What Rains You Bring

by LittleBlackGoldfish

Summary

At the lowest point in her life, someone reaches out to Taylor Hebert from across the boundary lines of space and time and all reality. Someone who knows what it means to persevere through guts and effort against all odds, and thankfully this time it's not an alien hellbent on sucking the corpses of infinite worlds dry in the birth pangs of its progeny.

Notes

This is a complete work; originally posted elsewhere, and finished in March of 2016 I'm deciding to put it up on AO3 just so all fan works are in one place (well all the ones that I still have the original copies of). There are parts of this that I'm immensely proud of and part i'm not so satisfied with, part that I wasn't even that satisfied with when I wrote them, but I'm also no longer interested in the story I was trying to tell enough to do a rewrite.

I started writing this in response to another piece with essentially the same premise (sort of), that I felt didn't touch on the stuff I thought would be really interesting, that said I quite enjoyed that original piece and think it did some things better than I did; it is also on AO3 so please check out the fic that inspired this. I'll post a chapter or two every couple of days, fixing what minor errors I catch when I glance over it but foregoing any real editing.

Enjoy, however much you can.

- Inspired by Hope Through Overwhelming Firepower by fadingMelody
Whatever I expected on my first night out as a cape, it wasn’t to be facing one of Brockton Bay’s caped gang members. I had expected to face some unpowered gang members, kick a little butt, and maybe take a little of the garbage off the streets of my city. Maybe if I hadn’t taken a right back at the intersection three blocks back, or if I had started a few minutes earlier in the night, or if I had done any of a dozen other things differently I wouldn’t be in this mess now.

As powers went Oni Lee maybe wasn’t the scariest guy out there, according to his Parahuman Online wiki page he could teleport and leave a temporary clone of himself behind, but he had a rumored single-minded focus, loyalty, and willingness to follow orders which was terrifying for the potential damage he could cause with just a little bit of creativity. If the other stories about him using his clones as suicide bombers were any indication, he had that bit of creativity.

Knives and the like, which seemed to be his preferred weapons I could take; the tests I’d been conducting over the last month and a half proved at least that. Kitchen knives, glass, and jagged pieces of metal had all failed to draw blood, blunt force and the small flames I was willing to test myself against had similarly failed to affect my flesh. But grenades? Guns? I couldn’t be sure there wasn’t some threshold after which whatever durability my power granted me would just give up and then I didn’t want to think about the possible ramifications. Worse, without the pain responses that were natural to warn me when I was hurt, I was more than a little worried I’d do worse damage to myself just by continuing to fight when I should run. Unfortunately, against someone like Oni Lee, running was easier said than done.

I still couldn’t quite believe I hadn’t recognized him from my original hiding spot in the alley across the street; granted the shadows and the bodies of the gang members had hidden the details of his clothes and he’d had his typical demon mask off when I first spotted the huddle of gang members. All I had seen was four ABB gangsters gathered at the corner, looking suspiciously like they were planning something. Still, I felt incredibly stupid for not putting the pieces together before I made a ruckus and got the group’s attention.

It was a little too late to be regretting my choices at this point.

I was still a little in the shadows, a street light across the street being the only source of illumination in the immediate area and my costume; not that a hoodie and sweatpants really amounted to much of a costume, served to keep my face mostly obscured. If I could just get away, make a break for it and lose them for a little bit, I was reasonably sure I would make it out of this none the worse for the wear. But, I had to get away first, and it wasn’t looking like Oni Lee and his thugs were in a cooperative mood.

Lee said something I couldn’t make out and his men started spreading out to cut off my escape routes, while the teleporter himself hung back with half his attention on a building down the street. He’d been gesturing to it earlier.

I wanted nothing more than to take off, but they were simply too close for me to lose them quickly.

And, maybe I wanted to test myself a little too.

Whatever they must have thought of me; teenage girl stepping out of the shadows and yelling at them, I knew that I had to catch them off guard, had to surprise them. Even in Brockton Bay, a city with one of the highest parahuman to human ratios in the United States, the chances of actually
running into someone with powers out on the street was low. If I was lucky they might think I was a new Ward and retreat before backup could arrive, but with my costume as it was I didn’t think that possibility rated highly in their estimation. Besides they could probably always call for their own backup; which had the distinct possibility of including Lung. That was if he wasn’t already somewhere nearby.

So I did what was hopefully the unexpected thing and charged.

It was odd how quiet everything was; I moved first, but the thugs didn’t waste much time in charging either, both of us silent except for the slapping of our shoes on the pavement. One of the three had been closer and was a little faster than his fellows, maybe trying to prove his worth, he came at me swinging a knife.

I ducked under his swing, and still moving slammed my fist into his stomach. The upward angle drove my strike into his diaphragm. Not much more than five and a half feet tall with a somewhat stocky build, his shirt rode up as his body was lifted by the force of the hit, revealing the elastic band of his boxers and the grip of a handgun stuck in his pants. He flew backwards.

He was shorter than I was but with he had to be heavier than me, so apparently I had some super strength too which didn’t make sense because I had taken a few experimental shots at a makeshift punching bag I had strung up in the basement with some cushions I found and the results had been spectacularly unspectacular. So why was I now punching way above my weight? Adrenaline?

Possibly, but if so, then it wasn’t really reliable and that made me nerv-

I didn’t have time to fully consider it as his two friends had gotten close. The one on my right, largest of the three of them, made to grab me. I scrambled out of his reach, and unfortunately right towards the second thug; he decided to stab me, aiming roughly for my spleen. I spun, sweeping my leg out and sending him falling backwards and then reversed the motion and slamming him in the side of the head with my fist.

Something impacted the back of my head.

Then someone screamed.

The bulkier gangster was clutching his hand and looking at me like he wanted to kill me, which considering he had just been making an actual attempt was a little strange..

I was about to go for the knockout blow when someone grabbed me from the either side and suddenly there was Oni Lee going for my throat with a very large knife while two clones held me in place. He was fast enough that I didn’t have enough time to really do anything before he was wrenching my head back and trying to saw at my jugular with his knife. I swung my foot up into his crotch, making him drop his knife and grab himself. As I was bringing my foot back and down I slammed it into one of the feet of the clone on my right, he grunted but failed to let go like they do on tv.

Luckily the clones started disintegrating a split second later.

I heard a loud crash behind me, but my body was already in motion and I thought I felt the whizzing of something flying past me.

SHIT.

He’d escalated from knives to a gun as quickly as I’d feared he would.
The same pattern repeated a few times, each time the shot came from a wildly different angle and each time my body was in motion before I was entirely sure which direction he was coming at me from.

Suddenly Oni Lee was behind me, reaching for something for something attached to his vest.

I struck out hard at his head with my elbow twice.

Something snapped. Down the street a little a figure appeared and clutched at his face.

I struck out twice more in quick succession and the clone’s head snapped back at an ugly angle before dissolving in ash.

Another clone, blood smeared across his lower face, appeared in front of me, and again I was already moving; kicking out with my foot this time. I caught him in the side, felt definite give under the impact, and watched him tumble to the pavement a few feet away. Something metallic glittered through the air in his wake.

I was already sprinting in the opposite direction when the grenade went off with a resounding boom. A wave of pressure and heat swept over me, whipping a few loose strands of hair around my face as had to be gravel picked up by the explosion pelted my back. Once the wave had passed I was immediately searching for the next attack. A crater marked where his last clone had suicided, maybe ten feet away but there was no sign of him. I didn’t think he’d died for real, he must have figured I was more trouble than I was worth and split, leaving two of his men lying on the ground.

I took a moment to check myself for injuries and found myself thankfully intact, then I checked on the two thugs. No major injuries on either of them, thankfully the fight had carried me and Oni Lee far enough away from them that nothing had happened to them when he’d tried that last tactic. Now that I was getting a moment or two to relax, the reality of what had just happened was hitting me. I’d stabbed, and even though I knew there was really any chance of that hurting me it was still scary, but worse I’d been shot at and though I’d somehow managed to dodge it all and outrun the grenade blast, none of that made me feel better. Tonight luck had been on my side in a huge way, but if I was going to go forward with this I really need to rethink how I went about this business of being a hero. Two figures crept out of an alley a block down the street; immediately I was ready to book it, in case it was Oni Lee with more Azn Bad Boy reinforcements but it wasn’t.

By the look of them they were capes, and the only other parahuman in ABB was Lung himself which neither of these two were. One might have been tall enough, but he was built all wrong and wearing black motorcycle leathers and matching helmet with a visor shaped like a stylized skull. The other was clearly a girl, probably a teenager by her size; her costume was skintight with a crisscrossed hatch mark pattern of black lines with lavender in between and a domino mask to disguise her face. Beyond them in the alley I thought I could see several more figures, two more people and at least two hulking animal like figures.

Definitely not Protectorate, or any of the big independent outfits like New Wave that I knew about.

The two were approaching me cautiously; the guy keeping an eye on their surroundings while the girl kept her gaze on me at first but as they got closer it was the man who focused his attention on me, let out a whistle and spoke.

“I guess we owe you one. Not that we couldn’t have taken on Oni Lee and his boys ourselves, but you kind of took that little job off our hands.” The girl continued to stare at me, and I got the distinct impression she was trying to figure something out.
Meanwhile, her friend kept talking. “Really fucked these guys up. Hey, not to be ungrateful or anything but don’t think this means we’ll let you take us in.” Shit. First night out and not only had I run into Oni Lee, I’d walked right into the middle of some sort of villain feud, inadvertently saving what looked like a gang of villains from getting ambushed by the ABB. Shit, shit, shit.

“I hope you don’t take it the wrong way if we don’t stick around make to introductions, but you know; opposite sides of the law. Also have to figure Lung heard some of that, so we’re going split.” He paused, looked back at the alley, and then at the bond to his left. “So, yeah, thanks and shit, but next time-”

“LEE!”

Down the street in amongst a spreading out crowd of ten of his thugs Lung appeared from around the corner, already starting to sport scales and a distinctly inhuman looking face.

“Shit, that’s our cue.” The man and the girl turned and sprinted before Lung could catch a glimpse of them, ducking into a closer alley, and this time I was sure I saw something large and possibly furry at the end, but in a moment they and it were gone. I was finally beginning to think of making my own escape when Lung saw me and the unconscious bodies of the men who’d been with Oni Lee. He growled something and his men went into action, a few drawing guns from their pants.

I was already moving and looking for someplace to hide behind, I chose a car to my left; ducking behind it and crouching down. Shit. Besides a van closer to Lung there wasn’t much of anything in the way of cover available for me to hide behind, so if I wanted to make a break for it I would be out in the open, for any of them to shoot at and I wouldn’t be able to make it to an alley before someone was in range. From there it would only take a lucky shot or two and I was dead. I quickly peeked around the car and found the gangsters much closer. A moment or two and they would be on top of me; if they were feeling cautious, if not maybe fifteen seconds. I made a snap decision, took a moment to gather my courage and for the second time that night I charged.

I must have surprised them, because none of them fired even though they had probably a good couple seconds to do so in and then I was in amongst the first of them. I swung at the first, cracking him in the face, ducked and sidestepped his already falling body, then launched myself at the next guy in front of me, tackling him and then rolling off him to deliver two solid hits to a guy to my right.

“KILL THE BITCH!”

The next I kicked in the stomach.

The next I sent stumbling into one of his friends.

Then a strike to the side of someone’s head.

Then an elbow to someone who’d gotten behind me.

The hits, strikes, and counters became a sort of blur until the only ones left standing in the street were me and Lung.

I dashed to the left, and swung at where his kidneys should be, making solid contact.

Nothing. No reaction to my hit at all.

Lung seemed to grin and chuckle, his answering backhand sent me tumbling down the street for several feet. As I struggled to my feet, he had already made it three quarters of the way to me.
Flames starting to encircle him.

This was it.

I was so dead.

Lung was going to beat me into the ground or he was going to roast me alive or maybe his mouth would get big enough that he could swallow me whole. But whatever way it was going to happen I was dead. Facing him had been an idiotic choice and though I hadn’t had much of a choice, I was regretting it all the same.

Flames licked at the exposed flesh through my smoking clothes.

