Oh, that?" Taylor shrugged, "I have no intention of fighting anyone here. Besides, this could be counted simply as me playing with my toys."

Zelretch sighed, "Of course you were. What were you doing here so early in the morning, anyway?"

“Ah, about that,” Taylor placed the bow on its rack and went to a work table, “I was examining the Mystic Code I’ve recovered in Wilson Avenue. It’s pretty nifty, if you ask me. Aside from the water that contains suspended copper powder oxidized to turn blue, you’d actually think that it’s just an ordinary liquor flask. But, if you run mana through it-.“

With the veins on her hand glowing electric blue, she grasped the bottle’s mouth. Runic inscriptions began to glow all over its surface.

“- It’s actually a cleverly concealed mobile boundary field,” she smiled at the old man, “One that’s designed to suppress the powers of capes. This does raise the question on how effective Magecraft is when it comes to dealing with parahuman powers. Probably something you might want to explore. The implications are fascinating.”

Zelretch was indeed intrigued.
Just from the bottle Taylor held, there would be plenty to study about. Normally, bounded fields were complicated to set up, and were usually used in places where the caster regularly stays, like his Workshop or residence, and were connected to the land’s leylines. But the ones on Earth Bet were developed quite differently, focused more on portability and flexibility. One such device was held by Taylor.

“Very interesting,” the Kaleidoscope rubbed his chin, “It shows just how diverse Magecraft can be, given a certain environment. Here, the mana is rich, and performing magic has a ridiculously lower cost compared to other worlds. And the local Mystic Codes have very interesting applications that can be taught back in the Clock Tower.”

“Yeah,” Taylor nodded, “It’s just a shame the practice of Magecraft disappeared here. Rediscovering such techniques can be a pain, unless I’ve got some guide or lead. And it’s something that’s being used against me right now.”

It was a valid complaint.

For some reason, the use of Magecraft stopped more than a thousand years ago. Zelretch was in the process of finding out the cause, and its implications on Thaumaturgical evolution, when he discovered Scion’s presence and plans. Since then, most of his focus was spent ensuring that the one countermeasure to the entity, which was Taylor, was prepared for the eventual conflict. But he had to concentrate on the Holy Grail War for now. Given what he was able to gather, Zelretch realized that Taylor’s opponents were able to uncover the secrets of performing magecraft once more.

“Then again,” Taylor spoke again, “looking at all the Mystic Codes we’ve seen so far, it seems like a lot of focus was spent on making them look as ordinary as possible. If it wasn’t for the fact that I knew some detection spells, such items would be mistaken as regular objects. Maybe that’s the reason for the gradual decline of Magecraft. The practice was so hidden, most of the actual processes were lost in every generation.”

“While your theory has some merit, Taylor,” Zelretch said, “It doesn’t seem to explain as to why all magic usage stopped so suddenly. If we examine events that may have been influenced by magic, you will note that all magecraft appeared to have ceased within a decade. That’s too quick to be normal.”

“Well, if you put it that way,” Taylor shrugged, returning the flask back to the work table, “Why’d you come here, anyway? I’ll be on my way back to the mansion an hour from now.”

“Two reasons,” Zelretch shook his head, “One, I’ve scheduled a trip for the two of us. There is this
artifact I’d like you to examine, since it may help in crafting your own mystic codes and traps with greater speed. That will greatly help you with your battles in Brockton Bay. Incidentally, my colleagues at the Museum may have arranged for a series of seminars which will occupy the time of your teachers in Winslow. Your absence this Wednesday will not be noticed.”

“Wednesday, on the 23rd, right?” Taylor snickered, “Good thing it’s no longer Valentine’s Day, or I’d be joking that you’re trying to get me on a date.”

The way Zelretch stared at her caused the teenager to break down into laughter.

“Anyway,” Taylor wiped away some tears, “what’s the second reason?”

This time, it was Zelretch’s turn to snicker, “The mere fact that you said you’re coming back to the mansion later means that you forgot that you’re supposed to be at little Dinah’s house by eight. I knew you’d be preoccupied the moment I saw that note at the dining table.”

Hearing that, Taylor’s face began to pale. Finally looking at the wall clock, she scrambled to gather her things.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!” she rushed up to the basement stairs, “Old man, please lock everything up. I really got to go now, bye!”

“No need to rush, Taylor!” Zelretch called out with a smile.

Ah, it was days like these that reminded the aging magician that the girl still has a lot of life left in her. In a way, it was a relief compared to how Taylor looked when they first met. At least, even for a while, she could be just another hard-working girl who simply loved her job, a girl who was also equally loved by those around her.

When that day finally comes, it would certainly be the saddest moment of his life. He just wished he could do more for such a remarkable girl. And despite Taylor’s claims to the contrary, there was only one word that he could use to describe her.

A Hero.
Emma Barnes blew a stray strand away from her face as she nursed a large cup of tea by the open air section. It was good, no doubt about it, since Granny Muriel was well-known for her coffee and tea, but the teenager’s mind was pretty much pre-occupied by something else.

It had been days after the Wilson Avenue attack, and she was getting antsy. She can’t exactly complain since it was mandatory for Wards involved in events like this. Then again, her anxiety stemmed from not being out in the field, hunting down preys that target those weaker than them.

She and Sophia definitely had different ideas on who to classify as prey, since the latter tends to include people like Taylor, but they do agree that those on the streets are the ones they need to put down. Emma just wished that she could do something, to make a difference. Better yet, find a way to finally make Taylor snap and beat her up.

At least it would prove her friend’s strength and soothe her own guilt, as well as finally convince Sophia that her best friend was just like them. She really hated the fiasco that was D-Day. Then again, it was a gambit doomed to fail since it depended on Taylor reacting just as Emma assumed – which the former didn’t.

The sound of another large cup of tea being placed on the table, plus a person sitting down, caught Emma’s attention.

“Hey, this table is occup-,” Emma stared at the newcomer, “Well, what you do know? Taylor can actually afford buying her own cup of tea. What’s that for? Calming yourself down? Or maybe you’re about to cry for one week straight again?”

A sigh.

“Damn it, Taylor!” Emma furiously thought, “Why are you just sighing like that? You should be beating me up already. I know that’s a hot button for you. So go, beat me up now!”

“And really, Emma?” Taylor deadpanned, “You expect me to react explosively to that comment of yours here at Granny Muriel’s? Do you want her to come over here and give us the spanking of a lifetime?
I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to be reminded of it.”

Emma internally winced. Yeah, that was a dumb move. Granny Muriel knew them since they were children, and was often their babysitter whenever their parents weren’t around. She had to go to the West Coast about a year ago to visit children, though, so it was only recently that her café had reopened.

“And what brings you here then?” Emma sneered, “Granny doesn’t exactly sell her teas cheap.”

“Seriously, Emma,” Taylor shook her head, “Buying a cup of tea isn’t something that’ll break the bank for me. A housekeeper’s job pays well, maybe not as good as your modelling job, but it pays. But that’s not why I’m here.”

She leaned closer at Emma.

“I just wanted to talk to you, one-on-one,” she continued, “Without Sophia checking my mouth or Madison ruining my attempts at conversation. I just need to ask you a question.”

Emma rolled her eyes, “And what is that question?”

“What happened to you while I was in nature camp?”

Emma froze. Unbidden, memories of that night came to the fore. Of the darkness, the laughter, the tearing clothes, and the pain. It took her an extreme amount of effort to control her emotions. She refused to show weakness in front of Taylor. No, never in front of Taylor. She had to be strong, so that her friend would know what being strong was.

“Nothing,” Emma gritted her teeth, “Nothing happened to me. I just realized how much of a baggage you are to my life. How you kept clinging to me, pulling me down. I just realized that I need to cut you off from my life.”

There, suitably worded to anger Taylor. Maybe she’ll finally demand payback once they return to school. A cat fight would be a mess, but at least it would reveal to everyone Taylor’s strength.
Taylor sipped her tea, took her time to reply. When she did, it was in an exasperated voice.

“Do you really think I’m stupid?” she asked, “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Emma, but only an idiot wouldn’t notice that the way you’re pushing me to fight you. Why’s that? And what’s so necessary about getting me all riled up? I’ve been thinking about that since last year, but until now I still don’t see what could have gotten you to where you are today.”

What? Taylor actually knew her tactic? Damn it. No wonder Taylor wouldn’t react like she was expected to. That meant all her efforts were actually pointless.

“Then again, it’s a good thing that Anne told me what happened,” Taylor sighed.

Emma’s temper flared. That damned sister of hers! How dare she tattle on her, and to Taylor, no less.

“Anne told you?” Emma asked flatly.

“The night before Halloween Hell,” Taylor shrugged, “Sure gave me nightmares all through the night. She said that it’s my right, since I’m family.”

She tilted her head.

“Funny thing is, that’s precisely what Aunt Zoe and Uncle Alan told me when I delivered groceries to them just two weeks ago. Remember Old Antonio, the grocer? He strained his back that time so I offered my services. In other words, the three of them have no idea what you’re doing to me.”

She finished her tea, as Emma began to grip her own tightly.

“There’s something really wrong with you, Emma,” Taylor declared, “You should get some help.”

“I don’t need HELP!” Emma snapped, slamming her cup on the table.

The silence that followed was deafening.
“Something wrong there, little Em?” Granny Muriel called out from the bar, eying them with a raised eyebrow.

That’s not a good sign.

“Nothing, Granny Muriel,” Taylor smiled, “I was just teasing Emma here, you know.”

“I know,” the old proprietor shook her head, “which means you need to stop, now, little Tay, or I will give you a spanking. I don’t care how old you are, you shouldn’t pick on your friend.”

“Sorry, Granny, won’t happen again, promise.”

Granny Muriel nodded, then turned her attention back to her coffee-brewing.

“I don’t need help,” Emma hissed at Taylor, “And even if I do, why should I do that for you?”

“You’re not doing it for me,” Taylor shook her head, “You’re doing it for yourself. Because that is the best thing you can ever do to get back on your feet. I don’t know what’s going on exactly in that head of yours, but whatever you’ve been doing to me, it has to stop now.”

“Make me,” Emma challenged, secretly hoping that Taylor would finally fight her.

“I already did,” Taylor sighed, and then stood up, “Now it’s your turn. Do yourself a favor and choose wisely, finally.”

There was a moment of silence between the two.

“Farewell, Emma,” Taylor finally said before she left.

Had she looked back a moment later, she would have seen Emma’s look of concern for her.
“Would you care to humor me, Marquis?” a young girl spoke before sipping tea, “It’s been days since I noticed your care-worn expression. What seemed to bother you? We may not see eye to eye at times, but that shouldn’t stop us from extending assistance whenever possible. As your guest, I shall endeavor that my efforts relieve you of your ails.”

“Nothing much, Milady,” a tall, lean man with long dark hair answered, “I just heard some disturbing news, which helped me realize something.”

“And that is?”

“My wife’s murderer will be returning to Brockton Bay.”

Glaistig Uaine blinked, “Apologies if I may have misheard, but did you just say ‘your wife’s murderer’? I seem to recall you claiming that she passed away from cancer.”

“I did,” Marquis admitted, “Only for the sake of preserving a lie. For the truth is much more dangerous. I had hoped that my sweet little Amelia be spared from this travesty. Alas, it seemed not be the case, if what I’m hearing from news reports could be believed.”

“I take it that you know who took the life of your beloved?” the Faerie Queen sipped her tea.

“I do.”

“And yet you did not seek vengeance? That’s unexpected of you.”

“I doubt that I could stand a chance fighting against someone who defeated my wife,” Marquis sighed, “She was such a hellion in battle. She had been fighting off her pursuers for years before she met me. We fell in love. Bore me a daughter. Gave me a new appreciation for life. She will forever
be my Saber.”

He looked at his companion steadily.

“I was about to leave with Amelia after her mother was killed,” he began to grip his tea cup tightly. “But the damned Brockton Bay Brigade came for me that night. Then again, it was a shock in itself. The only way they would have known my true identity was by betrayal or espionage. All-Father will never do that to me. We have an understanding there. But when I heard that his daughter was killed, by the same hands as my wife’s killer, I understood. So, I surrendered, asking those heroes to take in and protect my daughter.”

“Then why claim the kill? Wouldn’t that endanger your Amelia?”

“All-Father and his son know the truth,” Marquis scoffed. “By saying I killed Iron Rain, I’m also warning them that I’ve been dealt with as well, that they should be careful. Das Reinblut reaches deep. It is not certain where it ends. I just hope that the Brigade has treated my daughter well these years. She’s quite the healer now, from what I hear. I’m so proud of her.”

Marquis closed his eyes.

“If my beloved’s stories are true,” he began, “War will tear Brockton Bay apart, most likely endangering our daughter. I could only hope that this guardian, this Ruler that she’s been dreaming about, will be able to stand her ground. If this Foreigner had been any indication, then Ruler will have a difficult battle ahead.”

He opened his eyes.

“For there is nothing I could do from here.”
What Makes A Villain

AN: I blame JonBerry for this version of Uber and Leet. And an Easter egg for UnwelcomeStorm, her work in Constellations is something to be admired.

*As always, be warned that this is un-beta’d, again. I may edit this later, depending on comments or details that I may have missed at the moment.

-Queen Of The Cards-

“You know, old man,” she said as she applied polish on the silverware, “when I agreed to be your housekeeper, I didn’t exactly expect that I’m going to like this job.”

“Oh, why is that, dear?” Zelretch looked up from his newspaper, from the other side of the kitchen table.

“Well, at least it keeps me away from home, from exploding at Hannah,” she explained, “But then again, there’s something oddly relaxing about cleaning your surroundings, making sure everything’s in place. Like, your mind can freely wander while still keeping your hands busy.”

“Ah,” he nodded, “I think I understand. I had the opportunity to meet someone like that. I also had the privilege of knowing that he’d become a Hero in the future, despite everything. That saving mindset of his… I almost thought that you’re like him.”

“What made me different?”

For a long moment, the Kaleidoscope didn’t answer.

“You,” he began, “so loved the people that became part of your world that you value their lives much higher than yours. And the energy… That boy I told you about? He would give his all just to save everyone, and he would refuse to stop. You? You’re just trying to get things done, since you can hardly wait to get some rest. You’re aiming for that point in time that you can finally stop.”

She stopped polishing a spoon. For a few seconds, she simply stared at her handiwork. Finally
raising her head, she gave Zelretch a tired smile.

“I figured you’d say that,” she said, “You’re right. I am tired. I just want to end this Holy Grail War as quickly as I can, so that I can face Scion and finally die. I don’t think I can take staying in this world anymore. Everyone seems to be moving on without me, not needing me, not wanting me, not looking for me. Emma’s left me, my Dad hardly talks to me, the people I deal with are mostly strangers… I’m just tired of thinking like this.”

“I really think that Alaya’s messed up your life,” Zelretch sighed, “If only she hadn’t tinkered with the flow of time, I may have been able to make things easier to you as you grew up.”

“Well, it’s too late now,” she went back to her task, “I’m already at this state. I might as well get over it. Maybe I should start setting my affairs in order as soon as possible. It’ll be great if Dad could get some money after my death. I can at least make things more comfortable for him.”

“How would you do that?” Zelretch asked.

“You told me that I’d need actual combat training, killing people,” she replied, “There are plenty of gang members here that I could practice on. Aside from depriving gangs of manpower, I know for a fact that a lot of their warehouses store a lot of money. Maybe I should begin…”

Zelretch shook his head as she continued outlining her plans. It’s not every day that he’s realized something. Yes, she wasn’t like that boy at all. She won’t exactly risk her life or act heroic to keep everyone from getting hurt. She’s a much worse case.

She actually wanted to die.

Chapter 11: What Makes A Villain

New Emperor’s Palace

Chinese Union-Imperial

7:00 a.m.

A young woman glided smoothly over the marble floors, with people bowing to her in respect as she
passed by. She had just entered the inner pavilion when a tall, thin man strode towards her.

“And where have you been, Mei?” Shen Yu, Thinker and Imperial Strategist, frowned.

“I met with my counterparts from other groups at Paris,” Mei Gong replied.

“Didn’t I tell you not to go anywhere without my approval? You have no authority to travel.”

“His Imperial Highness the Prince wished for some sweets that Paris is famous for,” Mei shrugged, “When I mentioned my trip to him, he had His Imperial Majesty issue travel orders to me, in exchange for souvenirs. Besides, my meeting will benefit our empire in the long run.”

“You’re over-stepping yourself,” Shen snarled, “I have no use for people who cannot obey a simple command. Especially ones whose ultimate loyalty is suspect.”

“Says you and the Yangban,” Mei shot back, “Although, who was it that has consistently ensured the safety of our Imperial Family? Who was it that had been instrumental in strengthening our borders and enhancing our technologies to fight other nations? Everything I do, I do in service to the Emperor. That’s how important he is to me.”