What exactly had convinced me I could take on someone who the Protectorate hadn’t been able, or willing, to bring down I wasn’t sure; only I’d sort of been running on autopilot for a good while now. It was certainly one of the more creative forms of suicide I could think of. Even though I’d beat his assorted minions into unconsciousness, or at least incapacity, now that Lung was throwing his hat into the ring I was well and truly screwed.

His fist rose high over my head.

Time seemed to slow.

Flames swirled in a corona around his scaled hand.

I breathed out.

Here I come Mo-

NO!

My hands shot up; catching the mass of scaled flesh hurtling towards my head.

What.

Lung himself seemed as surprised as I was. My legs pushed me upright against the force of his arm as the flames sputtered and then died. A tense silence remained for one second, then two, before with a roar the flames once again leapt up all around us. Lung pulled back his once again growing fist and swung.

I tensed, my arms already swinging upward again as Lung’s mouth opened in a furious roar.

Catch.

"GO!"

Swing.

"DOWN!"

Catch. Flames exploded outward from Lung.

"YOU!"

Swing.
"LITTLE!"

Catch. Another explosion.

"CU-

My legs made a twisting pivot motion on my heels at the same time as my hands shot forward and grabbed a hold of his massive, scaled forearm. I dug my feet into the ground and tensed.

Then I swung Lung.

Huh, that rhymed.

I let go and Lung made a terrific crash as he slammed into the side panel of a parked van on the other side of the street and then fell forward on to his arms.

Which is when my body decided to start running.

If I could make it far enough away that he could immediately begin tracking my movements, I might be able to lose his trai-

Instead my body headed straight for a two story building, at a faster pace than I'd ever managed even at a full out sprint, fast enough in fact that I was afraid I would crash into the wall face first. What actually happened was in some ways worse, I jumped a few feet away from the wall and proceeded to scale the face of the building, two stories, in a weird scrambling leaping sort of motion, before pivoting and pushing off of the molding at the top. At this point I was moving fast, frighteningly fast frankly, and my trajectory was clearly bringing me to some point in the vicinity of right on top of Lung.

Someone was screaming at the top of their lungs.

With my voice.

I had probably been yelling for some time, because my throat was already starting to feel raw. My right leg extended and my left was brought into a crouched position midair. The world started sweeping past me, as if my foot had become a fixed point towards which the ground below was quickly rushing to converging upon. My foot made contact with Lung’s back for a moment, a moment so infinitesimal most clocks wouldn't even have registered it, it was almost as if nothing happened.

A perfectly still moment.

Then the most concentrated burst of noise and force I had ever personally witnessed, centered on a point midway of Lung's back, exploded outwards Those shiny scales which had seemed so impenetrable before, cracked under the force brought to bear on them.

Like some scaled lobster shell, shattering under the force of a pin hammer, his scaled skin splintered to reveal shiny pale skin underneath.

Glass shattered in all the surrounding buildings and cars, alarms went off and then there was a sort of silence- except for the car alarms.

I stood there, on Lung's back, quite stunned and not believing what had happened.

Already I could hear the distant sound of an approaching vehicle and I was just starting to think of
making my escape when I noticed it, her. Floating there, right in front of me.

A girl.

A girl with pink hair and apparently wearing nothing at all except for her bright smile.

"Hi! I'm Nono!" Her voice was incredibly cheery, in a way which made me want to scowl. "I'm going to be your Onee-sama!"

What.
My what?

“Onee-sama!”

And now she was repeating herself, as if that wou-

Older sister.

Leader. Virtuoso. A girl with black hair; pale skin and a statuesque appearance; her face angular, almost regal looking with fierce and piercing eyes. Then the same woman, older, but not old, eyes now filled with a sense of loss.

Ideal. Exemplar. Another girl, with short reddish brown hair and some sort of cloth tied around her forehead, her face is rounder but filled with a passion and a drive which makes you want to do better.

Partner. Cohort. This girl is younger than the other two, dark skinned and with short white hair that frames a round face, with a toned and athletic body tending towards lean. She exudes a confidence and self assurance bordering on arrogance; he might be describe as haughty and her entire bearing screams royalty. Warrior. Princess. Hero. Friend.

What? The images are fading but they remain as memories, clear and sharp. Apparently my powers come with some way of understanding new concepts? Everytime I think I have a handle on what exactly my power does it throws something else at me, at least I have options.

How exactly those options are any help in dealing with naked floating people I’m not sure yet.

“No, doesn’t want to be dealt with.”

Ok, so floating pink-haired girl is pouting now, and covering up her chest? Just her chest, and looking weirdly shy-wait, wait, did she just respond to something I was thinking?

And now she’s dressed in a weirdly puffy red suit of some kind with white stockings.

“Stop that!” I bark, not sure what I want her to stop.

“You’re the one doing things,” she responds petulantly.

This is so very bizarre. Ok Taylor, get yourself together; so you’ve taken on Oni Lee, Lung, and probably a dozen gangsters tonight and now there’s a floating girl with pink hair, who can apparently go from naked to clothed in the blink of an eye, reading your mind. Not too long ago Lee fired off five shots, set off a grenade and bolted, Lung was roaring just a minute ago and setting fire to the surrounding terrain. Protectorate cape maybe? Not one I’ve heard of though, and too fast or maybe too slow. Should have either been here to participate in the fight or would have arrived a little while afterwards; depending on if already out in the city or coming from the base in the bay. Independent? Possibly, but definitely not local, and why appear naked? Said I was doing things; maybe only appeared naked because of powers? Doesn’t make much sense. Easiest solution is just to ask; she already gave her name as Nono but that doesn’t tell me much.

“Um, dumb question maybe, but, Nono you said, right?” A nod on her part. “Who are you?”
“Nono is the Sol-no, Nono is, is, your Onee-sama! Here to guide you on your path to being a Hero! Through grit and perseverance!”

While I’m still working up a response to that statement I hear the noise of a motorcycle approaching rapidly from the direction of the waterfront. It swings, gracefully around the corner to reveal Armsmaster, in all his blue and silver armored glory, and Miss Militia hanging on at his back looking very much like the ideal of her eponym. The Tinker’s bike comes to noiseless but sudden halt just down the street from me, and the pair of them are off with their weapons ready in an instant; what must I look like to them, standing here in what must be torn, dirty, and burnt sweatshirt and pants. Actually apart from dirt I can’t see anything out of place, which is odd. Might also be the floating girl in front of me. How did I forget about her exactly?

“Are you responsible for all of this?” Miss Militia asks, gesturing towards, well, everything all the while keeping a very large and intimidating gun trained on me.

Armsmaster is moving slowly away from her, trying to trap me between the two of them and the bike; which probably has some automatic defense built it. They’re not being overtly threatening, besides Militia's gun being pointed in my direction both of them are being remarkably relaxed. At the same time I don’t particularly like the way they’re trying to corner me, it makes my skin crawl and gives me the urge to get out of her but I don’t want to make a bad impression with the leader of the local Protectorate team.

“Yeah, uh, no. Lung and his men, yeah that was me but he did most of the breaking things.” At that their eyes drop down and I realize I’ve been standing on Lung’s unconscious form this entire time, that might be what’s giving them pause. “Oh, heheheh, kind of forgot about him.”

I step off him and back up a little, eyeing his prone body in the middle of the cracked cocoon of his scales; being out for this long can’t be good for him long term health wise. Shit, I hope he can’t sue me, I mean it’s Lung, there’s got to be some kind of provision in the law for hurting guys like him that says whatever happens to them is just what they’ve got coming.

“Hey, he can’t, uh, sue me if I caused permanent damage, can he?” I ask, figuring I probably won’t ever have a better source of information. Both of them eye each other for a moment before Armsmaster turns back to me and speaks for the first time since the both of them arrived.

“Is this your first night out?” He returns my nod with a small one of his own like I confirmed something he already knew. “With Lung there’s not much to worry about, even if you did significant injury to him his nature would allow him to recover very quickly. Speaking of which, would you mind if I-” With his free hand he gestures to his halberd. “-were to administer some tranquilizers. Just for safety’s sake, you understand.”

“Yeah, fine with me.” I answer, making sure to clear myself from any possible trajectory of what I assumed are going to be tranquilizer darts even though I’m not even sure if they could get through my skin it’s still better to be safe.

There’s a puff of air and several darts embed themselves in Lungs human skin, then the both of them relax. So, not me they were wary of so much as the mound of human shaped dragon I was standing on, that is a bit of a relief. Miss Militia moves to check over the nearest gangsters, some of them already recovering, a few even seemed to have disappeared somewhere in the confusion. An awkward silence stretched for a pregnant moment or two before he said anything.

“If you are truly concerned about the consequences of your actions, situations such as yours are why we have the Wards program. You would benefit greatly in protection from certain consequences, opportunities for mentorship from more experienced heroes, and you would have
access to greater material resources,” That last he said as he gestured slightly towards me; I caught his meaning almost immediately. My costume didn’t exactly scream professional I knew, but it was the best I’d been able to do without raising Dad’s suspicions. I didn’t exactly have a huge amount of pocket money and none of my skills so far had been anything close to resembling something useful in making a more complicated costume. Still, I vaguely resented the fact that he, a Tinker with the backing of the Protectorate, had brought attention to it.

“Not exactly swimming in cash, sure, but I did all right. Besides, results matter more than how pretty I look.” I shot back, a little indignantly though it didn’t seem to faze him at all.

Membership in the Wards did sound like a pretty nice deal when he laid it out in those terms, but I was almost sure that whatever else it might be it would also be filled with teenage drama; which I got more than enough of at school. What was more I didn’t particularly want to stick myself with having to listen to adults tell me when and where I could go out to do my daring dos, or setting schedules for it. If I was going to do this I was going to do it on my own terms, at least until it became clear I was in way over my head, though hopefully tonight represented the high point of my cape career for at least a few months.

“There are other benefits as well,” Miss Militia interjected before Armstrong could continue. “Defeating an opponent of Lung’s calibre will get you attention, much of it from the other gangs. On your own you are vulnerable, but as a Ward the Protectorate can offer protection for both you and your family from anyone who might attempt to harm you because of this incident.”

Put that way, it was tempting because I’d already been worrying over how to protect my father from the threats that came with the job. At the same time, right now no one knew who I was and that would make it extra difficult to find out about Dad but if I became a Ward somewhere my real name would get put on a file and that would link back to Dad. No, best to keep my identity a complete secret, besides I was mostly just going to be taking on street thugs if I had my way and not going toe to toe with the likes of Lung again any time soon.

“I appreciate that,” I said. “but I have a handle on that, too.”

“PRT officers will be along shortly to collect the unpowered thugs,” Armstrom said, closing the discussion on that while Miss Militia gave me an unsure look. “it’s unlikely they’ll be held on to for longer than it takes to get them a clean bill of health, but they need to be rounded up all the same and you can give your statement to the officers. We’ll also need their assistance in transporting Lung back to a proper containment cell, you can ride along if you want and give your statement at the PRT Headquarters.”

“Actually I need to scram, school tomorrow, you know.”

I was turning when Armstom called out to stop me.

“Wait a minute!, There are procedures- You can’t just run off- At least give us a name!”

I turned back at that. Truthfully I’d been wracking my brain every day since I’d discovered my powers trying to come up with a cape name that was both not being used and not completely stupid, but frankly there wasn’t a lot and I wasn’t the most creative person for names apparently so nothing had presented itself. Of course if I didn’t come up with one myself someone else was bound to give me a name, and I didn’t want that. Briefly I thought about telling him and Miss Militia to take credit for Lung’s defeat so that I could avoid the issue entirely but I didn't really want to and I didn’t think it would hold up as a story anyways given all the witnesses. The little group of villains I’d inadvertently saved, Oni Lee, and all the regular gang members I’d knocked out. So, still facing Armstom while simultaneously moving backwards I wracked my brain for
something, anything which would make a good name for a heroine.

They say that necessity is the mother of invention; they never said it produced good inventions.

“Princess!” I shouted, saying the first thing that came into my head.

“Princess!?” He asked sounding incredulous, and a little like he was trying not to laugh. Ass.