Shen’s face reddened, “I could do as well as you! You’re only confident to say that because of the people under you. Send them over to me and I can give even better results.”

“My people answer only to me, and the fact that the entire Yangban has never succeeded in defeating even just one of us says something about your training methods. Besides, can you actually claim that the contributions of the 731 Global Traders did not come from my ideas?”

They both glared at each other.

“That’s enough, you two,” Tong Ling Ta, also known as the stone manipulator Ziggurat, intervened, “You’re both assets to the empire, just that you’re dealing with different things.”

After a moment, Mei and Shen stepped away from each other and turned to the newcomer.
“You have a point, Ziggurat,” Shen agreed, “I have to admit that Mei’s actions on the external front had always been in our favor.”

“Hello, Ling,” Mei warmly greeted the cape, “How’s yesterday?”

“Smooth. New Siam attempted inroads, but I was able to drive them off. Cowards.”

The three chuckled.

“Anyway, now that all three of us are actually here,” Mei began, “I think it better that I share now with you what I’m planning.”

She leaned closer at the two capes, “We can finally get Lung back in our hands.”

“What! How?” Shen asked, “Any operation involved in getting Lung back is too costly for us.”

Mei grinned, “Claire, Mako.”

Two hooded figures, one tall while the other was short, emerged from the shadows and approached them. Kneeling down, they addressed their leader.

“We are at your service, Mei-sama.”

“Wait, just these two?” Ling asked, “Not that I’m doubting their capabilities, but Lung is an entirely different deal.”

“No, just Claire,” Mei corrected her, “I’ve got a separate job for Mako. You see, I’ve gotten some useful information from my meeting in Paris. It’s now time to expand our empire to the United States.”

“And how will you do that, exactly?” Shen asked, “You’ve been cagey about the details, only that
you’ve been snapping up various companies both here and abroad. You’ve got a lot of money to spend, don’t you?”

“Oh? Worried that I’d ‘over-step’ myself?” Mei grinned, “No, I assure you all my investments will return in spades. Besides, if you look carefully at the companies I’ve taken over, you will agree that I’ve positioned our empire to better deal with our foes via their economic structure. When it collapses, all the countries in the world will have no choice but to seek our guidance.”

“And how will Mako achieve that for us?” Ling inquired.

“She just needed to kill someone,” Mei shrugged, “Right now, the man’s not in a very good place. But keeping him alive would be to our detriment. Besides, once our little assassin here gets her hands on our target, she’ll get access to the network that he’d created for himself over the years.”

The woman giggled.

“Oh! I could hardly wait for the chaos to start. It’ll be so epic that the capes in the US will be left reeling from our actions. They couldn’t do anything to stop us then.”

“Well, I sure hope so,” Shen grumbled, “Let me look at the list of companies you’ve taken over. I might be able to find something there that could make our expansion much faster.”

“Of course,” Mei agreed wholeheartedly, “I look forward to hearing about any threats you might identify from the data.”

She watched as the two capes left her alone with her subordinates. Making sure there were no eavesdroppers:

“Claire,” she quietly said, “I need you to make the sacrifice play. Ruler has started her rhythm, and the only way we could control that is by giving her a power from our group. If my theory about her class card usage and restriction is correct, you’re the worst option for her in terms of offense. You’ll basically become the hidden card under her sleeve that’ll be useless in the face of threats that we’ve lined up against her. Also, I believe that Ruler will be paying a steep price in order to defeat your superior defense. She’ll be out of commission as we carry out our plans in Brockton Bay.”

“And Lung?” Claire asked.
“Mako will handle it for us,” Mei replied, “Her primary target could be eliminated in minutes anyway. What’s important is that Lung gets returned here. The Yangban will become even more powerful with him around. Just make sure that you get that potion that Kin is brewing for us before you two leave. And, Mako?”

“Yes, Mei-sama,” the young girl acknowledged.

“Make sure that his death remains unnoticed. His pawns will be useful scapegoats for us and will advance our plans even better.”

“Understood, Mei-sama.”

“Prepare to leave in a week’s time. Dismissed.”

Both hooded figures nodded and disappeared into the shadows again.

*Winslow High School*

*Brockton Bay*

*10:30 a.m.*

Taylor walked down the school hallway, trying not to hit anyone or draw attention to herself. Even though the Holy Grail War has begun, abruptly stopping school would actually be a bad idea. Zelretch had explained the possibility that her enemies may be onto her, and keeping to her daily routine could be the only way to keep away suspicion. Aside from that, ditching school would attract her dad’s attention.

That would raise a whole different level of chaos. If her bullying ever reaches her Dad, things could get difficult with her plans regarding the War.

Let it be known that Danny Hebert’s temper may become a huge problem for her if that happens. Taylor could easily imagine him locking her up in her bedroom. And then he’d head straight to the school, baseball bat in hand. Or probably anyone that dare to attack her.
Taylor snorted at the thought. Her dad has no idea about the kind of people that she had to deal with. Bullies at Winslow were mere bugs compared to her enemies.

In this entire city, she was perhaps the only one who could defeat the enemy card holders.

Her musing was interrupted when she felt her shoulder hit someone.

“Careful there, Hebert. Stop daydreaming in the middle of the hall.”

Oh, great, Sophia Hess. Her day couldn’t get even better.

“Hess,” Taylor stared, and her eyebrows rose.

Sophia Hess, whom she remembered to sport long, braided hair, looked totally different with her pixie haircut. And wrapped around her neck was a scarf that Taylor felt was very familiar.

Wait, that’s a piece from her cloak as Ruler. Why hasn’t it disappeared already? No, that’s not actually important. What’s more noticeable was this aura of heaviness that seemed to surround her bully.

“Cat got your tongue?” Sophia smiled weakly, “Just watch where you’re walking.”

She went on towards her own class while Taylor’s head turned to follow. Come to think of it, she hasn’t been attacked by the Trio since this morning.

“That-,” Taylor was bewildered, “That was weird.”

Wonder what made Sophia act like that? It’s not like anything earth-shattering happened to her.

For a moment, Taylor contemplated that Sophia was traumatized by the events at Franklin Nature Park. She quickly dismissed the thought. That was impossible. Sophia Hess wouldn’t be affected that badly by something like that. She only got shot a few times by Archer.
Besides, she’s still alive. That should be good, right?

Hearing the bell ring, Taylor walked faster to her class. It won’t do well to get a detention when she’s got a trip with Zelretch later.

Granny Muriel’s Café
Boardwalk
3:30 p.m.

“Here’s your tea, little Tay,” Granny Muriel smiled as she handed Taylor her order.

“Thanks, Granny,” Taylor smiled back.

“And here’s your cappuccino, Lisa.”

“Thanks, Granny Muriel,” Lisa bowed slightly.

Sipping her drink, the blonde Thinker smiled happily.

“As always, your brew is heavenly,” she praised the barista, “What’s your secret?”

“You know that already, young lady,” the old woman smiled, “Tradition and experience. Sometimes, the old ways are the best.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Lisa saluted with her cup as the old woman left them.

She then turned to Taylor, “So, how’s your day?”

“What’s there to tell?” Taylor sighed, “You know how my school works. Although things were easy
“Well,” Lisa shrugged, “Kinda slow. Boss hasn’t been in touch with us for a couple of days now. Seems like he got himself into some trouble. Well, whatever, he brought it to himself.”

“I’d wanted to know more about that, but I’m not going to ask,” Taylor frowned, “Why are we here anyway? Not that I’m complaining. Granny’s tea is excellent, but I’m supposed to be cleaning your apartment, right?”

“Nope,” Lisa grinned smugly, “that’s just my excuse. Otherwise, you’d schedule some real work from others. You need to take things easy. Forget your problems, even just for an hour.”

Secretly, Lisa was also taking this time to actually rest her mind. Whenever she’s with Taylor, it was so easy to shut down her powers, even for a while. It was refreshing.

“Well, thanks for the concern,” Taylor sipped her tea, “But I’d still have to deal with my problems once the hour is up.”

“But you’d be able to think better then, right?”

“Fine, no point arguing with a psychic.”

“Not really,” Lisa admitted, “I’m just good at reading people.”

“If you say so.”

They were chatting about some nonsense movie they’ve seen when music blared in the air. It was a familiar tune. Oh, right, it was that movie they were watching. Even without Lisa using her powers, she knew exactly what’s going on.

“Great, Uber and Leet,” Lisa sighed, “Two small-time villains with their usual shenanigans if I ever saw any.”
“I don’t know,” Taylor smiled as she looked at the people gathering at a makeshift stage, “I don’t really think they’re villains.”

That made Lisa stop, “What do you mean?”

“We’re in the Boardwalk,” Taylor replied, “Unless those two had a permit to set up that stage, those Enforcers would be all over them like white on rice. I think today’s purely for entertainment purposes. They’re likely performing for tips and Youtube videos.”

Now that Lisa thought more of it, it actually made sense. Guess she really was getting too dependent on her powers. Thinking normally seemed too slow these days.

“But what made you doubt that their villains?”

Lisa wanted to know what her friend had in mind, since it could give her a clue about Taylor’s thinking regarding the Undersiders.

“Look at the people gathering,” Taylor pointed out, “If Uber and Leet truly are the villains the PRT and Protectorate portrayed them to be, everyone would be running away screaming in fear. Sure, some of them actually walked away, but look, they’re coming back. They want to see the show. Maybe become part of it.”

“Like those hookers?” Lisa deadpanned.

“You and I both know it was staged,” Taylor snorted, “Although those poor idiots had to release another video explaining that stunt and the extras that volunteered. People are so easily fooled.”

“Still, we can’t deny that they’ve caused a lot of trouble.”

“Not really,” Taylor shrugged, “Think about it. The only time there was irreparable damage to property was when our so-called heroes came in to stop them. Remember that time, with Glory Girl? Ugh, I don’t know if she was living up to the ‘dumb blonde’ stereotype or her title as ‘Collateral Damage Barbie’. Otherwise, it was just plain pranks.”
“Yeah,” Lisa winced, “Anyway, what do you really think is a true villain?”

Taylor sipped her tea while looking at her friend and sometimes employer.

“A true villain rules by fear,” she began, “A true villain achieves his goals to the detriment of those around them. They are the kind of people who do things without remorse, without care for those affected by their greed. They have no concern for the welfare of mankind. They’re symbols of treachery and evil. In other words, they’re humanity’s greatest threats.”

Taylor’s words were filled with so much conviction that Lisa could feel chills run down her spine. The Thinker felt that there was something more about it, but didn’t think of using her powers to find out more. She had sworn never to read Taylor again after that one time.

“And Uber and Leet?” Lisa swallowed.

“Just some guys who wanted to have fun,” Taylor gave her a small smile, “They just lacked enough common sense and responsibility.”

“Oh.”

“Come on, finish that coffee of yours,” Taylor urged, “I want to see a bit of their show before I go home.”

*Hebert Residence*

*Brockton Bay*

*5:00 p.m.*

When Hannah opened the door, it was to see Taylor still avoiding looking at her and her arms laden with groceries.

“Have you started with dinner yet?” the teenager asked as she headed to the kitchen.

“No, I’m still planning one,” the older woman replied, “I figured some thick stew. It’s a cold night.”
“Forget it,” Taylor said, “I’ll cook dinner before I return to the mansion.”

“You’re not staying?” Hannah asked, slightly disappointed.

“I’ve got some work needed done there,” Taylor replied, “Besides, this is the only time I could do this.”

She pulled out a small notebook from her bag and gave it to Hannah. The woman noted how dog eared the edges were, showing its age.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Turn to Page 37,” Taylor replied.

Hannah flipped the pages and found the appropriate entry. She saw some scribbles at the sides modifying the recipe.

“Meatloaf?” she asked.

“Meatloaf, Dad’s favorite, Mom has a way to keep the interior moist and not crumble,” Taylor confirmed, “That notebook contains Mom’s family recipes, passed down from mother to daughter. In your hands is the original compilation that grandma gave Mom, one she scribbled on the sides to save her more personal touch.”

With a deep sigh, she finally looked up to Hannah.

“I’m trusting you with that recipe book,” Taylor said, “I’m not blind. It’s obvious how much you and Dad care for each other. It’s only a matter of time before you tie the knot. I just hope that you’ll continue Mom’s tradition and pass those recipes down to your daughter. Most of them are easy to follow. I just need to teach you the meatloaf recipe because Mom didn’t write down the latest modification. But she taught me, and I could replicate it perfectly.”
Realizing the gravity of what Taylor’s done, Hannah’s eyes widened.

“Wait, Taylor!” Hannah protested, “I don’t think I should take this. This is your Mom’s legacy. You should be giving this to your own daughter. It’s not right for me to take this away.”

“Yeah,” Taylor smiled sadly, “That is my Mom’s legacy to me, which I am passing down to you. I’m just making sure that, even just through this, my Mom’s memory still lives on. And you’re not taking it away. Think of it as my way of saying that you could stay. Although you still can’t convince me to live here again.”

They both silently looked at each other.

“Taylor,” Hannah began with all seriousness, “I promise you, I will take care of this notebook. And I will pass this down to my children when the time comes. You can be assured that Annette's legacy lives on with me.”

Taylor nodded and then looked back to the kitchen sink.

“Come on, help me chop up the ingredients,” Taylor began washing the vegetables, “It’s actually easy and quick to prepare. Dad would be happy tonight.”

After a moment’s pause, Hannah joined her. They spent a peaceful hour together.

*A Certain Mansion By The Hill*

*Captain’s Hill*

*8:30 p.m.*

“Ready for the trip?” Zelretch asked as Taylor entered the living room.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Taylor sighed, “I just don’t get it. You said the trip was on Wednesday, February 23rd. That’s still tomorrow. Why are we leaving now?”

“Ah, well, I forgot to tell you that it’s already Wednesday there,” the old man grinned.
Taylor’s eye began to twitch.

“You mean to tell me,” she gritted her teeth, “that this trip is going to be outside the country? What the fuck! You do realize I don’t even have a passport.”

“Oh come on,” Zelretch chuckled, “How would they know if you don’t tell them, right? Besides, we don’t need an airplane to get there.”

For moment, Taylor stared at him incredulously. She finally face-palmed.

“You’re going to use the Kaleidoscope,” she groaned, “for sightseeing?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” Zelretch smiled, “Besides, I have friends there that could help you with your problem in speed crafting magical items.”

“Friends?” Taylor raised her eyebrow, “I just hope that this doesn’t end up like Cornell. Remember Professor Scott, from Archeology? Three days after he promised to help us decode some offensive type Mystic Codes you discovered, he, his team and the entire Goldwin Smith Hall got blown up by Bakuda.”

“We’re not even sure that was Alaya’s meddling,” Zelretch pointed out, “It could be a coincidence. Triggers happen all the time.”

“We also can’t dismiss the possibility that it was the Counter Force at work, preventing us from asking help,” Taylor replied, “Don’t tell me you forgot about Mister Chatham of Chatham Industries, in Arkansas?”

“Of course not,” Zelretch frowned, “He was a nice guy. One smart entrepreneur, to be honest. And he was a believer of our purpose.”

The business man was supposed to open a factory in Brockton Bay. Not only would it generate more jobs for the locals, it would also serve as a convincing cover for Taylor. Winslow High had a history of leniency for students working as interns for major businesses. More so if the internship was under the business owner. It would have been the perfect set-up.
“Yeah,” Taylor gave him a sour expression, “It was a shame the Slaughterhous Nine stopped by his city, wiped out his entire family. Now, I can’t leave school easily without raising suspicion.”

Zelretch winced.

For some reason, any attempt to seek help or establish a network here in Earth Bet in order to better fight in the Holy Grail War was stymied by so many things. Bombings, a Slaughterhous Nine visit, heart attacks, heck, even a lawsuit, turned up to hinder or stop anyone who could have helped them.

That was why they were stuck with their current set-up.

Hopefully, since Zelretch had no direct hand in this trip they’re taking, his contacts in that museum would be spared. The exhibit was independently arranged and it was only due to his status as curator of Brockton Bay’s City Museum that he got wind of the items that were going to be displayed there. One look at the pictures, and he knew that Taylor had got to see these.

“Where are we going, anyway?” Taylor asked, changing the topic.

“Ah, yes,” Zelretch nodded, “It’s at the National Gallery of Australia.”

“That’s pretty far away,” Taylor commented, “What’s so interesting there?”

“Well, incidentally, the museum will be holding an exhibit of some rare artifacts that you would be interested in,” the Kaleidoscope explained, “Since some of these contain Primordial Runes.”

“Whoa,” Taylor blinked, “Primordial Runes? That’s amazing. I could probably come up with useful spell arrays once I got the chance to examine them. It’s pretty rare to find those stuff here in this world.”