Miss Militia actually looked like she might have grinned a little as I turned away from them and fled. Unfortunately I didn’t really have time to stop and find out, because it really was late and tomorrow I actually did have school so I took off running.

I made it home a little before three, switching out of my costume and back into the clothes I’d left the house in about half way. The basement had a small half window which if you pushed on the upper right hand corner would swing open enough to let you squeeze through if you were thin enough, which I was. Dad went to bed early and slept heavily enough that I wasn’t really worried about waking him up by using one of the main doors, but all the same, it just felt right to sneak in and out through the basement.

As I was settling into bed I realized something; neither Miss Militia nor Armsmaster had made a single comment about the floating girl.

She was right there, next to my bed, and as sleep took hold of me the only thought I had was, why Princess?

*

The sound of the radio from my father’s bathroom woke me almost at the same time as my own alarm clock went off. The almost routine nature of the start of the day was comforting as I lay in bed waiting for my lack of sleep to catch up to me; I waited one minute, then two, and three before deciding if I wasn’t going to feel tired I would just start getting up.

I sat up slowly, treating my body gingerly in the expectation of soreness caused by the overworked and abused muscles that I surely must have, but it never came. Instead, my entire body was fine, as good as it had ever been; I had been dealing with the various changes in my body for months now but this was a whole new level of weird. And now no girl, or maybe that had all been some sort of stress induced hallucination?

Either I had developed some sort of multiple personality disorder, or whenever I pushed myself too far I would start hallucinating and who knew if future apparitions would be as harmless as last nights; I didn’t know which of those two possibilities was more frightening. I would, I would just have to deal with it as it unfolded.

By the time I shook myself briefly out of my reverie and made my way downstairs dad was already downstairs cooking french toast, a plate of bacon sitting on the table.

“Good morning, kiddo,” he looked at me over his shoulder, smiling.

“Morning,” I answered

I was distracted; if I didn’t get tired, did I even need to eat? I wasn’t hungry, but I wasn’t full either
and I’d been eating normally for the past few months so obviously I could eat, apparently it just didn’t make a difference. I still enjoyed food.

What the hell, none of it made any damn sense.

“Distracted?” Dad asked.

I was just grabbing the orange juice from the fridge when he spoke, so I had to straighten before answering.

“What? No-yeah, I guess. Presentation today, about how powers have influenced our lives.” It wasn’t a complete lie, there really was a presentation, just maybe it wasn’t what had me distracted. Of course, how would I start that conversation? ‘Hey Dad, I have super powers and last night I beat up two of Brockton Bay’s most notorious gang members, also maybe I might be going insane!’ It would come out eventually I was sure because these sorts of things always did, but I wanted it to be untainted by anyone else’s issues or worries for just a little bit longer.

“Oh! Rumor’s going around that Gerry, you know him from work, might be getting work as one of Über and Leet’s henchmen,” he told me.

I made a noncommittal sound in response, I really wasn’t sure how to feel about that. On the one hand I didn’t really remember Gerry, I hadn’t visited dad at work or been around any of his coworkers since mom’s funeral, so the possibility of the man working for Brockton Bay’s two most incompetent unjailed villains didn’t really mean much personally. On the other hand though, it was all too possible that sometime shortly I might be going up against the villainous duo and their henchmen; which meant I might be fighting Gerry, a man who had worked with my father. There were real people just trying to get by on both sides.

Suddenly things seemed even less fun.

I finished the last of my bacon, and stood up.

“Off for your run?” Dad asked.

“Yeah,” with my dish and utensils put away I headed towards the door, stopping only to give my dad a quick hug and ‘I love you’ before I beat my hasty retreat out the door, breaking into a run immediately after I cleared the chain fence. Honestly, I’d discovered pretty quickly that running wasn’t really necessary. It just didn’t make me tired; one time I had run for nearly two hours without stopping at almost full tilt because of a particularly bad day, but it was a good way for me to decompress. I could forget about other things, just focus on the motion of my legs and the way I ate up the ground before me.

In the past several weeks it had been an enormous relief at times just to run and forget everything else; forget that my body was getting weirder and weirder by the day in ways I didn’t understand, couldn’t predict, and had no control over. Forget that I still had zero friends at school, forget that my grades were suffering, forget that a girl with pink hair was-

“Ah!” I exclaimed, so surprised by her sudden appearance that I tripped and fell face forward; landing and skidding forward a few inches. So, not stress induced hallucinations.

I pushed myself to my feet immediately, glancing up and down the street to check if anyone had seen my embarrassing accident; luckily though there were only a couple of people in the area, a man walking his dog on the opposite side of the street and an older woman a few blocks behind me, both of them had been facing away from me and hadn’t made anything but a momentary note
of my accident.

“Damnit, damnit, damnit! Just what I need, on top of everything else, now I’ve gone crazy and of course knowing I’m losing my mind doesn’t stop me from losing it.”

Deciding that now was as good a time as any to start returning home I turned around and started moving in the opposite direction from before, glancing every few moments towards the hallucination floating alongside me.

“Are you done?” My hallucination asked, her voice perky in a way that really annoyed me; what gave her the right to be so happy when my life was so messed up.

“Yeah,” I answered without thinking and then cursed myself for responding to my own insanity; talking to myself was a sure fire way to get other people thinking I was crazy.

“Nono promises you are not crazy; but Nono knows nothing Nono says will prove it.”

Every phrase that came out of her mouth was punctuated by emphatic gestures in my direction even as her attention seemed to drift towards our surroundings. She seemed fascinated by everything around us.

“Well, at least my hallucinations are realistic in some respects,” I sighed to myself.

A hallucination that knew it couldn’t convince me it wasn’t a hallucination was at least better than one I was convinced was real, if not any less weird. Though, if she was a product of my own brain she should know everything I knew so it was probably not that surprising that my own hallucination had a good appreciation of me.

“It’s different than I imagined,” my hallucination said.

“What?” I asked.

What the hell was she talking about now, and for that matter why the hell was I still responding? Shouldn’t I just ignore her and try to get on with my life? If at least to avoid looking crazy to everyone around me by not having conversations with thin air. Or would that just make the hallucination worse as it tried harder and harder to get my attention, could I even live like that, with basically a person constantly reacting to the things around me without responding in any way? If nothing else worrying about all of this would definitely drive me completely over the edge.

“Earth. I only saw it from far away, where it was so little and shiny, and all the rest come from her; maybe it’s because she didn’t grow up here. Or it’s the time. I wish-”

Though I didn’t pause my running, her wistful tone of voice did give me pause mentally, in that moment she looked sad and lonely but it passed quickly to be replaced by a grin that didn’t look forced. Though perhaps I wasn’t the best judge of those sorts of things with people. I resolved to ignore her.

Though my hallucination kept up a steady stream of commentary on the various scenery around us throughout the rest of the way back home I ignored her. Mercifully she disappeared when I took my shower, only reappearing in the bus on the way to school where she jump right back into her near constant and annoyingly perky habit of commenting on people. The bus driver who looked like her ‘Master’, whatever the hell that meant, an old lady who was ‘sooooo cute’, some punk rocker guy who she thought was beyond cool, and others. She never seemed to lack for things to say.
She quieted down a lot when we got to school, and became, almost protective in a weird way, but nothing happened.

My Computer class went all right; none of the primary instigators for my abuse were in the class so it wasn’t usually a place stuff happened. I finished the in-class assignment quicker than usual, but it wasn’t anything particularly interesting or advanced, and turned my attention to Parahumans Online wiki first. I wanted to figure out who the villains I’d met last night might be, who hadn’t given me their names, so I went to the Brockton Bay page; which had a brief description of the city and some factoids and then a very long list of the capes who lived or frequently showed up here. All the heroes were out, unless I wanted to contemplate one of them being some sort of undercover agent or mole but neither of those two really made much sense. Cape powers were, in general, too distinctive for that to really work enough to be useful. All the ABB capes were out too, as I didn’t imagine they would be fighting their own gang, besides there were only three parahumans in the whole gang which meant they had apparently recruited someone. The Empire I was confident in eliminating, as I doubted they would run from Oni Lee, plus there hadn’t been any rank and file which probably indicated an all cape gang and more I didn’t think they would have let me go. The Merchants, just didn’t fit; after all nothing about them had screamed junky. Which left me with just a few other villains.

Definitely not Über and Leet.

The pictures for Tattletale and Grue might have been the two I’d talked to, but both pictures were blurry and out of focus, Tattletale’s more than Grue’s. Of course they could have been new arrivals to the city too, but those two were my best bet, in fact I was almost sure it was them. I was almost sure I had seen other figures in the alley behind them, but the only villains left were Coil and Hellhound. Hellhound might have been the one making the other inhuman shapes with her dogs, but Coil didn’t really seem to fit. No one knew his power, but just the same he didn’t seem to do much in the way of fighting in person, there wasn’t even a description. His article was almost shorter than Tattletale’s.

I looked at Lung’s page, immediately zeroing in on the ‘Defeats and Captures’ section; it read ‘Lung was taken to the PHQ for holding until the villain’s trial by teleconference after being captured by Armaster following an encounter with an independent cape reportedly named Princess. Given Lung’s extensive and well documented criminal history, it is expected he will face imprisonment in the Birdcage should he be found guilty at trial.’

That was me.

I almost wanted grab my neighbors shoulders and force them to read those sentences; telling them that that was me. That, I had done that.

I resisted. Instead I went to the message boards, There was one post promising retribution; whether it was just a fan of Lung’s or a serious threat I didn’t know. Other posts just asked for more details about the fight, specifically looking for people who lived in the area and might have seen something or somebody who had gone by and seen the aftermath. One topic, which just read ‘Who?’, was wondering who I was. No one had any information so the topic looked to be dying. I debated, briefly, answering myself but it seemed risky and without a way to prove I was who I said I was nothing I told them would mean much.

As the bell rang, signalling the end of the period, I felt satisfied, as if now that other people knew about what I had accomplished it actually meant something.
My next class was Mr. Gladly’s; he was a short youngish teacher who had that sort of attitude, like someone’s idea of a cool teacher out of one of those corny movies. He pulled it off some, but I didn’t like him because he tried too hard to be seen as cool that I think he ignored a lot of stuff going on just because it was convenient. Of course it wasn’t his fault that of the three primary instigators of my abuse only Madison was in the class with me, which didn’t mean nothing had ever happened, only that she had to rope other less enthusiastic girls into her stupid ‘jokes’. Gladly never turned a complete blind eye, whether I was the victim or someone else, but when he did notice something he only ever stopped what was happening right there. It irritated me that he never did anything about what he had to know was going on outside of his classroom, which made him less like those corny movie teachers he tried to imitate.

Madison and her friends were giggling as I walked in, presumably at some stupid joke at someone else’s expense. Overall things had been subdued since what had happened right after winter break; they hadn’t really gotten punished because no one had “seen” anything, but all the same they knew that they had to keep things quiet for awhile. I was amazed it had lasted this long to be honest. They hadn’t stopped completely, of course, but they had changed tactics; people left lunch tables when I sat down, whispers in the hall, I got bumped into a little too often, and stuff got spilled around me more frequently than was believable but there wasn’t anything major. Hell, it wasn’t like everyone did it either, so all in all I was feeling not terrible. I still didn’t really have any friends, but I could deal if this was how it was going to be.

Of course I still wanted to punch them in their stupid faces at least once a day, bloody them up a little maybe, if last night was anything to go by I had the strength and it probably wouldn’t even hurt me. Every time I had those thoughts though my dad’s face would float up looking disappointed or I would think of mom, and I knew I couldn’t do that; not and be the person she’d taught me to be at least.

I almost hated my mom sometimes for it; giving me a sense of right and wrong that worked in the back of my head, so that when I had the chance to give a little payback to the people who’d made my life miserable I couldn’t because I knew she wouldn’t have liked the person that made me. It wasn’t fair; that she could leave me to this and still hold me to standards it was clear the rest of the world wasn’t being held to.

So I hated her a little, loved her more, and missed her most.

But those sorts of thoughts only occasionally invaded my days, mostly I just looked to getting through today.

Now that I thought about it, it occurred to me that maybe there was a way to use my power to beat them without becoming someone my mother couldn’t be proud of. I just to be better, better than all of them. I wasn’t pretty enough to beat Emma as a model, and Madison wasn’t really good enough at anything in particular to make it something I could use. Sophia though, she was supposed to be something of a star runner on the track and field team; and though she wasn’t the ring leader, that was Emma, she was vicious all on her own. I was sure that with my powers I could outrun her any day of the week, and keep doing it. She wasn’t exactly likeable so I doubted the other members of the track team would give me much trouble, probably more likely to ignore me, and if I could undermine the confidence of one of the three it would a victory, if only minor. Doing that would be at least the start of something; I wasn’t aiming to break her spirit or anything, it wasn’t really revenge I was looking for after all.
I just wanted to make them stop, to show them that I was better than them..

I didn’t even know when track started now that I was thinking about it. Would there be tryouts, would I have to get a physical, get tested to make sure I wasn’t on steroids or something? Shit, I hadn’t had the idea more than five minutes and already there were holes everywhere. Well it wasn’t going to happen right now anyways.

Mr. Gladly was just finishing explaining to Julia that she could not switch groups when I started paying attention again. Realizing I had no idea which group I was in, I almost panicked before I saw Greg and Sparky making their way over to my desk; Greg explaining to Sparky some intricacies of a new game he was playing to the taller boy.

“...so you have to pay attention, otherwise you’ll lose all your, hey Taylor, you’ll lose all your best guys.”

“Mm.”

Sparky’s response didn’t seem to phase Greg, as he kept right on regaling him. Julia was starting in on Mr. Gladly again, trying to finagle him into letting her join Madison and her group but, I suppose to his credit, Mr. Gladly was unmoved.

“No, Julia. Greg’s group only has three. Go help them.”

He made it sound final, and I guess from his point of view this could be him showing the popular kids he couldn’t be walked all over, but from mine it was just stupid. I’d rather he just let her go with Madison than force me to have to deal with her. The other group looked as if they were going to move next to mine, but Gladly gave them a look and asked them if they needed anything; they grumbling said no and sat back down while Julia made her way over to us.

As she reached us and sat down she gave us all a look that let us know just how unpleasant she found us, though I was the only one who even noticed; Sparky, I guess might have noticed and just not have cared, but Greg at least was grinning stupidly. Greg was one of those guys who was desperate for attention from any pretty girl, I wasn’t sure if he thought being nice to them would actually get him anywhere or if his brain just sort of shut off in the presence of anything with long hair, an unblemished face, and something approaching a “rack”. Either way it was a little pathetic.

Without her friends nearby though I didn’t think she was likely to do or say anything too bad so we each started sharing our homework. Greg, because apparently he’d been distracted by the game he’d been talking about with Sparky, didn’t have much and what he did have wasn’t very coherent. Julia’s contribution was similar to my own, but just less, it was obvious she had stuck with the stuff it only took five minutes to think of and hadn’t really thought much beyond that. Sparky was a surprise, he talked a lot about music and how this or that cape had influenced certain artists or genres, but he ended talking more about the musicians themselves than about the influence of capes; though there was one cape singer he mentioned.

Mr. Gladly chose Sparky from our group to present what we had discussed, and surprisingly enough despite his reputation for a certain inattentiveness he did all right. He hit all the points each of us had raised at least, even if he made half the points more confusing than they needed to be and he even got a couple laughs out of the bored classroom which I wasn’t entirely sure were intentional. Not that it seemed to bother him any if they weren’t.

None of the other groups had much better presentations, between me and Sparky we had most of the more interesting observations. Though one of the other groups probably had us beat by volume if nothing else, in the end though Mr. Gladly named us the winners. The rest of class passed by
dully and without incident which let me fully wallow in how thoroughly weird my life was getting.

Here I was, the day after taking on two of the most notorious villains in Brockton Bay and where was I sitting? In class, worrying about grades, psychotic bitches, and feeling good because I’d received validation from an overeager teacher.

Maybe Greg wasn’t the only pathetic one.

Something caught my attention out of the corner of my left eye.

Shit.

The Hallucination was back.

Mercifully she seemed content to investigate the surroundings and not drive me more insane. She hopped from one person to another giving them a thorough looking over; I wasn’t sure what she was looking for but either she was finding it, or not finding it consistently because she basically just kept not having a reaction. Once she had made the round through the entire class, briefly making disapproving noises at Madison, so at least she had taste, my hallucination turned her attention to the row of windows along side the classroom. She was closer to me now, so in order to distract myself from her presence I tried to force my attention towards the front of the room and let my hands start drawing idly.

The ring of the bell brought me out of whatever daydream I had been having. As I got up and put my things away into my backpack, it felt like I had been remembering something, or been thinking through a really good idea and now it was gone just beyond my grasp. My attempts to recall what it had been that had so occupied me but it was like trying to catch with a sieve, it all disappeared as soon as it felt like I might know what it was.

“...Taylor, Taylor. Where do you want to meet me for your prize?”

I startled out of my thoughts and focused on Mr. Gladly. Mostly what I wanted was to not have to deal with him again today, but I didn’t say that.

“Oh, uh, I don’t really want anything. Sparky can have mine,” I told him, after all if I wasn’t going to have it someone at last deserved something a little extra and the tall boy had been more helpful than the other two.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded at the teacher and turned to leave, his voice following me.

“Uh, actually Miss Hebert, I wanted…”

I ignored him though, and his voice faded as he gave up on getting my attention; he’d asked not too long ago if I would go with him to the principals office to make an official complaint, but I already knew how something like that would go and wanted to save us both the embarrassment of having to talk about it. Right outside the door Madison, Julia, and another girl were waiting and a couple doors down the hall I could see Emma, Sophia and several others girls making their way towards us. Some sort of ambush had been arrange, maybe they’d been hoping that Mr. Gladly would have delayed me enough for the entire group together but Madison and the other weren’t paying enough attention because I was out of the door and past them before they really noticed me. There wasn’t enough room to really escape them, there was after all only one direction to go in after I left the classroom but they at least couldn’t trap me now.
Pink hair floated along in front of me, scowling at the quickly encroaching girls, I meanwhile ignored her as much as I could.

The crowd of girls reached me, and tried as much as they could to surround me and stop me but I was just fast enough to keep a little ahead of them without anyone running. They started in talking over and around me.

“Nobody even likes her.”

Julia.

“Such a loser. Did you see the mess she turned in for her major art project on Friday?”

Sophia.

There were more comments, often contradictory and nonsensical; I was a slut, a prude, worthless, stuck-up, an idiot, a nerd, desperate, and simultaneously not even trying. It stopped making sense pretty quickly, the actual comments obviously not meaning much and the real purpose clearly just to make me feel as badly as possible. If they had given me an opening I might have made some retort, but they just kept talking right over me.

“Thbpbptphpt!”

I was so stunned that I actually stopped moving and stared at the source of the noise; my hallucination stared down each of the girls individually and continued to blow raspberries at each of them. It was just ridiculous enough that I almost broke out in laughter right there. Emma noticed my expression, and apparently misinterpreted it because she chose that moment to strike.

“What the matter Taylor? Going to cry yourself to sleep for a week straight now?”

She was using what she knew about me, and about possibly the worst period of my life before recent events, to find what she clearly thought was a chink in my armor and hammer home how little she thought about me now. It hurt, I’ll admit, for moment or two but then that hurt got replaced with anger. I wanted to slam my fist into her face, wanted it so badly I could see my fist smashing her face and could almost feel her bones cracking under the impact of my fist.

I calmed my breathing for a moment or two and in that silence I thought of the only thing that I could maybe say back to that. Emma had liked my mother, looked up to her, thought she was cool. “You know, my mom never really liked you that much. I guess she knew something I didn’t.”

It was maybe a little bit of a lie, but I didn’t stick around long enough for her to try and refute it or even really see if it landed, instead I pushed past her and the others, turned the corner and went out a door. Outside the sun was shining, I had a class starting soon but I didn’t really care right then, I just had to get away for a little while. My hallucination kept pace in front of me, facing backwards so she was staring straight at me.

“Taylor Hebert, stop.”

Right now I really didn’t feel like dealing with that particular brand of crazy, so I ignored her and kept on walking at a fast clip, ignoring milling groups of kids and seeking less crowded pastures.

“Stop!”

My feet moved at a faster clip, and the motion of taking the steps two at a time jostled the
backpack over my shoulders uncomfortably.

“Stop.”

My body responded involuntarily, freezing suddenly without throwing me off balance and I found myself on the school sports field with the old metal bleachers to my left.

“Taylor Hebert, you must listen to me though I know you think Nono is some sort of hallucination. Nono is not.”

She paused, and looked at me in a way that made me almost believe her right then and there. There were tears in my eyes, when had I started crying?

“You deserve better than what is being done to you, much better,” She said, her voice soft and light. “Nono knows how cruel people can be, but Nono also knows how good they can be. If you let me Nono, she will be your guide, and together we can be the kind of hero your mother would approve of, would even admire. Nono will not tell you to forget those girls in there, but you must understand that you are so much more than they. you have potential they could never grasp. So let me show you how to save the world.”

One of her hands extended towards me. I felt, better, a little at least and I was beginning to think that if this was what going crazy was like I might just give in, say to hell with whatever other people might think and just embrace whatever she was. Ignoring her wasn’t helping and if the choice was between taking her at her word, that she was real in some other way, or spending the rest of my life constantly on my guard to ignore some potential figure and voice well I’d rather do the first. Well, I guess that was my choice then.

I put my own hand out to meet hers, and half expected to see it pass through her but instead I met resistance. What my hand met certainly felt like another hand.

We shook.

She smiled a brilliant smile that lit up her face and seemed to almost do the same for everything around her.

It almost felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

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I went back to class after that, but the rest of the day was basically uneventful, and so was my evening at home. Dinner with dad was nice enough, each of us making meaningless small talk, though he obviously struggled not to pry into my day. I was grateful he resisted the urge because it wasn’t really something I was ready to deal with yet with him. Afterwards we watched a little TV before I made the excuse of having to deal with homework and retreated to my room where I lay down on my bed.

Nono lowered herself to the right of my bed on the small window seat upside down; sprawled out so that her head was angled just about level with my bed and her legs stretched partway up the wall. Her pink hair fanned out around her head and fell in a cascade over the lip.
I found my voice after a silence which stretched for the moment or two I used to prepared myself for the coming conversation.

“What are you? You said you weren’t a hallucination, does that mean you’re like those old comics where the superior being comes to give the earthling great power?”

“No no could give you a term for what I am, but it would be meaningless to you, or I might explain it in terms more familiar to you; but that explanation would be incomplete, confusing, and probably stressful. Nono will tell you that Nono was born to be a warrior, and protector of humanity against an enemy that wanted to extinguish all human life.”

What exactly did she mean that it might be incomplete and probably stressful to explain what she was? I could think of only a few possibilities; she might be like something out of those old horror stories whose true form would send me spiralling away into madness, what she was might have some effect on what was happening to me or she might be some sort of time traveler with some knowledge of the future which I would not like. Of those I wasn’t sure which was scarier; placing my trust in a horrifying monstrosity from the inky blackness of space, the thought that I might be different enough in my body that my very humanity might be in question, or that as a timetraveler Nono meant some immensely powerful force in an indeterminate future thought I was important enough, or maybe just malleable enough, to send someone back to change.

I was shaking and I felt a pit opening up in my stomach which threatened, it seemed to swallow me whole, but I focused on my breathing to calm myself. Whatever the truth was, I had already determined to trust Nono at least part way; whatever else she had knowledge I did not and she hadn’t demonstrated any malevolence in her actions so at least until she showed me otherwise I would trust her.

As I came back from my minor freakout I realized that Nono had kept talking, but as soon as the thought of it was entering my mind the, not memories but like them, memories of what she had said shifted into the forefront of my mind.