“I know,” Zelretch chuckled, “Plus, it will shorten your inscription time once you’ve studied them up close.”
“Yeah,” Taylor agreed, “Anyway, where in Australia is that museum?”

“In Australia’s capital city,” Zelretch said with a flourish, “Canberra.”
“Okay, I get it,” Missy Biron replied on the phone glumly, “Just take care. I’m really worried for all of you going there. Good luck, Dean.”

The young girl hung up her Wards phone. She then sat down on her makeshift bed of comforters and stared at her current host.

“I told you, Missy, you’ve only got 0.0013 percent chance that you can join in that Endbringer fight. I’ve got to admit that it’s a dangerous event.” Dinah Alcott told her friend as she closed her book, “It’s the Simurgh, right? I heard that she’s got a really mean streak. Best to avoid her then.”

“But I’ve still got to try, Dinah. Everyone’s going, except me. I just want to help.”

Dinah then looked puzzled.

“Is Oculus going there, too?” she asked.

Missy grimaced, “… no.”

“There you have it.”

Dinah began to arrange her books on the shelves by her bedside. It was simple project that her Daddy helped her build, so that all her reading materials were in easy reach.

She also took the time to check that the magic circle engraved on the wall, hidden by the books, was still active. Considering who her guest was for this sleep-over, it would be prudent that she had every protective measure ready for anything.

Her baby-sitter, after installing it and similar ones all over the house, had explained to her how the little engraving would ensure that no one with malicious intent for the occupants can enter. It was a
very detailed explanation, which included stuff like explosions and organs turning into liquid. The pre-teen found the descriptions morbidly cool to learn about.

“But I’m a big girl now.” Missy whined as she leaned back on the bed, “I’m actually the most senior of the Wards, length of service-wise, and I really think I can help. Maybe not in the battle, but search and rescue can really use my powers.”

“I’m not sure what you meant about being a big girl,” Dinah said, “since you and I do not fit its technical description.”

“It’s rhetorical,” Missy retorted, “And I’m not going to argue with you about it. That’s an exercise in futility. Where the hell did you learn how to debate like that, anyway?”

“A simple skill my baby-sitter taught me,” Dinah replied, “Along with cooking, gardening, painting, lock-picking and pick-pocketing.”

“Wait, what?” Missy was incredulous as she sat up, “Why would she teach you how to break into houses and steal from people?”

“So that I’d know how to best protect my home and my stuff?”

“… well, if you put it like that…”

“Anyway, she’s also a life-saver when it comes to the sciences and math.” Dinah added, “Stuff that made my head hurt during class were easy to understand once she explained it to me.”

“Huh,” Missy raised an eyebrow, “I’ve always wondered how you were able to catch up with me in our math class.”

“Yes,” Dinah replied, “and I’ve always wondered why you’re so obsessed with spatial equations. Never thought you were actually Vista, the Ward. That was a surprise.”

“And I still can’t believe that you’ve actually triggered,” Missy said, “In cases like this, I’d recommend that you get registered to the PRT immediately. Thinkers like you are in high demand for
villains. It’s too risky to be on your own.”

“Again, I’m telling you that doing that would put me at greater risk,” Dinah frowned, “I asked, you asked, and we still ended up with the same numbers. 92.73 percent chance is just too high. I just can’t make a gamble with odds like that.”

“Still,” Missy frowned as well, “The fact that being in the PRT puts you at risk may also mean that we’re also at risk. Makes me wonder where the threat is and how we could deal with it.”

“It’s a puzzle to me as well,” Dinah admitted, “The picture I got was that of an external threat, one that is beyond your capabilities. What it is exactly I can’t see, though. I may need to rephrase my questions better or wait for the right time to ask the question again.”

“Well, your numbers have never been wrong, so far. Guess I’ll just have to keep my eyes peeled.”

There was a moment of silence between them.

“Thanks,” Dinah finally said.

“For what?” Missy asked.

“For not telling anyone about me.”

“What are you talking about? We’re friends, and I’m actually grateful that there’s someone like you who knows my secret. I mean, there are other girls in the Wards, but I can’t exactly relate to them. Shockwave and Oculus are okay, while Shadow Stalker can be a bitch, but they’re actually their own group. Having you here, with me, talking about things I can’t share with others is a sort of release for me. Makes me feel better. So, I should be the one saying ‘thank you’.”

Dinah smiled, “Do you feel better now? I can’t imagine how your home life looks like, but if you need a place to stay, feel free to stop by anytime. Mommy likes having you around. Maybe I should also introduce you to my baby-sitter. As Missy, of course. I’m sure you’ll like her.”

“Maybe next time,” Missy said, “Right now, I’m still worried for the guys. It’s a miracle that we
haven’t lost anyone yet in these Endbringer battles. But one bad day, yeah, just one bad day, and I might lose them. And it’s scaring me. I’m especially worried for Dean.”

She began to shiver.

“Damn it, I’m not usually like this. But right now, I just can’t help it, Dinah.”

“It’s going to be fine, Missy. Believe in them, believe that there’s hope in the future.”

Dinah then went down from her bed and gave the other girl a hug. Missy hugged her friend back tightly, desiring the reassurance. It was a simple gesture, but one with a strong message.

To get a better picture of what laid ahead, and perhaps plan on what to do next, the pre-cognitive Thinker silently asked herself:

“Chance that the Simurgh may be driven away from Canberra successfully?”

0.00%

Well, that was bad.

Wait, this has happened before. It was something she learned when she started going out with her baby-sitter for their customary visit to Mr. Zweinorg at the museum. Even though she can’t predict that person, she can predict any event that person was involved in. She just couldn’t figure out how that person got involved. There was nothing in the pictures telling her so.

Quickly, Dinah began to formulate the appropriate question. Silently, she asked again:

“Chance that the Simurgh may be defeated in Canberra?”

100%
Deep inside, Dinah smiled. It seemed like her baby-sitter was up to her usual shenanigans. And this time, it’s overseas.

Wonder what story Taylor would tell her when she stops by again?
“Thanks for bringing Dinah home,” Kylah Christner said while hugging her cousin, “You have no idea how much Auntie was panicking when she couldn’t find her in the mall.”

“It’s nothing Miss Christner,” she answered, “I’m just glad that I could help.”

“Please, we’re no longer in nature camp,” the young woman chided her, “You can stop calling me that. Besides, I’m just a camp counsellor there.”

After saving Dinah from those kidnappers, she decided to help the young girl in getting home. She figured that this would be the safest option. Her instincts had been warning her that going to the authorities would actually expose the child to even more danger. Dinah was also in agreement, spouting something about percentages, which further cemented her suspicions.

Whatever happened in Hillside Mall became a secret the two of them decided to keep.

“But Miss Christner-.”


A small smile, “Okay, Kylah.”

“That’s more like it.”
She stayed for a couple of hours with Kylah and the Alcott’s, who wanted to know more about her. One thing led to another, and she suddenly found herself as a part-time babysitter for Dinah. The girl was actually happy, while she was mystified about the family’s ready acceptance of her capabilities. It wasn’t like she was a full-time housekeeper or something. She just liked helping people. It gave meaning to her existence.

When she finally got the chance to speak with Dinah in private:

“Why are they so accepting of me?” she asked.

“You mentioned that you volunteer as tutor at the City Library,” Dinah replied, “And that you work for Mr. Zweinorg.”

“And?”

“That’s one of Mommy’s pet projects. If you’re teaching there, then it means you’re good. And Mr. Zweinorg is a friend of Daddy’s.”

“Uh…”

“It’s not easy to also to be a housekeeper, cook, delivery girl, and tutor at the same time. It takes an incredible person to pull that off. Knowing Mommy, she sees you as someone that the city youth should idolize. In her eyes, you’re a hero.”

“What? No, I’m not a hero!”

“I may not know you long enough,” Dinah smiled, “But I could tell you’re one. You’re the type who’ll always do the right thing in the end. That makes you a hero.”

Chapter 12: As The Day Ends

Cauldron Conference Room

Location Unknown
“SON OF A BITCH!” Rebecca Costa-Brown let out a string of curses as she took her seat.

“What got you in such a twist?” Doctor Mother asked.

“President Bradley, that bastard,” the PRT Chief Director snarled, “If I had stayed a minute longer in that meeting I would have twisted his head off, that smiling asshole.”

“What did he do this time?” Number Man asked.

“Oh, nothing much,” Rebecca shook his head, “Only that he ordered me to implement the Tagg method in California – today.”

“That’s good then,” Doctor Mother said, “We did predict a thirty-two percent increase of natural Triggers there once Tagg’s method of dealing with capes is applied. The resulting chaos and violence would also cause an increase in purchase of formulas from us by up to twenty-seven percent. What’re you so angry about?”

“Because I could read him,” the other woman replied, “And I discovered that he was setting things up so that Tagg could replace me as Chief Director by next year.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Number Man said, “Our plans did include that possibility. Anyway, based on the numbers I’m gathering, we just need them in position only by the end of the year. We can get rid of them both after that.”

“I know,” Rebecca replied, exasperated, “I just hate it whenever he does that. Like he’s got a serious grudge against me and wants me to suffer a lot.”

“Just a little bit more patience,” Doctor Mother advised, “Your position is not in danger at all. We’re only accommodating them because their actions will bring us closer to defeating Scion. The key here is to create as many capes as we can.”

“True,” Rebecca sighed, “This is the only way. Nothing else will work. To destroy Scion, to save all
the worlds, sacrifices must be made. Our plans must succeed, no matter what.”

Their attention was drawn when a portal opened, and Contessa entered.

“So, how’s your trip?” Doctor Mother inquired.

“Successful,” Contessa replied, “The divorce lawsuit against Malcolm Collins can no longer be dismissed now. His company would be divided between him, his wife, and their four children. Of course, I’ve made sure that the children will side with the mother.”

“Good,” the Cauldron leader sighed in relief, “When I found out he was setting up an office in Brockton Bay, it would have caused the experiment to fail. He’s a respected leader in Europe, while the Asian community is grateful for his assistance when Kyushu sank.”

“A Slaughterhouse Nine visit would’ve been better,” the Number Man stated.

“No,” Rebecca shook her head, “I don’t want another Chatham incident. The clean-up was a mess. Please remind me again why we had to eliminate the entire Chatham clan?”

“Because as long as a Chatham survives, they will still set up business in Brockton Bay,” Contessa replied, “That is unacceptable. We need to deprive the people there of alternative sources of jobs, and ensure that their only recourse is to join the gangs. Allowing a major business unaligned with the gangs to set up will cause the cape feudalism experiment to fail.”

“We allowed the ferry to go through,” Rebecca pointed out.

“Part of the plan,” Contessa replied, “Suddenly shutting it down in the future will create the chaos needed to Trigger more people.”

“Just from the ferry shutdown scenario alone,” the Number Man pointed out, “Our projections estimate that thirty people will become capes.”

“That’s a lot.” Rebecca was impressed, “I could already see it. Get them all registered to the PRT, trained up, and they will be another force we could use in saving the world. Even if they become
villains, they will also become a means for us to produce even more capes.”

“Despair and hopelessness is the key to such gain,” Number Man replied, “Give the people something to lose, then take it away from them so suddenly and beyond their control, in such a manner that they will be brought low without a way out, and they will certainly Trigger. The Slaughterhouse Nine showed how effective that is. It also helped that Brockton Bay’s current environment is quite depressing.”

He sighed as he ruffled his hair.

“That’s why our constant shutting down of any attempts to set up satellite offices of major businesses there is turning into a headache right now,” he grumbled.

“That’s also a point of mystery for me,” Rebecca frowned, “Why is it, for the past year, there has been an increased interest in setting up businesses in Brockton Bay? Their industries are so different from each other. From food to construction, this is not normal.”

“Have you finally found a path for identifying the culprit?” Doctor Mother asked Contessa.

With a shake of her head, Contessa replied, “No, there are too many unique paths. Each one solves it’s specific problem, yet does nothing in dealing with the rest. I’m troubled. This is the first time something like this has happened.”

"Then again, Brockton Bay is actually perfect for those industries," Doctor Mother reminded Contessa, "It's just that their presence can unfairly influence the experiment."

"When we started the PRT, its only role was supposed to be a stop-gap, to keep capes under control until Scion is dealt with," Rebecca grumbled, "We never predicted that Tagg can be so effective in suppressing capes, destroying any framework that would've allowed cape feudalism, and stabilize his territory. Guess his work back in Switzerland did give him the experience."

"I'll continue looking for the correct path," Contessa said, "Though it might be difficult to find the root cause."

“Just keep trying,” Doctor Mother urged, “We need to find out who or what is responsible for this. The success of cape feudalism in Brockton Bay is crucial for our plans in saving humanity.”
Kischur Zelretch Zweinorg sneezed loudly. He gave everyone staring at him a sheepish smile.

“Sorry, people,” he said, “Dust allergy.”

“That’s why I told you wear a mask, Zel,” Jeremiah Fraser, the gallery director, chided him.

“I know, Jerry,” Zelretch sniffed, “And I’m starting to regret not listening. I suppose you’re not going to let me hear the end of it, right?”

“I’ll keep quiet if you promise not to bring up the wasabi incident anymore,” his colleague grinned.

“Deal.”

They shook hands.

“Hey, Zelretch,” Taylor called out to him, “I had no idea that these could be combined in such a way. If I’m reading this right, the unique combination of water, air, and ice would create a hail storm. It’s amazing.”

She was bent over a display case containing several small stone carvings of Primordial Runes. The two older men were staring at her with bemused expressions.

“A history buff?” Jeremiah asked.

“Sort of,” Zelretch replied, “She has some interests in Runes and how they can be combined to produce certain effects according to ancient methods.”
“Well, if you put it that way. I’m of the opinion that these are just a recording of what the ancient people believes are the elements that influence the weather. More of a religious aspect.”

Zelretch simply smiled. If only the other man knew the truth.

The main reason he wanted Taylor to study these Primordial Runes was to give her the skills needed to create spell arrays for use during the Holy Grail War. Another reason was to bypass the restrictions set on him by Alaya regarding direct interference.

One of the things he discovered while training Taylor was that giving her knowledge related to magical combat was seen as direct interference. The one time he tried teaching Taylor a Gandr shot, he got kicked out of Earth Bet. He was gone for a week because of that.

But if he merely assisted her in the basics, like introduction to simple runes, or how to identify and examine Mystic Codes, then no violation would be made. As long as he only provided the means for Taylor to study combat magecraft on her own, Alaya wouldn’t call him out.

It was ordinary combat, which he was also good at, that he could safely train Taylor everything. That’s why he concentrated on her physical conditioning and combat exercises against the gangs. Not to mention all the mundane weapons that he bought for her.

Bidding his colleague good-bye, Zelretch walked up beside Taylor.

“So, how did your studying go?” he quietly asked.

“I’m getting interesting ideas here,” Taylor whispered back, “Mostly traps and restraints. It would be helpful for me in terms of battlefield control. As soon as we get back to Brockton Bay, I’m setting up as many traps as possible. I can’t take any chances. My battle with Archer showed just how difficult it is to defeat the card holders. Guess that’s a Heroic Spirit for you.”

“Yes,” Zelretch nodded, “Just remember that your enemies are more likely than not familiar with magecraft-based traps as well. They may be able to disable them.”

“Well,” Taylor hmm’ed, “The more time they spend disarming my traps or restraints is more time for
me to deal with them. Archer got to me too effectively because I lacked enough firepower to quickly bring her down.”

“Good point,” Zelretch nodded, “I also suggest that you also study about enhancement spells. Sometimes, a punch, when sufficiently strengthened, may actually be a better solution than bringing out the big guns.”

“Yeah,” Taylor agreed, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

They spent a productive two hours inside the museum. Taylor was in the middle of scribbling down some new Rune combinations when she suddenly shot her head up.

“What the fuck?!?” she said in shock.

“What’s wrong?” Zelretch came closer.

Taylor didn’t say anything. Seeing as there was no one around, she raised her left hand and activated her summoning circle. Grabbing the emerging Archer card, she began to grit her teeth.

“I’ve just confirmed it,” she said, “The combat restrictions are lifted.”

She turned to Zelretch with a grim expression.

“A Card Holder is nearby.”

Wards Common Room
PRT Brockton Bay
11:00 p.m.

Removing her helmet, Emma Barnes sighed as she entered the common room after her shift. It had been a strange day. While it was nice that Sophia had been somewhat subdued in school, and hadn’t bothered Taylor for an entire day, her behaviour up until now was something that needed to be discussed.
Sophia Hess looked to be in no condition to become Shadow Stalker.

“Hey, Sophia, you there?” she knocked on her fellow Ward’s bedroom door.

“Yeah, come in,” Sophia called out.

Opening the door, she saw Sophia sitting on her bed with a forlorn expression. Standing by the bed was Madison, holding a tray of empty plates.