“No no thinks that, the best way to tell you about myself would not be to start from the beginning, but rather somewhere about the middle. I woke in ice…”

Ice and light, she said were her first memories. What followed were several hours of stories of her life; stories about an old man and his dog, of playing in the snow which sometimes towered over her, in which she spent hours watching the old man in his workshop, always though there was a sense of loneliness because though in her stories she sometimes had companions she never had friends. There was a change, and the stories became about more people; about people young and old, and great machines which fought towering monsters which could crush mountains. These stories she seemed to like best of all, her voice became more and more animated as she talked about the person she called her sister. Events grew stranger and stranger; some of the machines shot the monsters, others froze them, some combined together, or did even weirder things but again there was a shift where her own place in the stories seemed to become more central.

Finally there was a climactic battle where someone tried to use a planet to destroy the last monster, but she and her sister stopped them and then together they struck the final blow which killed it. This caused something, she was not forthcoming with all the details in exactly what this blow had done, which necessitated her giving up something precious and taking another precious thing into herself. It was clear, from the way she spoke, that her action was in some way a sacrifice which had separated her and her friends in someway.

“No no was in that Not Place for a long time or a short time or no-time. Nono could not say for sure. Eventually Nono heard, though not with my ears or anything similar, a cry or a signal or
perhaps a plea. It took either a very long time or perhaps none at all for me to find the place where
what I heard was coming from, and when Nono found it, Nono found you Taylor. You and
something else, something in the very process of changing you. Nono was lost enough that my first
instinct was to reach out for any contact, and in the moment the other thing went, away and Nono
took it's place.”

“Uh, wow, that’s a lot.” A lot confusing and not a lot of concrete information.

She smiled at me and nodded happily.

“Yes, it is. There is more, but it would be better to talk about that sometime later, when you
understand more.”

By then dad had gone to bed and so I decided to make my way down to the basement and snuck out
the one window that I could still squeeze out of.

Nothing happened that night on my patrol, which was something of a relief really.

The next day at school I found the girls Track and Field coach and asked her about joining.
Surprisingly enough she was all too willing to have me, although I would have to get my own
running shoes and other such equipment, plus get a physical from a doctor. After some quick
research online, I reassured myself that what was involved wouldn’t actually be that invasive.

I went out that night too, and stopped two muggings in progress which made me feel even better.
Again I snuck in through the little window in the basement, careful of the old stairs leading from
the basement up to the first floor, I was just starting up the stairs to my room when a light turned
on in the living room. My dad was sitting in his pajamas in the armchair his hand still raised up to
turn on the lamp to his left, facing towards me.

Shit.

“Taylor, we need to talk.”

Shit.

But Nono was smiling, which I hope was good. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad?
It was past two in the morning and my dad was awake.

My dad, who went to bed practically every night at ten on the dot.

Shit.

“Come over here and sit, please,” His voice was firm, but it wasn’t hard.

I had seen my father angry before, heard his voice thunder like the sky itself was coming down and seen the way his face hardened and twisted in fury, he wasn’t like that now. Right now all I saw was my father, his too large eyes sunken and tired, and his face set in worried expression. The light, off to one side, threw half of him into semi-shadow and his natural lankiness sharpened the shadows between his limbs.

I didn’t feel fear, but something hard rose into my throat and constricted my ability to breath. He was up, and waiting in the living room; somehow I doubted he had failed to check my room and the rest of the house for me and the fact that I had been sneaking in and out through the basement would give lie to any explanations of my nighttime activities as merely running.

The pink haired lunatic behind me was still smiling, even as she gave me a push towards the couch. Thankfully I didn’t stumble, but still was pretty sure my movements were incredibly awkward as I made my way over to the couch and sat down across from dad.

“I know I haven’t been the best father. After your mother...after she- after she passed I wasn’t there for you,” His voice was hoarse, and I could see him struggling to stay still. “I-I forgot about you, I was lost in my own pain and you suffered without your father to comfort you or take care of you. I failed you and worst of all, someone else had to remind me that I wasn’t the only one suffering.”

I open my mouth almost ready to start reassuring him, but instead I couldn’t help but remember how that week felt; Mom gone, Dad so out of it he didn’t even see me and every night I cried alone, and all I felt was a simmering sort of resentment. He was my dad, so of course I still loved him but I didn’t trust him as much, instead I knew all too well how human he could be. In a strange way I had lost dad with mom too.

“After I got some sense knocked it me, I swore I would do better. I failed again; I saw your grades slipping at school, the dread when you went off to school, and how you came home each day a little more disheartened but each time I told myself that I would have to let you come to me. That If I pried you would just close up even more, but that was just an excuse I used because I didn’t want to confront how badly I was failing you as a father. At the beginning of the year, after that night in the hospital I promised myself I would do better.”

He sighed, and lifted his eyes from where they had been focused throughout on his hands to look right at me. Next to me I could feel more than see Nono; solemn and straight backed, she was more serious than I had seen her other than that night a couple days again. Her presence was so real in that moment I could almost feel her hand in its motion.

“I know I can’t expect you to start telling me everything; there’s too much between us right now, a lot of which is my fault. But we can’t keep going the way we have been; so I want you to know that whatever happens I will always have your back, maybe I won’t always be able to fix everything but you’re at that age where you start to realize your parents don’t have all the power. I
won’t make you tell me everything about what’s going on at school, and I won’t make you tell me where you’re going at night; but I can’t just have you out there with no way to find out if you need my help. Tomorrow you and I are going to take the day off to spend together; go do a little shopping, get us both some cellphones, and start finding our way back to being a family.”

He got up and pulled me into a tight hug that almost squeezed the air from my lungs, and then he pulled away a little to look down at me. His eyes shined.

“Now, go to bed.”

I wanted to say something, something to reassure him and something to just fix everything about the sudden and vast gulf I knew was between us but I couldn’t find the right words. Instead I turned and headed for the stairs. Just as I reached them I looked back over my shoulder at my dad framed against the unlit room.

“Dad…”

His eyes met mine, and I could see pieces of me in him; the too wide mouth, and too large eyes the lanky awkward movement of our limbs, and the dark curls of our hair. Out of the three of us my mother had always been the good looking one. Maybe my dad was right, maybe this could be the start of a new beginning.

“Yes, Taylor?”

“...I love you.”

I only waited long enough for him to return the words before I made my way up the dark stairwell, down the hallway, and into my room. I lay there for a long time, not even bothering to get underneath the covers. My feelings were a mess, and I wasn’t sure how to process them, I didn’t want to tell my dad anything about what had been happening to me for the past two years or about my night time activities. Trust had little to do with it, I was mostly afraid that telling my dad would give him things to worry about; but if he was already worrying was it fair to keep the things from that might help him understand what was going on? His reactions to what was happening at school I was pretty sure I could pretty accurately predict; he would hug me, and then he would run screaming down to the school demanding action which would get us both nothing except a headache. But telling him that I was a cape, and that things were happening to my body I couldn’t always control, predict, or even sometimes understand? How he would react to that I wasn’t so sure; maybe he would force me to join the Wards, or convince me to hide it, or he might do anything else and when I refused how much more damage would that do to our relationship?

At some point I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew I was waking up a hour later than normal to the faint sounds of activity downstairs. I made my way to the kitchen dressed in an old sweatshirt and sweatpants to find my dad busy at the stove top

“Oh good you’re up, I was going to wake you in a few minutes,” Dad said over his shoulder.

I could smell the bacon he was cooking and saw another pan with scrambled eggs cooking in it.

“Grab some plates for me, would you?” He asked.

I got a couple of plates out of the cupboard and set them on the table, then grabbed the juice out of the fridge and started up some toast. By the time the toast was done dad was loading up the plates with eggs and bacon.

We ate in an awkward silence, neither of us sure it seemed how to have a conversation in the light
of day.

By the time we made it out the door it was just after eight thirty and there were clouds in the sky just beginning to gather. I climbed into the front passenger seat and strapped in while my pink haired companion sat quietly in the back seat right behind me. Dad pulled the car out onto the street and we drove in silence, except for the the radio which thankfully saved us from any potentially uncomfortable conversations. Even though he had said he wanted us to reconnect, I don’t think my dad knew how to really start doing that either and so for the time being we both let the silence persist.

It took fifteen twenty minutes to make it to the mall because of traffic and then another five minutes looking for parking before we made it into the mall itself. It had been a long time since I had the urge or opportunity to come here; mom had usually taken me, and that had almost always been with Emma anyways. When I need stuff like school supplies or clothes dad always took me shopping to the stores that surrounded the mall but weren’t actually part of it, not that it mattered much to me.

The phone store was smaller than I’d imagine it to be, but I was stilled a little overwhelmed at first by the sheer variety of options and accessories that were stacked on the walls. The pink-haired loon flitted around the store trying to entice me into buying this or that phone with all the most garish accessories. My assumption had been that we would get the cheapest phones possible, and just be done with it but Dad apparently wanted something fancier because he got two smart phones, though they were still fairly cheap. Briefly I debated getting a bright pink case with a princess motif, much to the delight of my hallucination. I decided not to though because it seemed an unnecessary risk; it would probably never be noticed, but all the same it was a stupid gamble when I wasn’t even sure I actually liked the name, plus it would have just begged questions from Dad. After picking the phones out he spent probably twenty minutes getting the actual plan for the phones set up, I figured it only took so long because he was asking so many questions about this or that feature.

Finally though we had our phones in hand and exited the store to find someplace to sit and emine our purchase.

We found some seats in the food court and spent the next few minutes familiarizing ourselves with the functions and putting in what numbers we had; my list was pitifully small and consisted of Dad’s number and our home number. I didn’t really imagine that my list of numbers would grow much anytime soon.

After that we wandered around the mall, in and out of this or that store without generally buying much of anything until about eleven. Dad wanted to buy me clothes, but I was feeling vaguely guilty about that fact that I had basically resolved not to tell him anything real and didn’t want spend his money when I really didn’t need anything. All in all the entire outing was turning out ok, Dad hadn’t pushed on anything and we had even talked a little without it being completely awkward, still a little awkward but not completely. We grabbed a bite to eat from the same food court we’d used to figure out our phones, and talked some more; I told dad a little about stuff at school, mostly the littlest stuff that I barely noticed anymore. He didn’t seem to completely buy it but I wasn’t really willing to start spilling right here and now in a crowded mall food court, and maybe he got that.

Dad said we had somewhere else to go, so we left the mall and headed into downtown just as it started raining. I was a little confused, because there wasn’t really anything in the downtown which either of us would find all that interesting, so I thought that might have meant going through downtown was just the fastest way to get there but barely ten minutes later we were parking barely
a block away from Bay Central Bank. It wasn’t the only bank in the city, but it was certainly the largest by a wide margin.

Ok, so my Dad had brought me to a bank as a surprise.

“Dad, you know I’m a teenage girl, right, and not a forty year old?” I asked sarcastically.

He smiled and chuckle a little at that, but got out of the car and hurried through the rain to the entrance of the big stone building. He opened one of the main doors for me and then we both entered the lobby; it was basically like every fancy bank I had ever seen in a movie except smaller and there were maybe a couple dozen people not counting the bank employees. My mental tag-along reappeared as we entered the bank and seemed to find this new environment endless fascinating as she careened around the enormous room, twisting around pillars and ducking behind the bank tellers.

“After the hospital, you know the school gave us some money?” He asked, dragging my attention away from the sight of the crazy floating pink-haired girl I had dreamed up.

I nodded; Dad had never told me how much, but I had figured that it must have been enough for the school to think we wouldn’t talk but not so much that we would be considered rich or anything and start raising suspicions.

“Well, at first I just put it in a savings account as part of your college fund, really the largest part, but for these last few weeks I’ve been thinking, it really should be your money. You’re getting old enough that you should be learning to manage money, and bank accounts so we’re going to open up a whole new account for the money in your name.”

It was sweet honestly, and exactly the sort of thing I would expect from my father; who was sweet and caring, and practical almost to a fault. He signed a big ledger and we went to sit down in a sort of ‘u’ of couches with magazines stacked on a table in the center. Ten minutes later, as I was paging through some cape gossip magazine and reading about how Dragon was secretly dating Narwhal, I felt what I could only describe as a tug from the direction teller counters.