“Thought I’d cheer her up with a midnight snack,” the petite girl answered Emma’s unspoken question, “It helped me.”

“Need anything, Emma?” Sophia asked.

“What’s gotten into you?” Emma asked, “You’ve been acting strange for several days now.”

“I just got an epiphany.”

“And what’s that?”

“That I’m not actually strong,” Sophia replied, “That I’m not a predator like I always believed.”

Emma and Madison glanced at each other. That was a complete 180-degree turn for their normally bull-headed friend. To say something like that, what happened to her?

Sophia pulled out an indigo scarf and held it close. Her eyes were closed and seemed to be holding on that cloth for dear life.

“Where did you get that scarf, Soph?” Madison asked, “You’ve been wearing that the whole day at school.”
“So I’d never forget what I went through,” Sophia replied, eyes still closed, “And I got this when Ruler tore a piece of her cape.”

“Wait, Ruler?” Emma asked, shocked, “Why?”

“My mask came off.”

“How did that happen?” Madison asked.

“Archer attacked me.”

“Who?” Emma asked.

“Where?” Madison added.

“At Franklin Nature Park,” Sophia opened her eyes and gazed at them, “Ruler saved me and my sister from Archer.”

“Ruler was there?” Madison exclaimed, “You never said anything about that in the reports. You didn’t even mention this Archer guy.”

“I think you’d better start at the beginning, Sophia,” Emma requested, “We’re getting confused here.”

Quietly, and with deliberate slowness to gather her thoughts, Sophia recounted everything that happened to her, starting from her getting baited to follow Archer to Ruler saving them by killing the kidnapper.

“I don’t know what to say, Soph,” Madison shook her head in amazement, “If you hadn’t passed the mandatory M/S screening at that time, I would be screaming that you’ve been Mastered. You’re acting really different now.”
“Not to mention that you actually held back from your report crucial data,” Emma pointed out, “Ruler killed Archer. Ruler Killed. Killed a cape. Killing capes is a violation of the Unwritten Rules.”

Emma then grinned.

“Then again, Archer was going to kill you and your sister, a civilian. So, I guess it evens it out. Knowing Miss Piggy, she won’t hold it against Ruler. What will piss her off though is that you didn’t report it. That you knew and saw your attacker, and that Ruler intervened.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do?” Sophia asked, “You weren’t there. You didn’t see what I saw. You didn’t go through what I went through. Out there, in that park, I saw two women duking it out, with powers that reshaped the landscape. Fuck! We’re starting to call Mount Franklin as Franklin Valley. And it was just from one shot from Archer.”

“So, a Triumvirate-level fight, huh?” Madison rubbed her chin.

“I don’t think so,” Sophia answered slowly, “I think it’s higher than that.”

“What made you say that?”

Instead of replying, Sophia turned to Emma.

“Remember the last Endbringer fight we’re in?” Sophia asked her, “We were close enough to see the Triumvirate in action, right?”

“Yeah, Alexandria, Eidolon, and Legend,” Emma replied, “They were able to finally drive off Behemoth.”

“Well, when I faced Archer, I thought I was facing the whole Triumvirate.”

“Just from one? What about Ruler?”
“Someone worse, since she defeated Archer,” Sophia clenched the makeshift scarf tighter, “Their powers, their abilities, you don’t really sense it just by looking at them. It’s like, what they’re doing is just a normal thing. There’s nothing extraordinary to see until they act.”

She swallowed.

“Asher, for example, there’s really no hate in her eyes. It’s like how you react when you accidentally step on an ant. I’m nothing in her eyes, and I know that I’m just an ant compared to her. It was only Ruler stepping in that saved us. Even her expression was just mild annoyance, like that extra report you had to file after your shift. It was just something she had to do.”

“Sophia…” Emma breathed.

“That’s why I’ve decided,” Sophia declared, “I’m going to come clean to the director. I’m going to tell her about my bullying Taylor, that I’ve been disobeying the terms of my probation. Ruler gave me a new lease in life. Probably my last. I’m not going to waste that. Betsy almost died because of me.”

She made to stand-up when Emma pushed her down.

“No,” Emma glared at her, “I’m as guilty as you were for the bullying. And I’ve been giving you free reign whenever we’re on patrol. It’s my fault as well. If you’re going to confess, I’m coming with you. Might as well clear the air. And I’m going to take full responsibility.”

Sophia began to protest when Emma shushed her.

“It’s like you said,” Emma began, “You violated your probation. That means juvie. You won’t be able to work as a Ward here anymore. That’s a waste of abilities. Most likely, you’ll be snapped up by another PRT branch, and it just won’t help you get better. Madison and I can be here to keep an eye on you. I’ll take all the blame, say it was all my idea. Piggot will be really pissed off, but she can’t do anything permanent against me. You’re seeing Yamada now, right?”

A nod.

“Good, keep talking to her. Tell her everything. She’s known to keep her mouth shut when it counts. What’s important is the therapy you’re getting from her.”
Madison raised her hand.

“Well, as accessory to your crimes,” she began, “I guess I’d have to tag along. They’ll be asking questions on why I didn’t report you two. Man, I'm going to hate this.”

Emma nodded seriously, “I promise you, Madison, you won’t be harmed by this. You’ll probably be benched for a while, but that’s it. This city still needs your skills.”

Their planning session was interrupted by the sound of sirens.

“Oh fuck,” Sophia groaned.

There was an Endbringer attack.

*Australian War Memorial*

*Campbell, Canberra*

*2:00 p.m.*

Taylor, clad in her hooded trench coat and her face covered by a scarf, moved past the memorial grounds silently. Despite not requiring as much Mana compared to Ruler, she needed to save as much power as possible in case the Duel begins. Still, she was ready to summon Archer’s bow anytime. While the card holder she detected to be here didn’t seem to be doing anything, her gut was telling her that a plan was being carried out.

She stopped upon seeing a woman standing by the Memorial Courtyard, looking right in front of the Hall of Memory.

“Amazing, this place,” the woman called out, “A shrine honoring the brave departed. A fitting monument to those who gave their lives in service to their country. I’m glad to be here. It feels like I’m in the company of heroes once more.”

She turned, and Taylor’s blood ran cold. There was no mistaking the purple hair, red eyes, and tight
bodysuit. Sometimes, she really hated her Ruler privileges.

“I really don’t know what I did to piss Alaya off,” the Grail Guardian winced, “But to have me face
you, I’m starting to think she really wanted me dead.”

“You know me, then?” the woman smiled.

“You’re Lancer,” Taylor replied, “But, more importantly, you’re Scatach the Immortal Witch, Queen
of the Land of Shadows, the god-slayer, and the original wielder of Gae Bolg.”

She face-palmed.

“Not to mention that you’re actually impossible to kill.”

Lancer laughed.

“Well, that sure puts a damper on your plans, then, Ruler,” she teased, “I suppose it’s time for you to
throw in your towel?”

“No way, you witch!”

Taylor made to summon her card when spectral chains emerged and held her in place. She began to
struggle, which caused the chains to tighten even more.

“Ah, I see it’s your first time,” Lancer observed, “That happened to me once, when I met Avenger.
Turned out that the Holy Grail is very strict in enforcing the rules for the War: No violence on sacred
ground. And the entirety of this memorial is considered sacred ground.”

With mighty effort, Taylor calmed herself down. Now that she had no intention of fighting Lancer,
the chains disappeared.

“Why are you here?” Taylor glared at her, “Were you following me?”
“Not at all,” Lancer replied, “Though I doubt that you’d believe me if I say that I was just out for a walk.”

“You’re right,” Taylor deadpanned, “I don’t believe you.”

“In that case, I wish to make a trade.”

“What, I let you leave and you’ll let me live?”

“Nothing as ridiculous as that,” Lancer smiled, “I offer you a much better deal. Besides, our fated battle is long way off.”

She walked closer to Taylor. Licking her lips, she leaned closer to the teenager’s face.

“Oh yes,” she whispered, “You’re not ripe for plucking yet. Too young, too immature still. I like my girls with experience, you know. It makes the action all the more pleasurable. Especially since you’re Ruler, I expect you to give me a superb performance.”

Taylor was thinking of a comeback when the air began to be filled with the sound of the Endbringer sirens. Taylor listened for the pattern. Three long screams meant the attack was somewhere else. Three short bursts meant here. It was three short bursts.

“Fuck,” she glared at Lancer, “Did you do this?”

“No,” her opponent denied, “I just figured an Endbringer would show up where you’d be. I’ve got information crucial in killing the Enbringers. I thought of evening the odds for your victory.”

“Let me guess,” Taylor narrowed her eyes, “That’s what you’re offering in the deal? No deal. In the end, it is my duty to end you.”

“Such fire in your eyes,” Lancer shivered, “Oh, you have no idea how much you’re making me so excited. It’s a shame that it’s not yet time for our encounter.”
She took a step back and gave Taylor a sultry smile.

“The Endbringers, the creatures you see,” Lancer began, “Are not real. Their bodies are merely a construct formed by about two hundred layers of matter around a core. You can usually find the core in their torso area. Destroy the core, and you destroy these abominations. Then again, destroying the layers will be a challenge. Just the skin alone has the hardness of aluminum alloy, and each succeeding layer roughly doubles in strength compared to the previous.”

Doing some quick math in her head, Taylor gaped.

“Wait, if that’s the case, the sheer physics makes it impossible to kill them without destroying the world!” she exclaimed, “All this time, they’ve been holding back. No one could kill them then. Even Eidolon couldn’t do it.”

“True,” Lancer shrugged, “No one can destroy an Endbringer – except us.”

Taylor stared at her opponent. Lancer raised an eyebrow.

“We are holders of Class Cards,” she explained, “We hold the power of Heroes. Heroes who are humanity’s greatest warriors. Warriors whose power and legend has been crystallized into Mysteries. Mysteries that can force physics to bend over and take it. In other words, Physics is Mystery’s bitch.”

Lancer went closer to Taylor again.

“And since Endbringers, in order to exist in this world, needed to conform to Physics,” she whispered, “they are susceptible to the Mysteries we wield. If I’m not mistaken, Archer’s Mysteries would be perfect against the Simurgh.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Taylor asked with narrowed eyes, “What deal are you trying to make?”

“Simple,” Lancer replied, “If you fight, you will destroy the Simurgh, but I get to observe you, thus learning how to best defeat you. If you don’t fight, the Simurgh will just be driven off, and Canberra will become a domed city, damming the lives of millions of people, but I learn nothing and thus
increase your chances of beating me.”

Her smile widened as Taylor grimaced. The teenager sensed the honesty of Lancer’s words. There was really no point in lying since the situation presented now was more troubling.

“Choose wisely, Ruler,” Lancer leaned forward, “Will you preserve your safety or will you make a deal with a witch?”
A False Angel Shall Die

AN: Still not satisfied with my work here. I just wanted to portray how susceptible the Endbringers are to Card Holders.

Edit: Made minor revisions on some scenes.

She listened from the stairs as her Dad spoke on the phone. They were supposed to leave this Friday for a weekend camping trip, but this sudden call from the Mayor’s office may have put everything on hold. Minutes later, the phone conversation ended and her Dad came to her.

“Hey, kiddo,” Danny Hebert was rubbing his neck, “I’m really sorry, but the Mayor wanted to meet with me today. There’s a group of investors interested in opening the ferry. I know you’ve been excited for this trip, it’s just that-.”

“It’s all right, Dad,” she answered, “This is very important. It could mean jobs for everyone in the union. There’s always a next time.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, we can always go next time.”

Since then, there was almost never time for them to be together. She couldn’t exactly blame her Dad. Ever since Mom died, there seemed to be a wall that divided them. Probably due to their way of dealing with grief. She concentrated more on doing things, helping people, and raising money in her own way. Her Dad, on the other hand, spent more of his time working on the ferry revival, and generating work desperately needed by the Dock Workers’ Union.

Very rarely did they meet in the house. Most of the time, they simply left messages for each other on the fridge, or through Hannah, when she began living in their home.

The thought of Dad’s girlfriend still gave her mixed feelings, but she had to admit that he looked much happier compared to when her Mom died. What really bothered her was that her Dad started leaving things at home for Hannah to take care of, just like when her Mom was still alive. Like nothing’s changed.

But everything has changed.
Her Mom was still gone.

Deep down, she felt that her Dad was still in denial over Mom’s death, that he’s using Hannah as a replacement. The woman seemed comfortable with the way things were, which was a good thing. But that wasn’t right way to deal with grief. He needed to accept the truth already, to finally gain the strength to move on and live his life again.

And be the father that she desperately needed.

She missed her old Dad. She missed his laughter. She missed his anger. She missed his focus. She missed everything that made Danny Hebert her Dad.

Maybe... Maybe if he spent more time with her.

If he no longer kept asking her for a ‘Next time’.

She wouldn’t feel so tired living in this world anymore. She wouldn’t feel so tired of looking at a man wearing the form of her father.

She’s already running out of ‘Next times’ to give.

Chapter 13: A False Angel Shall Die

Australian War Memorial

Campbell, Canberra

2:30 p.m.

“Hello, Lancer,” Zelretch greeted stiffly.

The old man was confident that he had seen everything, what with being the Kaleidoscope that travelled all over the multiple universes. Although even he had to admit that seeing two enemy card holders approaching him, without trying to kill each other, was something he didn’t see every day. It sure reminded him that there really was a first time for anything.

“Uhm,” Zelretch began, “Something you wanted to say, Ruler?”

The woman with purple hair and red eyes giggled while Taylor face-palmed.

“I made a deal with a witch,” the Grail’s Guardian replied, “sort of.”

“Still calling yourself Ruler?” Lancer asked mirthfully, “I thought you couldn’t use that Class Card for now?”

That bought the two other people short and stared at her.

“What made you say that?” Zelretch asked.

“Even at just a glance I could tell the power she emanates,” Lancer smiled, “It’s not Ruler’s ability she’s drawing on. It’s Archer’s. And the only reason she couldn’t use her stronger class card is because her body still couldn’t handle the sheer power of Ruler. That ability only comes with time and training. Take it from me, that’s how I’ve been able to handle Lancer.”

“So, what should I call myself, then?” Taylor asked sarcastically, “Queen?”

Lancer’s smile widened.

“That’s perfect!” she cheered, “It still stays true to your role as system administrator, and yet still allows you the flexibility to maintain your identity no matter the class card you use. Yes, from now on I shall call you Queen!”
“That was just a joke!” Taylor exclaimed, “Oh, never mind. Let’s go kill Simurgh. ‘By my right as Administrator of this Syste-’.”

Taylor was interrupted when Lancer grabbed her hand.

“What are you doing, Queen?” the purple-haired woman asked.

“Using my Command Seal to Install Archer,” Taylor replied.

This time, it was Lancer’s turn to face-palm.

“Didn’t I tell you that these so-called Endbringers are actually susceptible to our Mysteries?” the older woman asked. “Even in your Include state, they will still fall.”

“But the Include state’s power is one level lower than Install,” Taylor protested, “It’ll take me longer kill the Simurgh.”

“And yet you will still kill her in the end,” Lancer replied, “What’s a little challenge in life? You should save your Command Seals in case you need them for some serious battle.”

“And the Simurgh isn’t serious enough for you?” Taylor was incredulous.

“As I have said,” Lancer shrugged, “Endbringers needed to use physics to create their invincibility in battle. Our powers will simply bypass it. Take note, you’ve only managed to win three new Command Seals, and only for Archer. Don’t waste them. The only way you can gain more Command Seals is by defeating the other card holders. Which reminds me…”

She looked closer at the teenager.

“Why are you so intent on using all your power to fight?” Lancer asked.

Taylor glared at her, “So I could end this War as soon as possible.”
Lancer tilted her head, observing the teenager carefully. After a few moments, she sighed.

“Well, so much for my expectations,” she said, “I had hoped for a little more excitement. Anyway, you can’t use your Command Seal now.”

“And what made you say that?” Taylor asked heatedly.

“Because the Simurgh is already here,” Lancer smiled brightly, “therefore, you don’t have the time for a proper Install ritual anymore.”

“What?!”

Taylor whirled around and scanned the skies. Lancer merely patted her back.

“Don’t worry, you can still deal with her in time,” the older woman said, “Allow me to bring you to the gathering of heroes.”

“Wait, what?” Taylor stared at Lancer.

Without another word, the other card holder wrapped her arm around the teenager’s shoulders.

“This’ll be a very short trip,” she laughed, “Exciting, too.”

Taylor didn’t have the chance to reply as Lancer jumped high in the air, bringing her along. Moments later, they were gone.

Zelretch couldn’t help but simply stare as the entire scene happened. It was too fast. The only thing he could be sure of was Lancer’s brief reaction to Taylor’s reason for fighting.