I looked up to find nothing out of the ordinary that I could see, just Dad was quietly reading some travel magazine and the other bank patrons engaged in what looked like your typical bank related activities. The tug, though it wasn’t really a tug so much as a vague sense of curiosity, persisted and then I noticed that Nono was looking in the same direction with a look of consternation on her face. Though I was aware of her almost constant presence throughout the morning, this was the first time in a few hours that I’d actually paid attention to her. Unfortunately, because vague undefined and ill understood feelings weren’t generally recognized as valid reasons to evacuate a building I couldn’t say anything to Dad, but the feelings only grew by the second.

When the employee door opened it was almost a relief, until I saw several monsters burst through the doorway which was quickly swallowed by a cloud of inky black darkness. Time seemed to slow for me; I could see the muscles in the monstrosities working at the same time as the cloud of darkness crawled out of the door and began billowing in all directions. Even before the other people looking in the same direction started screaming I was shoving my father and a girl with frizzy brown hair sitting next to him towards the floor.

In a moment the great beasts were in amongst the crowd of people, though they did nothing more than growl and shower some unfortunate people with blood and bits of torn fur from their own distorted bodies. Darkness briefly enveloped us all, and for that moment the entire world felt as if someone had hit the mute button, before it receded somewhat until it appeared to be more of a backdrop than anything else. In the center was the man in bike leathers from the other night,
looking very much like he was part of the smoking darkness.

Grue, shit. For a small moment I panicked and thought he might recognize me, but that was ridiculous, he couldn’t have gotten much of a look at me that night and I was reasonably sure there was nothing about what i was wearing right now that was reminiscent of my outfit. Behind him followed three other villains; one the girl that had been with him that night, Tattletale, a smallish teenager who wore a white mask with a silver crown on top and a fluffy shirt, behind him followed a large stalking figure who could only be Hellhound.

Shit. A group of four previously solo act villains working together, why hadn’t that been on their wiki pages? What could have brought them together in the first place, Hellhound at the very least would seem to be a nightmare to work with so maybe this was just a one off? Except that Hellhound and the other guy had to be the ones I’d seen in the shadows the other night, so it had to be more than just for this one job or this one job was bigger than it looked.

“All right, everybody listen up. So long as no one tries anything you’ll all get out of here without a scratch on’ya but anyone tries anything funny and Bitch here will have her dogs on you faster than you can blink, all right? All right,” Grue said before I had more than a moment to consider y

questions.

His voice was strangely pleasant if you ignored the death threats. He and Hellhound, who I assumed was who he meant by ‘Bitch’ turned and headed away from the crowd and presumably to the vault, taking the three largest beasts with them. Tattletale and the other guy stayed with the crowd and the remaining animals; Tattletale began to wander seemingly aimlessly through the crowd while the animals and the other villain moved towards the main doors of the lobby. It got the sense she was enjoying this to some extent. My dad was stockstill, his entire body rigid as he tried to keep an eye on each of the dogs, and both of the capes all at once. I was almost tempted to take action, but besides the fact that this would reveal my parahuman status to Dad and completely destroy any anonymity I might want to maintain, it also carried a massive risk for all the civilians in the room, I just couldn't be sure I was fast enough to take out the dogs plus two villains whose powers I had absolutely no clue about before one or both of them could grab a hostage. Then of course Grue and Hellhound would get involved and everything would get messy for sure at that point. Instead I remained where I was lying on the carpeted ground and wait either for them to take what they wanted or for the authorities to arrive and scare them off.

No one in the room made a sound for a good long while. But then the cape I didn’t know called out to Tattletale, motioning her over to the doors where they said a few words to each other and then the blonde made a quick jog towards the vault doors and a moment later Grue was following her out with Hellhound hot on his heels. They all gathered around the doors and took turns peering outside, then they engaged in several moments of furious debates, during which I was sure I heard one of the closer hostages moan at some comment. All I could make out were a few words, mainly ‘regent’, ‘boxed’, and ‘guess’.

A decision seemed to get made as Hellhound and Grue both burst out of the doors with two of the three remaining animals while the other two stayed inside. I tried to make sense of the few words I’d heard; likely they were reacting to the arrival of someone like the Protectorate or New Wave, possibly the Wards too. None of them had seemed happy at the developments outside, but they didn’t seem to be panicking exactly so whoever had shown up wasn’t enough to scare them, probably the Wards then. Beyond that I couldn’t really say much more about what might be going on outside. The only word I couldn’t make sense of at first was ‘regent’, but then I remembered that Grue had gestured toward the other boy as he’d said the word and it struck me that it might be his cape name.
“My friends have gone out to introduce themselves a bit to some guests, so if you all will simply remain calm and relaxed his will all be over soon.”

She gave a jaunty wave as she went towards the back offices, leaving us all alone with Regent and one of the massive creatures. The boy kept only a cursory eye on us hostages while he increasingly focused more of his attention on the action outside, we could hear a great deal of noise, and admittedly I found it nerve wracking not being able to see outside or intervene. After several more moments the girl I had pulled down seemed about to start getting up, but I turned towards her, shook my head emphatically and reached out to hold her down. She struggled for a moment to get up before giving up with an exasperated noise. Regent called for Tattletale, and when she came out again they had another brief but intense whispered conversation and then he was out the door to join the fight, leaving us with just Tattletale and the last dog. The villainess backed away from the door, and moved just past where I was when I noticed the frizzy haired girl putting something away in her pocket. I shot her a quizzical look but she only smiled at me.

Tattletale herself was looking in our general direction, with a funny expression on her face when there was the sound of shattering glass and the ping of twisting metal.

Glory Girl stood framed against shattered remains of the doors, a web of hairline cracks spreading out from where her feet had impacted the floor.

Then I heard the sound of a gun cocks.
Next to me I felt Dad tense up as Glory Girl stopped in her tracks, a grimace marring her famous face. Supposedly she was meant to have some sort of aura effect which made people more afraid in her presence; I wasn’t feeling anything though. It was possible her power had started working on everyone in the area the moment she’d arrived. My powers might also have given me an immunity, or it was more complicated than the wiki had made it out to be and had different effects based on people’s relationship to her. I couldn’t be sure what it was, but whatever it actually did didn’t seem to be affecting me.

I shifted my head enough to see the other side and almost gave a sigh of relief which quickly changed to consternation. Tattletale was standing just a few feet away, just out of reach of anyone while she very casually aimed a gun at the back of the head of the girl I’d pulled to the floor earlier, who was now looking straight at Glory Girl with a slightly embarrassed expression on her face.

“Hey Ames, you okay?” Glory Girl asked.

“I am now,” answered the girl.

Holy crap.

The girl I had dragged to the ground was Amy Dallon, aka Panacea of New Wave. I had practically manhandled her not once but twice in the last thirty minutes and now I was in the middle of some sort of mini family reunion between her and her big sister while a parahuman maniac pointed a gun at her head. Their voices sounded cheerier than was really appropriate given the apparent hostage situation which involved one of them, but I figured that was probably part of some manner of mind game.

“This is sweet, but I’ve got a bit of a twitchy trigger finger here, so let’s not get too casual.” Tattletales’ voice was smug in its matching casualness.

She reminded more than a little of Sophia and I started hating her just a little bit more than was probably warranted from her actions so far. The hand not holding the gun pointed at Panacea’s head came up, pointer finger extended, and she wagged it back and forth at Glory Girl.

“Nuh uh uh, no funny business you two. I’m a psychic so I’ll know if you even think about it.”

Fucking double crap, a fucking psychic. She had to know what and who I was, but if she did then why hadn’t she pointed the gun at me; I was probably a more pressing physical threat than Panacea. Sure if Panacea got a hand on her she could probably take the villain out of commission for the fight, given her power, but so far as I knew she wasn’t any faster than a normal person. But then of course she would have known Glory Girl was on her way, so Panacea was the smarter choice for hostage. Wait, but if she was psychic why hadn’t she twigged to either of us before now? Some limit to her power; but what would let her know Glory Girl was on her way, and let her pick out the one parahuman in the crowd most suitable as a hostage? The more I thought about the situation, her being a psychic didn’t fit really; it had to be something else that still gave her crucial information in moments of danger, right before the danger really. But then why hadn’t she gone out there into the fight? That sort of power could make someone virtually untouchable in a fight.
No it was something else, something that gave her information, but it couldn’t be automatic and it must have a limit strict enough that she couldn’t waste it fighting.

Glory Girl was apparently thinking along the same lines, as she tersely retorted, “Bullshit, the brain power you’d need to interpret and decode the unique neural patterns for even a single person would give you a head even bigger than even your apparent ego could contain. Actual psychics are impossible.”

Oh.

“Look who’s taken Parahuman 101 at the university. I guess that makes me a special little snowflake, now doesn’t it doesn’t it Glory Hole?”

Why Tattletale’s strategy involved needling the cape who could do a reasonable impersonation of Alexandria I wasn’t exactly sure, but I was sure that it was part of it in some manner. The hero’s response was filled with confidence that I wasn’t entirely sure was warranted in the situation given how in command the villainess seemed to be at this point. Tattletale had had the upper hand on the both of them the entire time and if I had been in Glory Girl’s position I would have been treating her with a lot more caution. I definitely wouldn’t be playing into this back and forth banter and would desperately be looking for some way to take her out fast before she managed to maneuver the situation into something to her liking.

“It definitely makes you something, well informed at least, and even if I don’t know how you know what you know I’m sure it isn’t because you can read any minds,” Glory Girl said as she stared intently at the other cape.

“I can prove it for you if I want. Now let me see, whose secrets should I unearth for this little demonstration? Yours or your sister’s?” She said waving her hand first towards the older and then younger sister as she posed the question.

I had the feeling she wasn’t really asking them, that she was treating this very much like a game she was playing with two opponents she vastly outmatched. Now she reminded me strongly of Emma, with the way she was lording her advantage over her victim, like a metaphorical sword of damocles. The comparison scared me more than the initial similarity to Sophia because while she was violent and vicious in her attacks Emma had always been better at manipulating the situation to both keep herself out of trouble and find her victims weakest point. Of course Tattletale likely outclassed even Emma and I had no trouble believing that if she thought it could save her life or get her something she wanted the cape wouldn’t hesitate to destroy someone’s life with a few well placed words.

“I think I’m getting why you call yourself Tattletale,” Glory Girl said in response. “but it’s just retarded. We’re New Wave, that means there’s no secret identities, no hidden pasts, no secrets. That’s the shtick.”

“Well, then all I’m about to do is tell a story,” Tattletale continued. “About eleven years ago a super team operating in the area under the name of Brockton Bay Brigade, you might know some of them I think, fought a villain in his own home in what is generally considered a decent fight. He’s a classy guy in a lot of ways, but still a real piece of work, so he gets sent off to the Birdcage.”

“I don’t see what any of this has to do with the two of us, it’s all public record,” the heroine interrupted.

“Oh I haven’t even got to the good part. See, there’s a problem; this daddy was a daddy and his
little girl is now all alone in the world, it’s a real sob story. And who’re the two at the center of it all, why it’s little Panacea an-”

“NO!” Shouted the girl in question.

It was the vehemence in Panacea’s voice that surprised me the most, and apparently Glory Girl as well. Whatever the villain had been about to say had her scared and angry judging by her expression as her entire body tensed, and her set itself in a grimace.

“Took you long enough…” Tattletale said to no one in particular as she seemed to relax minutely

For a moment her words didn’t make sense but then I noticed the noise, or rather lack of it, coming from outside. I could see Glory Girl begin to react even as I was in motion, but then she seemed to stumble halfway through whatever movement she was making, and I saw darkness billowing out of the destroyed doorway and into the lobby. Glory Girl was swallowed whole by the oncoming cloud of darkness, and as that billowing mass bore down on me I flung myself forward, grabbed Panacea and moved us both out of Tattletale’s line of fire. Then the world disappeared and I was lost in an expanse of inky blackness that strangled every one of my senses.

No shot followed, or at least nothing I could feel.

Finally after a few tense moments of the world on mute the darkness began receding, leaving a crowd of huddled people scattered around the lobby, and Glory Girl picking herself up off the floor with a distinctly unhappy expression as her eyes scanned the immediate surroundings for signs of her opponents before they came to rest on me. Or more Likely, her sister, who I was almost lying on top of. The white clad hero starting making her way over towards us and I did a quick once over of Panacea to determine if she had been injured. That was when I noticed that Panacea was staring at my hand, with which I had at some point reached over her body to drag her away from the line of fire.

Shit, I hadn’t even considered how weird it might be for her to have someone she didn’t know, and wouldn’t be expecting to touch her; from what I knew of her power and what I knew of the weirdness of powers from personal experience I couldn’t imagine what she was experiencing. I let go instantly, but thankfully smoothly, and rapidly put a little distance between the two of us.

Even as her sister came up to check on her Panacea kept her eyes on me for a moment, giving me a very strange look, but then her sister was kneeling down next to her and they began having a whispered conversation.

All around the lobby people were starting to realize that the immediate danger had passed and were starting to move and talking to one another; next to me my dad was staring at me, his entire body tense and his breathing quick. It hit. There had been a gun pointed in the general area of my father, maybe he hadn’t been in the direct line of fire, but if Tattletale had gotten even a hint of the fact that I was a hero she could have easily switched her aim with barely a twitch. I had lain there and done nothing until the situation was almost resolved and it was clear, now, that the gun had in fact been little more than a stalling tactic. It hit me that I had let my own father, a publicly known hero and countless other innocents in range be subject to that threat. It was about as far from heroic as I could imagine without getting into outright crime.

Was I even cut out for being a hero, or would I always be this terrified, this paralyzed by the fear of consequences and the unknown?

Even as I thought it Nono was in front of me, kneeling down to look straight at my eye level.
“Will you give into despair and throw away all your mother ever taught you? Nono does not think so. Will you abandon all those who need you? Again Nono thinks not. You have done great deeds already Taylor, Nono knows this, so you must listen when I say this feeling is not worthy of you. It is imposed by the words of petty bullies, who seek to dim your greatness. This was not failure. Look around, no one is injured; they will all leave today whole and happy to return to their normal lives and your decision is part of the reason why.”

I guess she was right, no one had been hurt at all in any of the events; would that have remained true if I had gotten involved? I didn’t know, it was maybe impossible to know. Motion to my right caught my attention; it was Dad, finally coming out of whatever state of shock had overtaken him.

He rushed towards me and set his hands on either shoulder.

“Taylor, oh god! What were you thinking, putting yourself in danger like that? Don’t you know what could have happened! Oh god! After your mother, Taylor, I can’t lose you. Do you understand? You're all that I have left,” he said, pulling me into a tight embrace.

I nodded, even if it wasn’t something that I could agree to, after all if I was going to be a hero there would be situations which put me in danger all the time that I couldn’t and wouldn’t avoid. There was something in my eye that wouldn’t go away without a couple perfunctory wipes. Maybe I could just tell him, if he knew everything he might understand why I would have to do these things, it might even make him less worried if he knew that I was resistant; at least up to a point, against harm. But I just wasn’t ready to tell him, even if we hadn’t been in the middle of a crowd of now milling people, so I just nodded in agreement to a promise I couldn’t actually keep. I thought I heard sirens in the distance, and felt like shit.

Less than a day since dad had promise to be a better parents, and here I was being a shitty daughter. We were doomed, and despite his worries it wasn't my dad’s fault at all.

Something was casting a shadow on both of us; I looked up and found Glory Girl and her sister standing behind my dad. She looked pretty damned impressive now that I could look at her and not be overwhelmed with thinking about the situation we were in; the stark white of her costume contrasted with the gold of her tiara, belt, and the clasps holding her cape made her a figure to behold. The cape in particular made her stand out even more, it wasn’t many Capes that could actually pull off the cape, and hers made her look even larger than she was. Nono was freaking out a little.

“Oooh! So cool, total hero package! Nono gives her an A plus on all accounts!”

Really looking at Glory Girl, I noticed that she was only a little taller than I was but not by much, which surprised me as I’d always picture her and others like her much more imposing and picturesque. With her standing so close I surprise to find that no matter how impressive she looked in her costume it was almost painfully clear that she was simply another person underneath it.

“Not many people would put themselves on the line like that, and a bullet to the head would have been as bad for my sis as it would be for anyone else. So, thanks,” She said thrusting out her hand.

The gesture put me in an awkward position what with my dad turning his back over his shoulder to look at her while he continued to embrace me and her hand coming at me over his shoulder; to shake her hand I had to reach over my dad and at least half stand up. Panacea was staring at me strangely and suddenly all I could think was that she knew. Shit, of course she knew, with her power she would have to know all sorts of details about someone’s body from a single touch to figure out what needed to be fixed. Maybe I could pretend everything was normal - She might just
think that I didn’t know what I was and I could fade into obscurity until I was ready.

“Y-you’re welcome, I guess,” I finally said, struggling for a moment to stand despite Dad’s grip on my. After a moment he got the hint and let me go to shake Glory Girl’s hand, though he kept a hand on my shoulder protectively.

I hated the nervousness that was creeping into my voice, god what a moron I must sound like to them. The entire series of events was just surreal, just four days ago I was just making the decision to finally go out as a cape and here I was having fought Oni Lee and Lung, inadvertently helped some local villain escape, been present at a bank robbery by those same villains, met Glory Girl, and somehow kinda sorta, but not really, saved Panacea’s life. It was all like some shitty wish fulfilment story; though if it really had been I would have probably met Alexandria and beat an Endbringer. Of course, the day wasn’t over.

Glory Girl nudged Panacea, seemingly startling her out of her reverie.

“Right, thank you, but really you shouldn’t have done that. We had the situation under control of course,” she said not unkindly.

With those last parting words the both of them left, or rather they went outside, probably to check on whatever heroes had been outside and make sure they were ok. Dad was still looking a little stunned by it all, he wasn’t any kind of cape geek or anything, infact I would be surprised if he knew any heroes names besides the obvious, but Glory Girl was one of those heroes that ended up on the local evening news every few weeks because she photographed so well. After a few moments Dad seemed to gather himself and then he was right back to worrying over me; I tried reassuring him that I would not be throwing myself into danger, but I think I only made myself feel worse every time I repeated the lie. Just as the crowd was beginning to get restless PRT officers start flowing into the lobby, mostly they were actually local police officers wearing PRT windbreakers but there were several men and women in suits among them who had the look that you see in detectives on TV. I figured they were probably the only actual PRT personnel on site; and pretty quickly they start taking statements from people.

Unfortunately they did not start with us or people near us, so it ended up being quite a while before anyone got to us. The officers that approached us could have nearly been twins, both of them were older, possibly balding under their hats, wearing darker suits that the others, and each with a thick bushy mustache.

“I’m Officer Thomson…”

“And I am Officer Thompson, and we’ll be taking your statements.”

“To be precise, it’s you’re statements we’re after.”

Their odd habit of repeating what the other said set the tone of the exchange and even though it wasn’t apparently a constant habit it got confusing very quickly. Strangely enough it never seemed to slow them down in their questions, the entire ordeal still took quite a bit of time, but eventually both me and Dad got through our accounts of the entire robbery. Of course I left a bunch of information out, for all the obvious reasons.

By the time we were free to go it was nearly four in the afternoon, and given what had happened neither of us was really in the mood to be out and about for any longer, so we decided to head home. It was an incredibly weird experience to drive home with my dad after that, and a very silent one, after all, what exactly do you talk about with your father when you’ve both been in the middle of a robbery but that was almost three hours ago?
Neither of us seemed to know, and so we passed the car ride in silence without even the radio to drown it out. Being at home wasn’t really much better in that sense, but it was more comfortable. The rest of the evening past in relative peace, and I can honestly say that even if we didn’t exactly talk much it was one of the more enjoyable nights I had spent with my dad in the last several months. I felt somehow lighter, like a burden had been lifted from my shoulders, even with my worries about telling my dad about what was happening with me and the anxiety of lying to him I still felt better now than any time in the last few months. Well, except for when I first discovered my powers.

Maybe that just meant the other shoe was going to drop.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh. That’s it, those are my feelings on this chapter.

Really I feel good about a good portion of the dialogue, but the narration pains me. Not even sure if I had a beta at this point.
When I got up in the morning I realized I was getting way too used to the sensation of going to bed after what should be life changing events only to spend the next day doing completely mundane things. Today looked to be one more day in what seemed to be turning into a pattern.

I squinted against the bare light filtering in through the window before I forced myself to sit up and start preparing for the day. Breakfast was awkward in ways that it hadn’t been before; with Dad trying to talk to me about everything that had happened yesterday, which again made me start feeling really shitty for all the things I wasn’t telling him. My guilt was alleviated a little by the thought that I had no idea how to even go about starting to explain everything that was going on with me.

Even if I’d been willing to tell him that I was superhero now, I didn’t think I could explain that I also apparently had a passenger along for the ride who told stories that begged more questions than they ever answered. I had to find a way to explain it all to him. Otherwise I would only wind up lying to him about something no matter what I did. At least, that was how I was how I came to see it on the bus ride to school. Maybe it was a rationalization.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately for my continued sanity, Nono remained steadfastly silent on the issue. It was weird but I didn’t end up actually paying much attention to her unless she was doing something specific that caught my attention. She seemed to just drift away as she explored. When my tag-along did show herself, I was starting to notice a certain sense of comfort just from her presence. It felt good to have someone who I knew was in my corner, someone who seemed to take my side by default. Or, maybe not always my side, but so far the worst she’d done was force me to hold myself to the standards my mother had instilled in me.

My thoughts distracted me until I got to school. After everything that had happened recently, the place had somehow lost its edge. It had never really scared me even with the gang problems or at the height of the misery of dealing with Emma and the others. No, it had never been fear, but there had definitely been a sort of dread and loss of any enthusiasm for the place that had emerged. Now it all seemed so very pointless to worry at all about anything that happened in between those walls.

In contrast to what I knew was out there, to what I knew I could be doing out in the world the entire exercise of school seemed monumentally unimportant. What made it worse was that over the last few months the assignments had been getting easier. It wasn’t like I knew what was being taught before it was, you know, actually taught, but that whenever I was presented a new problem I could work out the answer really quickly. Studying had stopped being a thing for me, after the first time I read or heard something I remembered it and I could just sort of follow it all. More original stuff was the exception: art especially, I was finding I had to try just as hard at and papers were easier only in that I could remember the exact place to find quotes to support my arguments but I still had to work out how to argue the point in the first place. Grammar and spelling were a snap though.

If it weren’t for the fact that I’d have to explain to dad, I would have started skipping school weeks ago.

Today was already turning out to be much of the same. Classes passed by dully, but thankfully today was not one of those days that seemed to drag on forever.

School was steadily becoming more tolerable even as it seemed to be becoming less and less important to me. No one had done anything to me, beyond simply ignoring me, for several days which was almost as depressing as it was encouraging. What did it say about me, that the good
days were those in which I was just ignored? I mean, it wasn’t like my every waking second had been miserable before; none of the trio had nearly that much pull with everyone at school. But still life had been considerably worse when I was looking over my shoulder for what came next. I still found myself waiting for the next incident, but over time I figured I could deal. And now? With something outside of school, idiotic teenage dramas and something that was my own that none of them could touch; where I could really shine for what I did? That was sweet.

My earlier plans to try and humiliate Sophia by beating her where she was best had started to feel hollow sometime in the last few days. I didn’t want to turn into the sort of person who would only help others out of some petty scheme to put down someone else, if I did that it would be like admitting defeat in a weird way. Like saying that doing good only mattered, that people only matter because of how they could make me look better; it would turn into a fucked up, twisted version of the same things Emma and her pack did to me.

Criminals deserved to go to jail because they did something wrong. Not because I needed to make others feel like less or wanted to assert my place in some shitty medieval hierarchy of fucked-upness where the only people on top were those that could beat up the people below them.

It all came back to my mom. She had taught me there were lines you didn’t cross, not just because you feared the consequences but because when you did sometimes what you did couldn’t be undone, forgiven, forgotten, or fixed. Not that every law was like one of those lines, but that you could give way too much and too often on some lines and then, then the system broke.

Maybe it didn’t make too much sense when I tried to explain it, even to myself. Suffice it to say though that I meant to be firmly on the side of the good in the world; there were enough people out there in the world being shitty and with all my experiences on the receiving end, I didn’t want to be another bully. Even without mom, given everything that had happened to me, I think I would have come that conclusion on my own.