It was sadness tinged with disappointment.
Tattletale took a moment to orient herself as she and the rest of the Undersiders, along with many others from Brockton Bay, were teleported by Strider to Canberra. Seeing the setting sun cast a beautiful orange glow over the city landscape, she thought it served a strange contrast to what would certainly be a dangerous affair.

“Remind me again what we’re doing here, Tats,” Regent whined.

“Because we need to establish ourselves as useful for these occasions,” Grue replied instead, “That’ll get the heat off our backs from the Protectorate and simply treat us as mere nuisance in the city.”

“Besides, with our Boss gone, we need a better way to establish our reps,” Tattletale added, “Yeah, I know we’ve got the cash, I’ve secured a lot of it for our group, but that doesn’t mean we can simply take things easy. This is our way to make sure we are not going to be constantly chased whenever we’re out.”

“But we ain’t fighters,” Regent protested, “We can’t go against the Simurgh.”

“But we’re masters of escape and evasion,” Tattletale pointed out, “That’s useful for search and rescue, which we are certainly going to be busy with. Meanwhile, I’m going to the Thinker group and help analyze the battle.”

“What gave you this hare-brained idea anyway?” Regent asked, “I mean, an Endbringer battle? We’ve never participated in one before. So, why now?”

“I’ve told you already, it’s for our reputation.”

Actually, it was only half of the reason. The other one was from the conversation she had with Taylor earlier. Having seen Uber and Leet’s antics in the Boardwalk had Tattletale thinking. Despite their labels as villains, people don’t exactly see the duo as one. At most, they were being treated as amusing, if not annoying, pranksters.
Even the Protectorate didn’t expend much effort to arrest them. Case in point: Vista and Clockblocker, the two Wards patrolling the Boardwalk earlier. They simply stood at the sidelines, alert for any shenanigans from Uber and Leet that never came. When their performance ended without incident, the two Wards went on their way.

Tattletale wanted that same treatment for the Undersiders. Now with Coil gone, for reasons even she hadn’t figured out yet, there was really nothing much that the team could do. They could still attack the other gangs, but they needed something that can help keep the PRT off their backs better.

She glanced at Bitch, who was busy enlarging Brutus, Judas, and Angelica in their bone armor.

What they’re doing today was also for her. With Bitch being wanted by the police, having her act as rescuer in Endbringer battles could help keep authorities away and provide additional evidence to prove her innocence. The blonde Thinker had sworn to never abandon the dog master, as well as help the Undersiders become a more ‘respectable’ villain group.

“What the hell are you doing here?” a familiar voice called out.

Internally groaning, Tattletale and company turned around and saw Shockwave with her arms crossed, flanking her were Aegis, Shadow Stalker, and Kid Win. From a distance, she noted Gallant being glomped by Glory Girl, while Armsmaster and Miss Millitia were speaking with Panacea.

“What the hell are you doing here?” a familiar voice called out.

“Hello, Shockwave,” the blond Thinker smiled, “Fancy seeing you here.”

“It’s an Endbringer battle,” Shockwave retorted, “Of course I’d be here. And you haven’t answered my question.”

“Well, the Undersiders wish to lend a hand,” Grue stepped forward, “We believe our skills will be useful in search and rescue operations.”

“There’s no doubt of our usefulness,” Tattletale added, “As you Wards are often witness to.”

“Yeah, right,” Shockwave gritted her teeth, “I still haven’t forgotten the bank heist.”
“Hey, it’s not our fault that you zapped Kid Win’s ass,” Regent said, “I mean, you kept staring at his bum.”

“That’s because you kept twitching my head and hand there, you dolt!” Shockwave shot back, “And don’t deny it, I know it was you. That’s the only way I’d have hit Kid Win.”

“Hey, calm down, Shockwave,” Aegis said, “We’re under the Truce, remember?”

“Besides,” Kid Win added, “I’m the one who’s been zapped, and I’m not complaining here.”

“I agree with Aegis and Kid Win,” Shadow Stalker added her two cents.

The Undersiders whipped their heads at the same time the two male Wards moved theirs to stare at the hooded cape. Shadow Stalker was rather infamous for being constantly against Aegis and Kid Win. For her to agree with both was akin to a miracle.

Or was it?

Allowing a little bit of her power free, Tattletale read Shadow Stalker:

Wants to improve her standing with the Wards.
Wants to make peace with those she had offended.
Wants to be a better person.
Afraid of dying without making a difference.
Afraid of wasting her second chance.
Afraid of fighting again someone like ???
Grateful for being saved by ???

“What the fuck?” thought Tattletale, rubbing her temples.
This problem of hers has become too common as of late. For some reason, she’s been experiencing blind spots in her inferences. She could still get details, but most of the crucial parts, the ones that help her reach her conclusions, tended to be missing. It’s been driving her nuts, considering that Coil, before he disappeared, had been acting strangely ever since she deduced that he’s also experiencing blind spots as well. He’s been working her harder in information-gathering from that time on. But how the hell could she find information when she couldn’t find information in the first place?

She was in the middle of her pondering when the sound of someone screaming from above caught her attention. Looking up, she saw a purple and red blur fast approaching a clear spot just beside her. Taking a step away as a safety measure, she saw the blur land in a faint cloud of dust, revealing itself to be two women. One was wearing a purple bodysuit, while the other wore a red hooded trench coat.

“Well, this is quite the trip, Queen,” the purple-wearing woman said.

“Lancer, how many times do I have to tell you to stop calling me Queen?” the trench coat-wearing teenager asked in exasperation, “I’m Ruler.”

“Not right now,” the now-named Lancer giggled, “You have to admit that Ruler would be an incompatible name, considering the power you’re using.”

“Arrggh!”

Queen, or Ruler if she preferred, threw her hands up.

She was about to say something when she noted the eyes turned to her. Despite her lower face being covered by the scarf, and the hood casting a shadow over the rest, it was obvious that the newcomer was embarrassed.

“Oh, hi everyone,” Ruler clasped her hands behind her back, “Now, this is awkward.”

Shadow Stalker approached the trench coat-wearing woman.

“Uhm, Ruler?” she bowed in greeting, “I didn’t expect you to be here. Did you also hear the Endbringer sirens?”
Tattletale noted the respect the shadowy cape displayed to the other hooded cape.

How curious.

“Would you believe me if I said that I was just visiting a museum here?” Ruler answered Shadow Stalker, “I initially had no intention of fighting here.”

“Boring,” Regent droned, “Museums are so boring. Video games are better.”

“Hey, show some respect, you dolt!” Shockwave quietly hissed, “You don’t want to make her angry. You won’t like her when she’s angry.”

“Why, who’s she?”

“Someone who beat Lung up to a bloody pulp,” Aegis replied instead, looking at Ruler nervously, “While he’s already ramped up to having wings.”

“What? How did that happen?” Grue looked at the Wards sharply, “I mean, the last time I heard something like that was when the Armored…”

The leader of the Undersiders trailed off upon realizing just who exactly they were talking to.

“Oh crap,” Grue groaned, “She’s the Armored Maiden.”

“It’s Ruler!” Shockwave hissed again, “She’s just got a wardrobe and name change.”

Sounds of whining had Tattletale glance from the corner of her eye, noting that Bitch and her dogs were kneeling down in terrified submission. When the most combative member of their group backs off, it’s a good indicator of how dangerous the person in front of them was. Even Regent, apathetic as he was, took a step back in fear.
“Ah, huh,” he stammered, “I d-didn’t mean anything, honest, m-ma’am.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ruler,” Tattletale greeted, internally cursing the way her voice pitched higher at the end, ”We didn’t expect you here.”

Then again, it’s not every day you meet someone who crushed Oni Lee’s head with her bare hands and defeated a ramped-up Lung on her own, not to mention having a triple-digit body count in just a few hours. That’s a hell of a way to establish a reputation.

“Excuse me, she doesn’t answer to that title anymore,” the woman known as Lancer began, “From now on, please address my companion here as Queen, as is appropriate.”

“Queen?” Kid Win asked, “Why another name change?”

“Because her power as Ruler is temporarily unavailable,” Lancer explained, “Thus, her use of another ability. One she had won through glorious combat. In any case, Queen is the most appropriate appellation for her.”

“Lancer, would you mind?” Ruler, or Queen, glared at her companion, “I didn’t come here to talk about my skills. Stop talking.”

“Why, and let the misinformed come up with their own twisted interpretation?” Lancer asked, “Might as well get it all out early enough, Queen. So again, I reiterate to everyone within earshot, please address my companion here as Queen.”

The younger woman stared at Lancer, and then sighed.

“Fine,” she said, “who cares about names, anyway? Call me whatever you want.”

Tattletale had noted something important earlier, but it was a Ward that voiced it.

“Wait, what do you mean, your power as Ruler is unavailable?” Aegis asked, “How are you going to help in the battle against the Simurgh, uhm, Queen?”
“Great, now I’m really stuck with the name…”

Sighing heavily at the new cape label, Queen ended up shaking her head. Raising her left hand, those who were close enough saw a golden card float in front. Grasping it, Queen intoned:

“*Include, Archer!*”

The card disappeared and was replaced by a huge black bow.

“Oh, fuck!”

Shadow Stalker suddenly stiffened upon seeing the weapon. Lancer smiled upon seeing the girl’s reaction.

“Interesting,” the purple-haired woman stated, “It appears that you had faced the power of a divinity and yet lived to tell the tale. Not many could make such a claim. Consider yourself fortunate you only tasted a fraction of its true power.”

Shadow Stalker stared at Lancer, “Did Queen get it by…”

“Yes.”

“Oh, fuck… Is she like…” there was a quaver of fear in the young woman’s voice.

“No,” Lancer shook her head, “Think of it merely as her taking back the power that was originally hers to command. That’s why I look forward to the day she finally fights me. Who knows what she could do with my power.”

Despite the face covered by the mask, Tattletale could swear that Shadow Stalker looked really ill at ease.
“Excuse me,” a woman’s voice spoke up.

They all turned and saw Alexandria herself standing in front of them.

“Shockwave, pleasure to see you again,” the heroine greeted warmly.

“The honor is mine, Alexandria, ma’am,” Shockwave stood straighter.

“Anyway, I came here to hand you and your companions your armbands,” Alexandria said, “The Simurgh is estimated to arrive within two hours. I advise you all to listen to Legend’s speech that’s about to begin in five minutes.”

The legendary cape glanced at Lancer and Queen.

“I see some new faces here,” Alexandria began, “And you two are?”

“Lancer,” a giggle, “I’ve always wanted to attend fights like this.”

“Queen,” a deep sigh, “And I’m really regretting my presence here.”

“Well, if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to thank your participation in this Endbringer fight.”

Alexandria began handing out the tinkertech devices. Shockwave and the rest of the Wards with her got theirs first, followed by the Undersiders, then the last two. It was after Queen had accepted hers and registered herself that Lancer simply snorted and waved away the armband offered to her.

“No, I won’t need it,” Lancer said.

“What do you mean by that?” Alexandria asked, slightly miffed, “This is an Endbringer fight, against the most dangerous of the Endbringers. You need this in order to coordinate in the battle better and monitor the length of time you’re exposed to the Simurgh’s scream.”
“You seem to misunderstand,” Lancer smiled, “I’m not here to fight the Simurgh.”

“Excuse me?!”

“I’m just here to watch Queen kill the Simurgh. And how I’d be gushing at how well Queen performed the act at the climax.”

“What?!”

“Which reminds me,” Lancer turned to Queen, “She has arrived.”

As if on cue, the red clouds dispersed and the armbands began to beep in alarm.

“All capes, be advised!” Dragon’s voice on the armband spoke urgently, “The Simurgh accelerated her arrival time! She is now on site, repeat, the Simurgh is now on site.”

In a flurry from multiple wings, the most dangerous of Endbringers appeared in the skies just a hundred feet above them. The capes assembled could only gape in shock. There was no warning at all. The attack run was supposed to happen two hours from now, not exactly now.

“Oh fucking hell!”

Aegis and Shockwave cursed at the same time while Kid Win hastily unslung the rifle on his back and began attaching modules to it. Grue had the Undersiders gathered closer to him, smoke faintly flowing out of his hands. Alexandria began to issue orders to those around her and through her own armband. Amid the panic and mayhem going around them, Lancer and Queen, on the other hand, were reacting rather calmly.

“So, it’s begun, huh?” Queen said, “This is going to be a pain with all these capes moving around. I plan to fight the Simurgh from a distance, but if someone like Alexandria gets close to strike, there’s no assurance that my attack won’t hit her as well. I’ll need them all out of the way.”

“I’ve got a solution for that,” Lancer raised her hand, “Do you recognize the runes I’ve just written on the palm of my hand?”
“That?” Queen glanced at the writings, “Yeah, I know that. It’s a Geass contract, one that’s sealed once we shake hands.”

“Correct,” Lancer replied, “And ‘I solemnly swear that I shall ensure the health and safety of all the capes participating in this battle today, provided that you fight and kill the Simurgh’. And before you complain, I assure you that the Simurgh will die by your hands. If you don’t believe me, since I’m your enemy, believe in your strength. Believe in Archer’s strength. You are powerful in your own right.”

Queen was silent for a few moments, pondering Lancer’s words. She then extended her own hand.

“Well, I suppose it’s as good a deal as any,” the teenager said, “Besides, if my suspicions are correct, you really will keep the others from interfering, which is a good thing, in my book.”

Lancer smiled and shook hands with Queen.

“Go kill the abomination, Queen,” Lancer urged.

Tattletale watched as one of the most dangerous capes she had ever known walked towards one of the most dangerous Endbringers she had ever known.

_Cape Gathering and Recovery Zone_  
_Canberra Rally Point_  
2:29 p.m.

Queen simply stared at the Simurgh as she slowly strode forward. She knew just how dangerous the Endbringer was, the lives it destroyed, cities that were isolated, the people treated as pariahs, among other things.

The thought that another city might fall at the hand of the Simurgh sickened the Grail’s Guardian.

“Archer,” thought Queen, “In front of us is a relentless monster that threatens the safety of the people
and the city they reside in. It’s time to show everyone that all’s not lost. That the Chaste Huntress roams the wilds once more. Let’s show the whole world why you are the greatest mortal huntress to ever grace the lands. That no more monstrous beasts shall remain in this world. Let’s kill the Simurgh.”

A sensation of agreement filled the teenager’s whole being. Yes, Atalanta wanted to test her mettle against such a dangerous beast.

Time to give an appropriate greeting. Nocking two arrows on her bow, Queen then pointed up to the sky.

“With my bow and arrows,” Queen intoned, “I respectfully ask for the divine protection of the sun god Apollo and the moon goddess Artemis.”

She released the arrows, “I offer this calamity – Phoebus Catastrophe!”

The twin arrows disappeared into the darkening skies. Moments later, the skies brightened as thousands of arrows made of light began to rain down on its target: the descending figure of the Simurgh. The attack lasted three minutes, a non-stop barrage of divine projectiles against a mockery of an angel. Once the attack ended, Queen was finally able to see the results.

It wasn’t a pretty sight.

The Simurgh’s wings were all destroyed, her skin blackened, her hair burned, with countless arrows sticking out all over her body. Fluids that seemed to be blood were seeping out of the wounds, although Queen could not be sure due to the distance. Despite the grievous injuries, the Simurgh was still floating in the air.

“How, she didn’t actually need the wings to fly,” Queen raised an eyebrow, “Fancy that.”

She notched another pair of arrows, deciding to use the anti-unit version of Phoebus Catastrophe. It was right before she could fire that the Simurgh disappeared into a wormhole. Seconds later, the Endbringer emerged from another wormhole, now about thirty miles away from the archer.

“The hell?!” Queen exclaimed, “No one said anything about her being able to do that.”
Her momentary pause was taken advantage of by the Simurgh, who was now telekinetically lifting countless boulders, building, cars, anything and everything else around. With a gesture, all these debris were thrown everywhere. Some went straight to Queen.

“I hate it when this fucking happens!”

Queen cursed as she began dodging everything thrown at her. She had to be more careful, since her current body doesn’t have the same durability as a Heroic Spirit. One wrong move and she’d be dead.

Good thing she has a trump card for that, one that made Atalanta such a formidable opponent.

“Go ahead, and I shall pass in front of you afterward like a squall,” she chanted, “Aesthetics of the Last Spurt!”

As if in auto-pilot, Queen began to adjust her movements. A step further here, a little pat of the hand there, a twirl around, a slight leaning forward, and the teenager began to avoid the barrage with ease. At the same time, she was able to get closer and closer to the Simurgh. It was rather fortunate to have all these floating debris around her. It made getting close much easier as Queen used the larger projectiles as her stepping stones.

She was in the process of shooting the Simurgh again when the Endbringer opened up another wormhole and disappeared through it. Instead of getting frustrated, Queen simple pointed her arrow at a different direction. Releasing it, the projectile flew straight through the Simurgh’s head as she emerged from her wormhole, ten miles away. The power of the shot was strong enough to pulverize half of the Endbringer’s head, but it seemed to not have any effect.

“Right,” Queen muttered, “the body’s fake. It’s the core I’d have to aim for.”

The Simurgh changed tactics. Instead of throwing debris at random and escaping through wormholes, the Endbringer began to create hundreds of thousands of wormholes, which she used to send through all the debris that she could control in all directions. She also began to scream, creating shockwaves that destroyed everything within a ten mile radius and creating more debris that was sent against Queen.

Normally, the scream was the Simurgh’s most potent weapon, turning anyone who listens to it long
enough into a walking tool of mankind’s destruction. Aside from that, it served as a means to open up the minds people for the Endbringer to read. But when it came to Queen, it had no effect at all. Despite using Archer’s power, she was still passively protected by Ruler’s own defensive mysteries. Her mind remained clear and unseen by the enemy.

There was no telling which wormhole would spit out projectiles first, and due to their sheer numbers, Queen was exposed to a constant barrage of attacks. Then again, she was currently using Aesthetics of the Last Spurt. As Archer’s Personal Skill, it allowed her to predict the movements of her opponent and create a counter to it, provided that the opponent moves first.

And Queen had been letting the Simurgh attack first.

For five minutes, Queen had been dodging projectiles heading towards her, as well as shooting down those that she couldn’t avoid. She was also getting herself into a good firing position, knowing that her opponent will make a tactical error. Whenever possible, she would fire several arrows at the Simurgh, damaging and distracting the Endbringer and using the opportunity to improve her positioning.

Finally, as the Simurgh sent through another barrage of debris against her, Queen discovered that the Endbringer would be stationary for seven seconds. For seven seconds, the Simurgh would be truly be exposed to an attack. Thus:

“Phoebus Catastrophe!”

This time, a single concentrated beam of light streamed down from the sky. It hit the Simurgh head-on and sent her crashing down to the ground. The beam continued its attack for a few minutes before dissipating. What remained of the Simurgh was a sorry heap of burned torso and stubs for limbs.

Landing on a nearby hill, Queen inspected her handiwork.

“Hmm, Lancer was right,” thought Queen to herself, “the Simurgh is susceptible to my attacks.”

She was about to turn away when she stopped, “Wait.”

Turning her head, she glanced at the Simurgh’s remains. What was important to note was a small sphere just below the chest area. It was the Endbringer’s core – the real target.
“I think this bitch’s dead,” she muttered, “But let’s check for a pulse.”

Certain of her mana supply, she sent another pair of arrows to the sky.

“Phoebus Catastrophe!”

A few minutes later, nothing was left of the Simurgh, including its core.

“No pulse,” Queen nodded to herself.

Belatedly, the armband she wore beeped, and a synthesized voice spoke:

“The Simurgh is dead, I repeat, the Simurgh is dead.”

_Cape Gathering and Recovery Zone_

_Canberra Rally Point_

2:31 p.m.

Tattletale stared.

That was the only thing she could do.

Ever since Queen walked forward to fight the Simurgh, everything she thought would happen didn’t pan out the way she thought it would. From the very start of the fight, which was conveniently captured on camera by one of Dragon’s tinkertech drones, she bore witness to something she thought she’d never see.

The possible death of an Endbringer.
When Queen fired those two arrows in the sky, Tattletale first thought it was a pathetic attempt to distract the Simurgh. It was after the rain of glowing arrows burned away the Endbringer’s wings that she realized that there was more going on.

She almost choked on her own spit when she saw the Simurgh open a wormhole in order to escape. There was no indication from previous engagements that such ability existed. Letting her power free for a bit, Tattletale’s head had begun to ache once more.

*Simurgh cannot see ???

*Simurgh cannot see ??? as a threat.

*Cannot counter non-existent threat.

*Damaged by non-existent attack.

*Cannot defend against non-existent attack

*Body damaged by ??? at source.

*Cannot access additional data from analytic engine hosts.

*Cannot formulate appropriate response.

*Combat capacity greatly reduced by ???

“Oh, shit…” she moaned, “Why is this happening to me again?”

It was when she was rubbing her head that she realized something. Glancing at Queen’s figure on-screen, Tattletale let her power free once more.

???

???

???

“So, she’s the reason for my blind spots,” she muttered.

On a whim, she decided to try her powers on Lancer as well. The woman in question was currently helping a hyperventilating Shadow Stalker sit down. Shockwave was frantically rubbing the back of her fellow Ward.
Just like what happened with Queen, Tattletale could not read Lancer as well. Odd. Two people whom she’s been unable to read. This was the first time that it ever happened to her.

“What’s going on?” the Thinker wondered.

“We should go now!” Alexandria called out, “Queen has given us an opening. We should take advantage of it!”

There was a chorus of agreement from the other capes as they began to assemble in their designated combat formation during Endbringer battles. They were about to move out when a shimmering dome formed above their heads and even covered the ground under their feet. Upon touching the dome and the ground, everyone realized that they could not get through. Even Shadow Stalker, in her breaker state, couldn’t get past it. At some distance, Strider was shaking his head at Legend, indicating that he cannot teleport as well.

Several of the random wormholes opened up and showered the gathered capes with huge rubble. They hit the barrier and simply slid down it. Even the resulting dust didn’t get past the dome.

“I’m sorry, everyone,” a voice called out, “I swore to keep you all safe and sound during this battle. Figured this is the best way to do so.”

Lancer stood tall, a glowing circle with strange writings below her feet. She gave everyone a sheepish smile.

“You did this?” Alexandria demanded, “This is inexcusable. We are in a middle of an Endbringer battle. Everyone needed to get out there and fight the Simurgh now!”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Lancer giggled, “Queen will be killing the Simurgh soon.”
“As if,” a famous voice retorted, “You need great power to defeat an Endbringer like the Simurgh.”

The gathered capes parted, allowing Eidolon to pass through. Resplendent in his green robes and glowing with power, he floated straight at Lancer.

“I demand that you drop whatever barrier you’ve set up,” he ordered, “We are all needed to fight the Simurgh.”

“And like I said,” Lancer said, “It’s unnecessary. In fact, there is no need to prove yourself with those so-called worthy opponents. After all, you’ve already shown how powerful you are.”

Eidolon glared at her, his glow flaring out even more against the darkening sky.

“If you do not drop your barrier,” he growled, “I will make you. And you won’t like it.”

Lancer snorted, “Ha, let’s see you try. I bet I can drop you with a wiggle of my fingers.”

“You really do want a fight, huh?” Eidolon began charging up his blaster power.

Seeing a battle about to break out, the rest of the nearby capes began to move away quickly. The only one not doing so was Lancer, who was cleaning her ear with a pinky finger. As Eidolon prepared to attack, Lancer wiggled her finger, like writing something in the air. And like a puppet with strings cut, Eidolon’s power and green glow winked out and he dropped unceremoniously to the ground, unconscious.

“Eidolon!” Alexandria screamed.

She charged at Lancer, throwing a punch straight at her face. The other cape simply tilted her head to avoid the hit. A kick had Lancer jumping away from the circle, which remained glowing. The exchange continued for a few tense minutes, with no side gaining a clear advantage.

“Really, Alexandria?” Lancer asked, “Fighting during an Endbringer Truce?”
“You started it,” Alexandria snarled, “You stopped us from helping fight the Simurgh, then you did something to Eidolon. You are the reason people will die!”

“Excuse me? What I did ensured everyone’s safety. Besides, I really don’t want anyone interrupting Queen when she kills the Simurgh.”

“What you’re saying is impossible,” Alexandria declared, “No one, except possibly Scion, is strong enough to take down an Endbringer on their own. Eidolon might, but right now, he’s unconscious.”

Just then, everyone’s armbands began to beep:

“The Simurgh is dead, I repeat, the Simurgh is dead,” Dragon’s voice was heard.

Alexandria’s face could not be seen, but there was no denying the smug look on Lancer’s face.

“You were saying?” the latter asked.

“Alexandria,” another familiar voice spoke out.

A hand clasped the woman’s shoulder. Glancing sideways, she realized that Legend had arrived.

“Eidolon’s fine,” he began, “Just unconscious. Right now, I need you with me to speak out about what just happened. The Simurgh is dead and Queen has left the area.”

“Are you sure it’s the Simurgh?” Alexandria asked.

“Our Thinkers ran the analysis,” he replied, “It’s a hundred percent confirmation. Not to mention that Queen solo’ed the kill. There’s going to be a lot to talk about.”

They both turned to Lancer, who was pouting.
“Man, just when I was about to see something good,” Lancer complained, “You and your pals just had to come barging in. I missed the chance to watch Queen kill the Simurgh. It would’ve been a beautiful sight, another sign that the girl’s about ripe for the picking.”

“You know about this?” Legend asked.

“Of course.”

“And Eidolon? What did you do to him?” Alexandria demanded.

“Just a simple spell to knock him out,” Lancer replied, “You can’t imagine just how nifty ancient runes can be when applied to the air.”

“Cut it out with your nonsense,” Alexandria snapped, “Just tell us what you did to him.”

“Fine,” Lancer pouted, “It was simple science, anyway. I changed the air around him to be pure carbon dioxide. He’s been so worked up by my goading he didn’t notice what I did. He got knocked out. It’s not my fault he assumed I’ll fight him head-on. That would be breaking my oath to Queen, then. Besides that, any attack of his that missed might hit others, and I can’t allow that to happen.”

“Is your oath to Queen that important to you?”

“It’s what defines me, Alexandria,” Lancer shrugged, “Then again, you might want to check on Eidolon when he wakes up. I don’t recall him acting all confrontational like that. Isn’t he usually the more level-headed between you two?”

“That’s none of your business!” Alexandria said.

“Alexandria,” Legend interrupted, “Now’s not the time. I need your help with the gathered capes.”

“But,” Alexandria turned to her teammate.

“No buts,” Legend said, “This fight is in uncalled for during the Truce. And Lancer only knocked
out Eidolon to prevent unnecessary injuries. Think about it.”

It was a valid argument. Looking at the attack Eidolon was charging, it was obviously a powerful blast meant to destroy a target. And it was powerful enough to also damage the surrounding area, including the bystanders. Come to think of it, Eidoron was acting strange. He wasn't usually that easy to goad, especially by a newbie cape.

“Fine, Legend,” Alexandria sighed, “Lancer, you can be sure that this isn’t…”

The Triumvirate cape trailed off in shock.

It was also the only time that Tattletale realized that Lancer was already gone. This should had been impossible, since the woman was right in front of them just a moment ago. Looking around, she also realized that the barrier had disappeared as well, weird glowing circle included. Her head began to ache again as she pondered over details that she never saw.

She really had no idea what had happened.

Australian War Memorial

Campbell, Canberra

2:47 p.m.

“Are you all right, Queen?”

Zelretch asked as both Queen and Lancer returned from the battle with the Simurgh.

“Oh, great,” Queen groaned, “Not you, too.”

“Well,” Zelretch began, “While you two were gone, I’d been thinking. Lancer made a good point, regarding the way you use your powers and your current disguise as a parahuman. Having a cape name that’s not connected to your class cards will help simplify matters.”

Actually, he got the inspiration in order to separate Taylor from her Ruler identity – and it’s implied
trip to martyrdom. Addressing Taylor as Queen would help create that important gap.

“And don’t I know it!” Lancer smiled.

“And anyway, how are you, Queen? Was the battle difficult?” the old man asked again.

“I’m fine,” Queen replied, “Actually, I had no idea that it was easy to kill an Endbringer. Had I known, I would’ve gotten rid of them from the start.”

“I told you, Queen,” Lancer smiled, “Endbringers are not a problem for us. As long as we have activated our cards, we have a sure way to deal with them.”

Queen frowned at Lancer.

“You do know that this will not change anything, right?” the teenager began, “I will still stop you from getting your hands on the Holy Grail.”

“Pfft,” Lancer snorted, “You can keep the Grail to yourself. I can assure you that neither I, Berserker, nor Avenger are interested in the Grail. What’s the point? We’re already getting our greatest wish.”

“And what’s that?” Queen felt she knew what the reply would be.

“A fight to the death with you,” Lancer smiled hungrily, “You have no idea how much we wanted to face you in battle. You have to realize that if there is anyone that should deserve to kill us, it would be you.”

The Servant of the Spear turned and began to walk away.

“I’ll be seeing you next time, Queen,” she paused, “By the way, Berserker will be paying her respects to you on Friday, next week. I supposed you’d be ready to face her by then. And the day will come, when we’ll have our own Duel. Now that would be a match made in heaven.”
“Well, that’s sort hell to me,” Queen shot back, “Considering who you are.”

“Hmm?”

“You’re the god damned Scatach, Queen of the Land of Shadows! Not to mention practically immortal. How the hell am I supposed to kill someone like you?”

“That’s the point!” Lancer giggled, “It would be the battle to end all battles. A duel between an unstoppable force and an immovable object.”

“Arrgh!”

“See you later, Queen.”

Lancer giggled again as she faded away in particles of blue light. Both Queen and Zelretch watched until she disappeared from their senses.

“What do you think of this Lancer, Zelretch?” Queen asked

“Worrying,” the Wizard Marshall replied, “The fact that Scatach became a Servant meant that humanity in the future had ended. That’s the only way the Land of Shadows would disappear and allow Scatach to become part of the Throne of Heroes. We don’t know how this version of Scatach will behave after that event. This isn’t normal.”

“There’s nothing normal in this Holy Grail War,” Queen pointed out, “The fact that the extra Servant Classes, including me, showed up is proof enough already.”

“Then again, the Throne of Heroes is a repository of all heroes past, present, and future,” Zelretch mused, “It’s possible that we’re seeing a Scatach from the future. It may be similar to a previous case that my apprentice encountered, one with an idiot Master and a sarcastic Archer. Still, this bodes ill for the destiny of humanity in this world, if the Lancer we have is indeed this dimension’s Scatach.”

“I won’t let that happen, old man,” Queen replied with conviction, “Even if it costs my life, humanity in this world will survive. I’ll see to that, destiny be damned.”
The magician smiled at the young girl. It was times like these that he felt so proud of her. All that remained was figuring out how to get her out of her suicidal thoughts.

“I’m sure you’ll find a way, dear,” Zelretch replied.

Hills Outside The City
Canberra, Australia
9:00 p.m.

Lancer alighted on one of the hills overlooking Canberra. Waiting for her there were two women. One was a teenager, lean and muscular, her body toned to combat perfection. The other was an older woman, with a motherly air about her. Both looked at the new arrival expectantly.


“Disappointing, Berserker,” Lancer replied, “She does not fear death.”

“Isn’t that a good thing,” the motherly woman replied, “Not fearing death will make her a formidable opponent. Someone who could truly face my power.”

“No, Avenger,” Lancer replied, “She does not fear death because she has nothing to live for. To embrace death, without protest or whimper, will make her unworthy to face our powers. She will fail in granting us the end we sorely desire.”

“I still don’t get it,” Berserker scratched her head.

“She does not fear death,” Lancer repeated, “She thinks it makes her strong. It makes her weak.”

“Why?”

“How can you move faster than possible, fight longer than possible, without the most powerful
impulse of the spirit? The fear of death.”

Lancer turned to teenager.

“She has faced death head on and has come back changed. What she needs now is something to give her value. Something that would make her realize just how important it is to live. Only then will she be able to face us at full power. Only then shall we experience a death match so glorious it would be the stuff of legends.”

“Whoa, Lancer, hold up,” Berserker winced, “That’s pretty heavy talk. What should we do then? I’m not good at motivational stuff.”

“Nothing,” Lancer looked back at the distant city lights, “The solution would not come from us. I could sense it, the gears of destiny turning once more. You’d be surprised at how simple the answer would be.”

“How simple?” Avenger inquired.

“She has no desire for glory, for honor, or for fame,” Lancer stated, “She does not even wish for monetary gain. A girl like her has very simple dreams. Like those of a simple village girl. And it’s in her dreams that she will find her will to live once more. Once she finds something to live for, when she finds the reason for existing, when she realizes that her life is worth keeping in the end, then fear will find her again.”

She sighed wistfully.

“And thus end this wretched existence of ours in this world.”

“Amen,” Berserker and Avenger replied in solemnity.

A moment of companionable silence passed between the three Servants.

“So, what do we do now?” Avenger finally asked.
“Berserker,” Lancer began, “I promised Queen that you would ‘pay your respects’ to her next week. I’m a woman of my word. Let’s make it happen. Whether you live or die, you will know if what I have said will come to pass.”

“And I’d like nothing less than that,” Berserker grinned, “I’d better give her my version of a hero’s welcome, hehe. This’ll be a Duel to die for.”

“Don’t forget to activate three of our disciples in the city,” Avenger advised, “It would do well for the Fellowship to keep those capes pre-occupied while you have your Duel.”

“Of course,” Berserker replied, “I’m sure it would be one magnificent battle to remember. Wonder how many glorious kills I’d be able to commit before the Duel?”
“Your performance was awful,” Atalanta chided her, “You kept aiming two centimetres off from the target. I had to keep compensating for it, and it increased your mana cost.”

“Hey, I told you already, I’m still in the middle of practicing,” she replied, “I wasn’t exactly expecting an actual archer to be Archer.”

“And what were you expecting with an Archer class card?” Atalanta raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, “Maybe someone with a gun? I had plenty of practice with that.”

“A gun?” Atalanta’s cat ears flattened in annoyance, “Do you have any idea how shameful a weapon that is for an archer? It doesn’t have class or style.”

“Hey, there’s this guy who’s got all the swords that he used as arrows,” she protested, “and another who’s got a virtual armory of stuff that he just throws at anyone that pissed him off. None of them are actual Archers.”

“Di immortales,” Atalanta groaned, “This is what happens when the appellation doesn’t match the application. Those two are an embarrassment to actual archers.”

“So, that means you’re also pissed off with that gunslinger?”

“No, he’s a child,” her tail twitched, “I’m okay with a child.”

“Uhm, I think they just called him Kid, but he’s not an actual kid.”

“You should have seen him at the Throne then,” Atalanta shook her head, “In any case, your battle with this Simurgh did provide an interesting perspective about your world and the people that wish to save it.”

“Hmm? What’s that?”
“Something’s really wrong if your capes, including your strongest ones, are incapable of destroying these Endbringers. I mean, it only took us a few shots and maneuvers to take her down. I was actually disappointed at how brief our battle was.”

“Could it be due to my magecraft and your capabilities?”

“I doubt it. Perhaps there’s something else to consider. I believe that the Endbringers are acting according to some plan. I don’t know, maybe they’re trying to achieve something.”

“Hmmn...”

“Another thing,” Atalanta added, "Looking at events all over the world, there seems to be a pattern. I fear a hidden actor is in play, apart from Zion, one you should beware of. In any case, you will need to up your training. With Ruler becoming available in a few days, switching between Class Cards rapidly may be key to your victory.”

“Yeah, and if my guess is right, Berserker would be my next opponent. This is gonna be a pain. I’m still having issues with Install, since the ritual takes time.”

“You will prevail, I’m sure of that. Just keep calm and focused. Use your head. Berserker’s Mad Enhancement may actually work to your advantage. You may also want to consider using your Include state, since you can rapidly switch powers without a ritual through that.”

“True. I’ll ask Jeanne once she gets back. I could probably think up some new strategies, too.”

Chapter 14: A Storm In The Horizon

Hebert Residence

Brockon Bay

9:00 a.m.

“Man, what a day it was. I just hope home’s better.”
Sighing, Taylor had just entered the house when she was tightly embraced by her father at the hallway.

“Taylor, thank God you’re all right,” Danny Hebert whispered.

“Dad…” Taylor was stunned.

When was the last time she was hugged like this? It was so long ago that she could hardly remember it. Still, having her father right here, right in front of her, hugging her like there was no tomorrow, was a sensation the teenager sorely missed.

“When the Endbringer sirens rang, I tried calling but I couldn’t reach you,” Danny said, “I was worried sick.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t get to the telephone,” Taylor lied, “I had rushed to the private shelter that Mister Zweinorg has under his house.”

“Well, it’s a relief that there’s someplace safe for you to go when the Endbringers attack.”

“But you did hear that the Simurgh was killed in Canberra, right?”

“Yeah,” Danny replied, “That was the second most shocking news I’ve got.”

“Huh?” Taylor frowned, “What’s the first?”

“You gave Hannah your Mom’s recipe book,” Danny began, “I was surprised when she served me meatloaf last night. And, god, it was exactly the way Annette prepared it. When I asked, she told me of what you did. She was really touched by your gesture.”

“I thought that, well, considering how things are,” Taylor stammered, “I thought it best to welcome her, finally. There’s the engagement to think about, after all.”
Her reply caught Danny off-guard.

“Okay,” he said, “What made you say that?”

“Dad,” Taylor rolled her eyes, “Remember Mister Chang, the jeweller? I clean his house part-time. He told me that you stopped by his shop to have the Hebert family ring cleaned. That’s why I knew that you’d be proposing to Hannah. I just wondered when you’d be telling me about this. I mean, I am your daughter, who will become Hannah’s step-daughter. The one whom you should be asking permission first.”

Danny stared at her, then face-palmed. Walking together into the living room, he groaned as he sank on the couch.

“Taylor, kiddo,” he sighed, “This is definitely something I planned to tell you, I swear. I just didn’t know how to do it. We rarely see each other. I mean, this is me proposing to someone who’s not your Mom. That’s all kinds of awkward with you.”

“Well, guess that’s to be expected,” Taylor shrugged, “We Heberts are really bad at expressing ourselves. Honestly, I think this is the longest conversation we’ve had as of late. I mean, I could count on my fingers the number of times we’ve actually been talking to each other just this year.”

“Oh god,” Danny face-palmed again, “This is the last thing I’d wanted to talk about with you. All I wanted is to let you know how worried I was. When Hannah was explaining things to me, about how you gave her your mother’s heirloom, there were so many thoughts running through my head. I almost thought that you were planning to kill yourself. I’m just glad you weren’t.”

It took Taylor some effort to school her expression. How was she supposed to tell her father that this was precisely what she was going to do? This was the only way to make sure that he stays alive in the end. Her internal conflict was interrupted when Danny kneeled in front of her.

“Taylor, promise me,” he said, “Promise me that you won’t do anything to yourself. I’ve already lost your mother. I don’t think I can take it if you’re gone as well. I know I haven’t been around. I haven’t talked much with you. I haven’t been the father you needed. And I am sorry. I’m really sorry for that. Please, let me make it up to you. No more next times. No more delays. Just, please, don’t leave me. I need you.”

Taylor swallowed hard. This was something she hadn’t prepared for. But, then again, this was
something that she had been sorely waiting for. A chance to be with her father. A chance to reconnect. A chance to be family again. Even with Hannah around. She could stand it, as long as her father was there.

Could she actually be with her father? If she was asked yesterday, then she’d definitely say no.

But to feel her father’s arms around her again. To be able to talk to him, for a longer period of time. To hear, from her own father’s lips, how much she was needed. It shook her to the core, like getting doused in ice-cold water. It set her feet to the ground again, forced her to think things through once more. She’s getting her deepest wish, and she knew what the answer was. There was no doubt about it. She’ll find a way, somehow.

It was her father’s request. Who was she to deny it?

“I promise.” Taylor replied, “But on one condition.”

“Name it,” Danny said promptly.

“I get to plan the proposal,” the teenager said, “Mom told me how you proposed to her. I do not want a post-bar fight scene or anything similar to that. You should update your style, Dad.”

Taylor treasured the look of shock on her father’s face, then starting giggling. The giggling turned into full-blown laughter when Danny joined in.

Yes, it was nice to be home.

PRT Arizona

Arizona

Three days later

“Director Tagg, your two o’clock has arrived,” his secretary announced through the intercom.

PRT Director James Tagg smiled. Adjusting his tie and spraying some cologne, he pressed reply:
“Send her in.”

The door opened and young woman, blond hair tied in a ponytail, entered the office. She smiled gently at the PRT director.

“Hello, Jay,” Emiliana Hoss greeted, “I hope I didn’t interrupt anything.”

“For you?” Tagg smiled, “You can never be an interruption, Em. I’m just glad to see you again.”

“Same here,” Emiliana smiled, “I just wanted to stop by before I reached Brockton Bay. It took me a while to schedule this trip, considering the countless holidays due to the Simurgh getting killed. Can’t skip the public festivities, you know.”

“Brockton Bay? That’s Piggot’s territory,” Tagg said, “Planning something there?”

“Just taking over the leadership in Medhall. There had been management issues, and since our family owned the parent company, it was decided that I should replace Max Anders as CEO. And considering the news that Queen is based in that city, our family thought it best that I be the new face of the company. Being a woman may make the Hopebringer more receptive to our family’s offer of cooperation. PR boost for us, more resources for our new Hero.”

“Ah, you never change,” Tagg smiled, “Family first.”

“And I could clearly see that you’re still the same,” Emiliana said, “Duty first.”

“Is Karla well?” Tagg cleared his throat, “The last time we met, the talk wasn’t exactly smooth.”

Emiliana grimaced, “Well, you know how mother is. I’m just glad I could get away from her and spend even just a short time with you. Despite everything my family’s been telling me, spending my time with you in Switzerland was the best thing that could ever happen.”

“And I’m grateful for that,” Tagg smiled, “I learned so much from you there.”
“Oh?” Emiliana smirked, “I didn’t know I was such a teacher to you. Did you actually learn anything from me?”

“Might makes right,” Tagg replied, “You showed me just how important it is to use overwhelming power, authority, privilege, hell, anything that could give you an edge over the unruly and the criminal. Switzerland was a mess back then. You showed me how to solve such a mess.”

“I was just doing my job while I was still with the UN military forces.”

“And yet, it was you that stabilized the situation there. You made peace possible in that country. You showed me how to become the leader my people need to stop the chaos.”

“You flatter me,” she batted her eyelashes.

“You deserve it,” Tagg leaned forward, “I wouldn’t be who I am today without you. I wouldn’t be able to bring peace to my country without your guidance. So, thank you. For everything.”

Emiliana gently caressed Tagg’s hand on the table.

“I wish I could offer you more than my friendship,” she said wistfully, “It’s just, huh, family.”

“I know,” Tagg reassured her, “and I don’t blame you. I don’t blame any of you. Duty calls, that I can understand perfectly. It’s basically what I do here in the PRT.”

“Yes, speaking of the PRT,” Emiliana changed the subject, “I’ve been hearing a lot of good things about your Fantastic Five. Although there were those wondering why they didn’t show up in Canberra.”

“Two words: Slaughterhouse Nine,” Tagg replied, “The group made an incursion in one of our major towns when the sirens rang, but still continued their attack. The F5 decided to go after the S9 first. By the time they managed to drive the villains off, we found out that this Queen had already killed the Simurgh.”
“Well, at least one of the Endbringers are gone,” Emiliana shrugged, “Less problems for you to think of. I just can’t believe that, with five Protectorate capes, you were able to ensure that no villains existed in this state. That’s quite an achievement.”

“Not really,” Tagg shrugged, “I’ve got PRT troopers here who embody the principle of being ‘the best of the best of the best’. None of them, in all my time as their director, have been killed in the line of duty. Not to mention that I’ve got the best Wards any PRT director could have.”

“Ah, the Trinity, right? Word is that these three youths are in line for replacing the Triumvirate. Although, there’s also word that Alexandria is eyeing someone else to take her place.”

“You mean Shockwave?” Tagg scoffed, “She’s nothing compared to Hippolyta. My Ward is worthy of replacing Alexandria, not some teen who only knows how to look pretty.”

“That’s not the word I’m getting. I also heard that Hippolyta has issues with her powers. I mean, being able to use the powers of all capes within a mile? That’s certainly going to cause a lot of stress on her mind and body.”

“Hippolyta is military-trained. She can handle anything thrown at her. That’s how confident I am with her ability. That’s the same confidence I have with Samson and Hassan.”

“Yes, the other members of the Trinity,” Emiliana leaned back, “Samson, I can understand. Flight, invulnerability, x-ray vision, super speed, super senses, laser eyes, yeah, that’s a Brute that can end any Brute. But Hassan? I’m sorry but I don’t really see how a Tinker specializing in sniper rifles can be Triumvirate material, let alone leader of the Trinity.”

“That’s because you don’t know the truth, Em,” Tagg leaned closer and whispered, “This didn’t come from me, but Hassan’s true specialty is cape-killing projectiles. Naturally, he’d be drawn to making guns. And let me tell you, as long as Hassan sees a cape using their powers, he can design a bullet that can kill them.”

“Really?” Emiliana was shocked, “But the implications are immense. You do know what this means, right?”

“Why do you think I made him leader of the Trinity?” Tagg raised an eyebrow, “I needed someone who could put down anyone that disobeys me. Hassan is loyal to me. He’ll do anything I ask of him. Like the rest of the Trinity. After all, orphans make the best agents.”
“Well, if you put it that way…”

“Anyway, about the Fantastic Five…”

Four hours later…

Emiliana sat back on the chair inside her private plane, now on her way to Brockton Bay. Her visit to James Tagg revealed a lot of things that would make the seventh variation of Plan Delta successful. All Das Reinblut had to do was to remove Emily Piggot and ensure that Tagg replaced her.

She look down at the magic circle on her table, displaying an identical image of her, except for the braided blonde hair.

“So, how’s Tagg, sister?” Laura Hoss asked.

“Oh, you know how he is,” she smirked, “Still delightfully naïve to the ways of women like me. It’s kind of fun stringing along a man like him. His lusts are so pent up. In just a few minutes, I’ve had him confessing his deepest, darkest sins to me, like a sinner to a priestess.”

“Well, you are one,” her sister retorted, “Although I still have no idea how you managed that.”

“It’s all in the cards, sister.”

“I still find it unbelievable that Ruler was able to kill the Simurgh by just using the Include state of Archer,” Laura commented, “There was no indication of such power with Henrietta.”

“Henrietta always had issues with the Archer class card,” Emiliana pointed out, “Mother did mention that some of the adjustments made during the cloning process did not take, hence the lower firepower that Henrietta could deploy with Archer even with Install.”

“And the Simurgh?” Laura said, “Even you had to admit that it’s impossible for Ruler to avoid being seen by the Endbringer.”
“I’ve always been of the opinion that the Archer class is a bad match-up for the Simurgh,” Emiliana shrugged, “Besides, from my understanding, the Simurgh had been unprepared to deal with Atalanta, a hero known for hunting dangerous beings. The Endbringer knew there was a threat, but was unable to identify who the threat was. Probably didn’t know how she’s being attacked. And with how short the battle was, the Endbringer most likely failed to utilize any of its more powerful abilities properly.”

Another magic circle appeared, this time displaying another identical sister, one with pixie hair.

“Are we really going to activate Plan Delta?” Tiffany Hoss frowned, “Tagg is a loose cannon. One wrong move, and he could put our entire operation against Ruler in jeopardy.”

“Now, now, Tiffany,” Emiliana calmed her sister, “Don’t worry. I’ve got him wrapped around my little finger. He won’t do anything against us until it’s too late.”

“Still, this is a bad plan,” Tiffany insisted, “Having all of us in one city’s just putting targets on our backs. Not to mention that we’re leaving Bea to manage our cloning facilities. She’s not even Beatrice! We’ve also got to deal with Empire Eighty-Eight, all because we had to take over Medhall. Mother, please, let’s not go through with this.”

A magic circle was added to the two, now displaying another identical woman, only thirty years older. Karla Hoss was still engrossed over the tablet she was perusing.

“Mother?” Tiffany repeated.

“Huh, Tiffany?” Karla looked up, “Ah, sorry, I was a bit preoccupied.”

“What happened?” Emiliana asked, “You’re not usually like this in our meetings.”

“I was just reviewing some of the acquisitions that Laura did for us, as well as her handling of all our business assets, which included our plans to expand into Brockton Bay.”

“Are- are you doubting my skills, Mother?” Laura was hurt.
“No, of course not, dear,” Karla reassured her daughter, “if anything, I can trust your greed to see us through. I simply had a nagging thought that’s starting to become worrisome the more I look at things in a different angle.”

“What’s that?” Tiffany inquired.

“Remember Malcolm Collins?” Karla began, “We purchased shares in his company so that we could set up a branch in Brockton Bay for Plan Alpha. Then this divorce lawsuit came up. Normally, this wouldn’t be a problem, but his wife is against the expansion. And now, all four of his children, who hold the majority shares, are siding with their mother as well.”

“What can I say?” Laura shrugged, “Shit happens. Never thought the man was a pedophile.”

“It’s also the same story for Plans Beta and Epsilon, all which required us to set up branches of our cover companies in Brockton Bay. In fact, everything that seemed to go to hell with our plans over the last five years all follow a pattern: no opening of jobs for the unemployed, no neutralization of established parahuman gangs in the city, no investments that would bring more money in, no welfare or charity operations for the impoverished citizens, etc.”

“Wait, am I thinking what you’re thinking, Mother?” Emiliana asked.

“That there’s someone working behind the scenes to hinder us?” Karla finished, “Yes, that’s what I had in mind. What’s interesting to note here is that anything that supports the status quo in Brockton Bay, including activities that involve empowering the parahuman gangs there, remain relatively untouched.”

“It could be Ruler,” Tiffany suggested.

“No, the revelations made it clear,” Karla shook her head, “Ruler’s card holder only appeared two years ago. This problem had started way before that. Had I not been looking carefully at our records right now, I wouldn’t notice the trend. It’s all very subtle, which left Plan Delta as the only viable plan that we could deploy.”

“So, what does that mean for us?” Laura asked.
“Nothing,” Karla replied, “You sisters are going to Brockton Bay, take over Medhall, influence the PRT, and try to flush Ruler out without revealing yourselves. Bea will remain in control of our cloning plants. Even though she’s not Beatrice, she’s still enough to produce more Ubermensch. And no waking up Beatrice, am I clear? As for me, I shall be hunting down whoever is making a mess with our plans.”

The Hoss Matriarch smiled gently.

“And I will make them regret the day they were born. I shall bring them misfortunes beyond compare. That is the punishment for anyone that sins against Das Reinblut.”

Director’s Office

PRT ENE Brockton Bay

Same day

Emily Piggot frowned as she surveyed the people around her office.

Standing on her right was Armsmaster, hands clasped behind his back. Both of them were staring at the three teenagers who answered the director’s summons sans their costumes: Emma Barnes, Sophia Hess, and Madison Clements.

“So let me get this straight, Sophia,” Piggot said, “You wanted to be confined at the Brockton Bay General Hospital’s Psychiatric Care Unit because you’re, what, having severe panic attacks? Why am I getting this only now? Doctor Yamada did not report anything the last time you had a session with her.”

“I’m sorry, Director,” Sophia said, “It’s just that, I- I’m…”

The dark-skinned teenager began to hyperventilate, her eyes losing focus as it seemed to recall something horrifying.

“Sophia, relax,” Emma gave her a reassuring squeeze, “Just breathe, just breathe…”

Madison was staring at the scene in shock.
“Hey, Emma, you said none of you got into an Endbringer battle,” she pointed out. “So, why is Sophia acting like she’s having war shock?”

“None of us got into battle,” Emma confirmed, “Queen dealt with the Simurgh all on her own.”

“Yes, I’d also like your input on that,” Piggot said, “But right now, I want to know why is Sophia, of all people, requesting psychiatric treatment. Not to mention that she’s seems to be in a panic attack in front of me.”

“Oh, god,” Sophia moaned, “She’s worse than I thought… she’s worse than I thought…”

“Who?”

“Queen, or Ruler,” Sophia replied after a long pause, “She’s the scariest cape I’ve ever known.”

“Why?”

Sophia swallowed, “Glastig Uaine.”

Hearing the reply, everyone in the room stiffened.

“Are you certain?” Armsmaster asked, looking at her sharply.

“Her bow and arrows,” Sophia replied, “Those were the same weapons that Archer used against me. Queen didn’t have that power until after she’s killed Archer.”

“Archer?” Piggot quirked an eyebrow, “When did this happen?”

“At Franklin Nature Park. She’s the reason why Franklin Mountain became Franklin Valley.”
“You never said anything about that in your report,” Piggot narrowed her eyes.

“I didn’t know how to tell you about it,” Sophia stammered, “She’s no ordinary cape. And I had no idea about Queen getting Archer’s power until Canberra”

“This is bad, Director,” Armsmaster said, “If Queen possess the same ability as Glastig Uaine, we may very well have an unwinnable war in our hands.”

“There was this Lancer woman,” Sophia continued, “She said that Queen’s not exactly like Glastig Uaine. One merely takes other’s powers and gives it to herself. The other regains the powers that seemed to have been taken from her.”

“Some kind of Trump ability then? Granting of powers then killing the possessors to get them back?” Armsmaster asked.

“Let’s go back to Franklin Nature Park,” Piggot said, “There’s nothing in your report about your encounter with Archer. Care to tell us what really happened this time, Sophia?”

The teenager swallowed again. This time, she began to recount the events that occurred at the park. Armsmaster maintained his position, no doubt using his built-in lie detector to verify her truthfulness. Piggot maintained a stoic expression until after Sophia finished, when she sighed.

“You really do know how to create a mess for me, don’t you?” Piggot glared at Sophia, “Then again, your omissions are merely the tip of the iceberg I just discovered.”

“M-ma’am?” Sophia was puzzled.

“I had an interesting conversation with your handler, as well as Principal Blackwell,” Piggot leaned on her chair, “While I was pleased with the positive reports that I’ve been receiving, I noticed that there was too many positive reports. Practically all of it. And the way the two were denying that you’ve done any wrongdoing had made me suspicious.”

“There was a discrete investigation,” Armsmaster said, “And we’ve discovered a series of bullying activities that you’ve committed along with Emma and Madison.”
“Mostly targeted at one person, which is why I did not include Miss Militia here, even though she should be,” Piggot added, “You three have been attacking Taylor Hebert, the only daughter of Daniel Hebert.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Emma stepped forward, “But it’s all my fault. It was my idea. Sophia and Madison merely followed me. I convinced them-.”

“Stop right there, Emma,” Piggot interrupted, “I know what you’re doing. You know that I know about your virtual immunity to prosecution. I could have you thrown to prison and the Chief Director will simply set you free in secret and transferred to another city. That I will not allow. Brockton Bay is limping already as it is. We need every available cape to stabilize the city. But that doesn’t mean that Sophia and Madison will be scot-free.”

“I’ll take responsibility, Director,” Sophia said, “I know what I’ve done, and I’m truly sorry for it. I understand the stipulations of my probation, and I know the penalties for its violation.”

“Same here, ma’am,” Madison added, closing her eyes, “I had every chance to report what Emma and Sophia were doing, but failed to do so. It’s my fault for listening to Emma.”

“I still stand by what I said, Director,” Emma declared, “I am at fault. I wilfully bullied and intimidated Taylor Hebert in school. I turned practically everyone against her, using the influence of my civilian identity. I have no excuse for this.”

“But, why?” Armsmaster asked, “And Miss Hebert allows you to get away with it?”

“I’m sorry, so sorry, sir, ma’am,” Emma simply said, “I tried to fix a mistake, but I made it worse. And Taylor’s been keeping quiet about it. I’m not sure why, but she is.”

“Which is a blessing, in a way,” Piggot frowned, “Do you have any idea just who Danny Hebert is? He may be the hiring manager of the Dockworkers’ Union, but he’s their de facto leader. And he’s got strong ties with every union here in the city. Just one phone call and he could cripple the whole of Brockton Bay. Not to mention his temper is legendary. I wouldn’t be surprised if he showed up with a baseball bat and started attacking everyone here. Not to mention the political shit storm that would occur once news get out that three Wards are involved in bullying a civilian. Heads will roll, I assure you.”

The three teenagers lowered their heads in shame. Seeing that, the director sighed again in
frustration.

“Which makes not prosecuting you officially harder to swallow,” she said.

Emma, Sophia, and Madison snapped their heads up in surprise.

“The Youth Guard will have my hide if I so much as write a draft to process Sophia’s imprisonment while she’s undergoing psychiatric therapy, which I’m required to grant the moment it was requested. No need to explain why Emma’s off-limits. Madison, on the other hand, is just basically an accessory. Not serious enough to get her suspended, nor send her to juvie, but enough to get her reprimanded, perhaps transferred to another city. Again, I’m against anyone leaving the city.”

She raised her hands in defeat.

“Which means filing a report about your actions will only result in getting the senior members of the Protectorate, as well as the heads in the PRT, punished. And let me ask you three this: do we deserve that kind of hell because of your idiocy? Do you think that we should be removed from our posts because of this stupidity of yours? Because that’s exactly what’s going to happen when this gets out.”

Three heads shook ‘No’.

“Precisely. Which is why I’ll have you three benched for the foreseeable future. No patrols, no public engagement, no activities whatsoever. Until there is a need, none of you will even be allowed to wear your costumes. All three of you will wait until your actions have been thoroughly examined and an appropriate internal response is formulated. Dismissed!”

The three Wards walked out of the office in a subdued manner. Once the door has closed, Piggot painfully groaned.

“Director,” Armsmaster started, “Your vitals started to become erratic. Perhaps we should get you to the infirmary?”

“No, thank you, Colin,” Piggots waved it away, “It’s just the side-effect of my new drugs. A little more pain is a small price to pay if it meant not going through dialysis anymore.”
She sighed again in frustration.

“Christ, this situation has totally gone FUBAR,” she gritted her teeth, “Once word gets out, we’ll be in trouble. Of all people, those three just had to pick on the daughter of Danny Fucking Hebert. With his successful revival of the ferry, not to mention the public goodwill he’s earned, he can create a storm that will bring us all down. We need to proceed carefully.”

“We’re really not going to file a report on the three?” Armstrong inquired.

“I wish,” Piggot snorted, “Doing that would only result on those three getting transferred out. I know the Chief Director. And I also know my fellow directors. They’ll be using any excuse to get their hands on even just one of them. We’re not being pressured to implement the Tagg method here thanks to you and those three being here.”

“And the Heberts?”

“That’s a quagmire that needed to be approached carefully,” Piggot became pensive, “We’ve only got a general picture of things. This will require a more in-depth investigation. We might have to approach the younger Hebert first. Discretely, of course. As far as we know, she has no idea that the people bullying her are Wards. We’ll figure things out from there. Remember, this is a very delicate situation. One wrong move and it will be chaos all over again.”

“And Miss Militia?”

“We’ll tell her once we get all the details, so nothing for now. And I’ll tell her personally. If there’s any backlash, I’ll take it. Sophia’s handler is my responsibility. I never suspected that woman to be like this. She had been such an effective officer.”

“I believe this is my responsibility, Director,” the head of the Protectorate spoke, “I failed to monitor Sophia’s activities personally and instead relied on the reports of the two people who should have spoken the truth.”

“I suppose we’ll share the burden, then,” Piggot grimaced, “We might have to take a closer look at Blackwell’s finances as well. I suspect that she’s been misusing the funds we’ve given her.”
“Understood.”

There was silence for a few moments in the office.

“Hmm, Archer…” Piggot murmured.

“Ma’am?”

“Armsmaster, what does an archer specialize in?” Piggot asked a seemingly nonsensical question.

“Long-range projectiles, particularly with a bow and arrow,” Armsmaster replied promptly.

“How about a lancer?”

“Long-range melee combat, particularly with spears or halberds.”

“And a ruler?”

“Leadership, or tactical command of troops,” the Tinker became puzzled, “What were you considering, ma’am?”

“I just remembered, when Queen formally introduced herself,” Piggot answered, “She said she was Ruler. At first, we thought that this was her cape name. What if it isn’t? What if she was giving you her role? This raises some disturbing implications.”

“What is it?”

“There are more of them out there,” the director declared, “Each with their own specialty. I don’t know who they are, but I have a feeling that we’ll all know about them soon enough. And Queen, I’m sure, will be at the forefront of it.”
“Perhaps it’s her nature?” Armsmaster suggested, “After all, she appeared in conflicts that were usually giving us a hard time. Not to mention that the last one involved killing an actual Endbringer.”

“Yes, that is another concern as well,” Piggot leaned back, “How do we approach someone like that? I’ve just had a meeting with the Chief Director. She wants us to recruit Queen into the PRT, no matter what. I don’t know about you, but forcing someone who took down the Simurgh in just a few shots to join your group borders on stupidity.”

Armsmaster’s lips thinned.

“True, that may not be a good idea, Director,” he said, “We hardly know anything about her, including the particulars of her powers. She’s also unwilling to come with us those times we were able to talk to her. Convincing or forcing her to join us may just become an exercise in futility.”

He gestured at his robotic arm to emphasize his point.

“Exactly what I was thinking when I was given the task,” Piggot replied, “I still love my limbs, thank you very much.”

“What do we do then?”

“Wait and see,” Piggot sighed, “That’s all we could do. We wait and see. Sooner or later, Queen will show up. When that happens, I want Miss Militia on site immediately. She may be able to hold a better conversation with Queen, establish rapport. We’ll move from there.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

New Emperor’s Palace
Chinese Union-Imperial
8:00 p.m.

“Mei, what is the meaning of this?” Shen Yu entered the opulent office and then slammed the newspaper he carried onto the table.
“The meaning of what?” Mei Gong looked up in curiosity.

“Read the headlines,” Shen Yu shot back.

Mei picked up the paper and began to read the contents. Her eyebrows widened in surprise.

“Do you understand what’s going on?” Shen Yu asked, “The person we’re targeting is someone who could kill an Endbringer! I don’t know about you, but I have doubts that our current line-up in the Yangban has the capacity to deal with someone like that.”

With a snort, Mei threw the paper down and looked at the strategist.

“Come on, my friend,” Mei began, “Do you really think I haven’t considered that possibility? I’ve got plans for that. 731 Global Traders is not just an organization aimed at dominating the world economy. We’re also an organization that aims to stop anyone that threatens the Empire.”

“And this Queen?”

“Just a small hiccup in our plans, nothing to be worried about. And she’s my group’s target, not yours. I’ve got something good to deal with her.”

“How?”

“Let’s put it this way,” Mei smiled, “If you can make God bleed, the people will cease to believe in him. And there will be blood in the water. And the sharks will come. The truth, all I have to do is sit here and watch as the world will consume her.”

“Hmm, it seems that you’ve been thinking of something.”

“The secret lies in knowing Queen’s real identity,” Mei pointed out, “Once we know who she really is, a hundred tactics could be devised to bring her down. An unprepared cape is a dead cape.”
“Ah, yes,” Shen Yu smiled, “that is true.”

The two leaders conversed for a few minutes more until a mollified Shen Yu left Mei’s office. After the door has closed, three hooded figures emerged from the shadows. One of them, displaying a buxom figure, stepped forward.

“I sensed your annoyance even in my chambers, dear,” she said, “what got your panties in a twist?”

“Take a look, Kin,” Mei leaned back on her chair as she threw the paper at the speaker.

Looking at the page, the three figures ignored the headline and gaped at one of the pictures on display.

“Is that?” Claire Park began.

“I believe she is,” Mako Arashi replied.

“That bitch!” Kin Uzushima snarled, “Lancer’s breaking the agreement, dear.”

“No, she isn’t,” Mei sighed, “All we agreed on was not to hinder or help each other. There was nothing about helping Ruler. Besides, the help was in killing the Simurgh, not attacking us.”

“You seem to know her well, Mei-sama,” Claire said.

“I do, in fact,” Mei admitted, “Lancer’s always been a whimsical character. One who simply goes with the flow in search of her dream battle. It’s practically become an obsession of hers for a century already.”

“Wait, a century?” Mako started, “She’s been alive that long?”

“Yeah,” Kin grimaced, “I tried killing her many times but she always drives me away. I really hate it when she gives me that smug look every time we meet.”
“She, as well as her fellow card holders in that church of theirs, have a unique problem,” Mei took over, “She’s been Lancer for the last hundred years, because she couldn’t un-Install.”

“Then how was she able to sustain herself?” Claire asked, “The Install state consumes a lot of mana.”

“Why do you think she and her cohorts are so focused on that ‘glorious kill’ whatever idea?” Kin snorted, “They’ve been taking mana from the people they’ve killed. Considering the number of battles and wars all over the world that we’ve suspected they’re involved in, they’ve got quite a smorgasbord by now.”

“Anyway, this isn’t important,” Mei changed the subject, “There’s going to be a change of plans.”

Her three companions looked at her expectantly.

“Kin, I need you to go with Mako and Claire to Brockton Bay,” Mei began, “Get in touch with our agents there. It’s time for us to initiate the Ten-Year Victory. It’ll take some time for it to gain momentum, but once it does, it could not be stopped anymore. I trust that you will implement it properly.”

“Oh, you can be sure about that, dear,” Kin smiled wickedly, “Watch me, this’ll be a performance to remember.”

“Claire, you will not attack Ruler directly,” Mei said, “Trim down the PRT and Protectorate instead. Brockton Bay is an ideal entry point for the Traders to use, as well as the exit point when the Yangban takes Lung back. We have a cape that our agents have successfully brainwashed. Use her skills to the maximum. Ruler will show up, no doubt, but as long as she’s facing a cape without any of us around, she’s stuck in her human form, thus susceptible to cape attacks. Focus on causing as much damage as you can to the city infrastructure.”

“Understood, Mei-sama,” Claire bowed.

The Chinese woman turned to the youngest member of their group.
“Mako, your orders remain the same,” she said, “Neutralize Lung, kill your target, gain access to his network, and utilize the information to be obtained according to our plan. But your time-table has been shortened. You have three months instead of one year to get the data.”

“I will still succeed in the task, Mei-sama,” Mako bowed, “Leave it to me.”

The night went on as the four card holders continued to plot the downfall of Ruler.

It was a productive meeting.

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