One interesting thing had started happening. The day after my second night out as hero, at lunch, Sparky had sat down at the same table as me. He wasn’t exactly chatty and he only sat down at the same table. But given that I hadn't seen him in the cafeteria before it was definitely an event. In the days following, he'd only done it one other time before today. Of course, he'd only had one other chance so maybe that wasn’t surprising, but it was still nice to be acknowledged. Sort of. Well, not actively shunned.

He’d never so much as said hello before, but then I hadn’t exactly sought him out. And maybe he had his own problems, so I couldn’t exactly start blaming him. Again, it probably said something important that even the little that he was doing made me feel better.

I guess maybe I was a little starved for attention. I tried not to spend much time thinking about that or contemplating the potential reasons for Sparky’s sudden bout of apparent interest. I let most of my attention be consumed by thoughts about how I was going to patrol tonight.

Just thinking of all those possibilities helped consume to the rest of the day until it was time to go home. I wasn’t looking forward that much to going home. That made me feel guilty all over again. The public bus home had always been a bit of respite for a while now, not many kids lived in my direction and few of those that did went home as early as I did. Most tended to hang out with friends. Today only three other kids my age were on the bus, none of whom I really recognized. The other passengers were a mix of adults, college kids and old people.

Brockton Bay Metro buses were pretty good, as far as they went. I didn’t really have anything to compare them to so I couldn't say how good they really were. I never really had a problem using them to get around. Sure, I only had a few places I went, but the bus system covered most of the
city. They could have done with a better website, maybe something to help with planning a route out so you didn't have to ask the drivers whenever you wanted to find out how to get somewhere you hadn’t gone before.

Worse, sometimes routes had to be diverted and there was never any way to know ahead of time. Sometimes a trip that usually took twenty minutes ended up closer to half an hour because the bus route had to go around some road work or something.

That was happening now according to the bus driver’s announcement. It wasn't much of an issue for me, since dad probably wouldn’t be home for another hour or two I had plenty of time. The new route also went past some thrift stores I could browse through for better costume pieces. Luck hadn’t been on my side the last few times I’d tried, but if I didn’t look I would never find anything good.

Something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. The bus was passing to the left of one of those electric company substations, the ones with all the funky looking metal things. But there was something off. In amongst all the twisting architecture of metal a bright spot of light was growing, rapidly. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the pinpoint of light became a fireball. Before I could react pieces of debris - rocks, shards of metal, masonry and other things - crashed into the right side of the bus.

The entire vehicle rocked onto its left side wheels and hung for a moment, teetering at an angle before it crashed down on its side. Shit, shit, shit. I was fine, but looking around I could see people thrown from one side of the bus laying crumpled in piles of two or three, some bleeding from being struck by debris. Others had limbs at awkward angles or lay unconscious after knocking their heads on poles, windows, or the ceiling in our brief journey through the air. Some people were already beginning to make noise or come out of their brief loss of consciousness.

I extracted myself from my own position, which had been with my back against the ceiling and my ass planted on a window. Shards of glass rained down onto the surface beneath me as I moved.

First priority: get out of the bus. Whatever had caused the initial explosion looked like a bomb, but it might have been something else as well and whatever it was there could still be a follow up. I looked around. The now-skyward windows would be difficult to get people out of, same with the doors, and the other direction was useless for obvious reasons. Front or back windows could work, but some of them would have to drag themselves from one end to the other and I was sure not everyone was in the right condition to do that safely. I noticed a hatch, formerly on the ceiling and now on what I chose to see as the wall.

I grabbed at the opposite side railings, ceiling railings now I suppose, jumped a little, gathered my legs underneath me, then swung forward and extended. The hatch popped off and went sailing for a moment before it tumbled to a halt against a parked car on the other side of the street with all its windows blown out.

“Hey, everyone! Stay here while I go get help!” My voice got a lot of people’s attention and a few even seemed to understand what I meant. Outside the street was relatively clear; on the opposite front side of the bus a block and a half away, a car was sitting in the middle of the street at an angle with the drivers side door hanging open. Someone who must have been the driver of the car was standing just a few feet from the bus, he was unscathed as far as I could see and periodically switching between holding his phone up to his ear and dialing the same three digits.

Presumably he was dialing nine-one-one, only he didn’t appear to be getting through given his repeated attempts.
I heard a distant thump. Other explosions, and not just one or two. It might have been dozens scattered throughout the city maybe; more or less destructive than the one here but panic inducing all the same. Hundreds could be injured, plus thousands more frightened out of their minds because they no longer felt safe. I had get my costume and start helping where I could, but I had no idea what had been hit so I would have to go home first and hope the news was already starting to report.

I tried to orient myself towards home, and that was when I noticed the car on the other side of the bus - turned over on its top.

I sprinted over. Inside there was a woman behind the steering wheel, only barely conscious and struggling to get at something in the back seat. I checked there and saw a young girl strapped into a car seat crying her eyes out; I was nearer the woman so I moved to the drivers side door and pulled on the latch. Something had jammed the door; it didn’t open at first but I pulled harder and there was a tearing noise and the door almost me off in my hands. I unbuckled the driver, and careful to make sure she didn’t immediately fall on her head and pulled her out. She struggled against me, now more aware of what was happening and desperate to get back to what I assumed was her little girl.

“No! No! My sister!” she said a bit incoherently.

Okay then. “Stop it! I’ll get her,” she ordered the girl

The young woman stopped trying to get back into the car at that, but then just started sobbing. I really didn’t know how to deal with that so I moved to the back door and pulled it open. Whatever had damaged the front door apparently hadn’t done anything to the back. The little girl was maybe five or six and completely uninjured as far as I could see, but obviously terrified. I unbuckled her from her car sat and, again careful to make sure she didn’t fall on her head pulled her out. She didn’t give me any trouble besides crying and screaming incoherently, so I gave her right back to her sister. Now that I actually looked at the driver, she couldn’t have been more than a couple of years older than me so I don’t know why I’d assumed she was the mother.

The older girl held onto her sister as if for dear life. I didn’t know else to do, so I turned and started dashing home. As the scenery streaked past me I realized I should call my dad. My phone had been in my backpack and was thankfully undamaged, I found. I swung the bag back onto my shoulders as I dialed Dad’s work number on the phone and brought it up to my ear. He picked up before it even rang once.

“Taylor! Oh, thank god, you're alright. Where are you?”

I could hear the relief in his voice. I winced at the thought that I was probably about to destroy that relief. “Heading home dad. But dad listen…”

“Good. Stay there. Most of it is downtown or farther south. So just go home and stay there. I’m on my way home.”

Well, that helped narrow down where I would be needed.

“No. Dad, listen. I have to do something, I won’t be home when you get there, I-" I couldn’t explain now; not over the phone, and not when people’s lives hung in the balance. "I have to do something. See you later, I love you.”

“Taylor, what-”
I hung up before he could say anything else. The phone rang the rest of the way home, constantly vibrating, stopping briefly every few moments before it started up again. My costume was in the basement, hidden behind a stack of old boxes, I could grab it quickly and another bunch of clothes in amongst all those boxes wasn’t that weird.

I then rushed to the living room to turn on the TV, switching immediately to a channel with news. What the news said agreed for the most part with what my dad had said on the phone except that they mentioned a few attacks to the north and west, just barely inside the city really.

That was weird…

Why attack all along the edges of the city? Unless maybe you wanted to draw everyone away from the center, but what for? The only thing of any real interest in that area was the local PRT headquarters, but that was a virtual fortress and besides capes would be quick to respond to any atta-

Except all the capes would be distracted by trying to help people around the city. Who would be left to worry about one of the most heavily defended buildings in the city? But still, why attack it?

It had to be a villain trying to free someone and the only recent capture of note would be Lung.

Oni Lee could be trying to spring his boss, except the attacks had been to tightly spaced for it to be his clones blowing themselves up. Could one of the other gangs be doing this as a way to take out Lung and hamstring the ABB? Maybe, but it didn’t make much sense. He would be heading to the Birdcage anyways, so why risk him getting loose in the fight? No, it had to be the ABB trying to free their boss.

I remembered then that they’d had a new parahuman, Bakuda. The gang’s newest inductee was a Tinker, according to her blurb on the PHO wiki, who had initially bombed her university campus up in New York over some issue of grades or something. Obviously she was the most likely suspected in all of this but I couldn’t completely discount some other, unknown actor taking action. The fourth cape at the bank robbery for instance, Regent, I didn’t know what his power was so he could be just as responsible though I had no idea what possible motivation he could have.

Well whatever was happening, I’d made my choice. I would head downtown, but try to stay as close as possible to the PRT Headquarters, to be in position to head off any attack there.
I grabbed my costume, as much as the white hoodie and sweat pants I had been using could be called that, from the basement and returned to the living room. As I changed I left the TV on so I could keep an eye on the news, but the anchors were just repeating stuff about multiple attacks spread across the city or for people to report any suspicious activity they saw. Of course in the next breath they would say how phone lines across the city were jammed due to high volume. Over the sound of the TV I could hear distant sirens.

Now that I had my costume on I made a quick exit out the back door and started running towards downtown, feet pounding steady beat against the pavement. I had left my bag at home seeing as I wasn’t likely to need it, but my phone I had stuck into one of my pockets just in case. It was turned off now, but its weight still jostled against my leg with every step. For several minutes I took nothing but back alley streets and shortcuts through yards until I could get to a major road heading downtown.

The first thing I noticed were the clouds of smoke pluming into the air off to my left. The closest landmark in that direction was Brockton Bay College.

Going by the volume of smoke I could see the situation there had to be pretty serious, but diverting from my original destination could mean I would be out of position to deal with a potential jail break situation. Of course, there were likely to be first responders already at the college who I could notify about the people back at the bus and they were likely to be much closer than any other potential officials and so better able to get someone to the site swiftly.

Besides, could I abandon the people in danger here in the vague hope of stopping Lung from getting free? What if I got there and he was already gone or I found a dozen other heroes already there? Could I live with myself, after having abandoned who knows how many innocents without having done anything? Wasn’t this really what I was here to do? I had taken Lung on before and come out on top, who was to say I couldn’t do it again?

I made a sharp adjustment to my course, to dash across the open street. My body was reaching its limits, even if I didn’t feel tired I could sense whenever I tried to push my legs faster some sort of barrier where my feet just adjusted down to regular speed. It felt frustrating to know there was potential beyond that, power that would let me do more, but which I just couldn’t reach.

Some of what Nono had been telling me recently hinted that I was capable of a great deal more than what I currently could do, but whether it was a matter of learning to manipulate some sort of first principles stuff or something else altogether wasn’t clear. Frankly, a lot of what I had already accomplished frightened me, at least when I thought about the possible implications. The idea that I might develop more weirdness which would only increase the gulf between me and other people really freaked me out; enough so that I had been avoiding thinking about the issue much. Avoiding those sorts of thoughts was harder when I used my powers for a lot of reasons.

I vaulted the hood of a car still in motion and by the time I heard it braking I was halfway across the next lane and gone seconds later. I wondered briefly what the driver must have thought. Several more moments passed by before I came within sight of the College; from this vantage point I couldn’t see the actual site of the attack but going by the direction of the smoke, the movements of the growing crowds of students, and the sounds of approaching sirens I could make a guess. It took another minute or two to actually make my way because I didn’t want to accidentally injure anyone in a reckless dash across the campus. The crowd started to thin closer to the source, where I found another type of crowd: this one made up of firefighters, EMTs, and
polices officers keeping the milling looky loos away from the danger.

Streams of water arced from two of the firetrucks towards one building directly ahead, but the high pressure water didn’t seem to be having much effect and there was a very strange look to the flames. I edged around the crowd towards a less populated portion and pushed to the front, receiving more than a few grumbles in the process, until I was standing in front of a police officer. He was paying more attention to controlling the crowd than any one person in it, but it wasn’t too hard to attract his attention.

“A bomb went off at the power substation on Pine," I shouted, to be heard over the general noise. "there’s a bus full of people who need medical attention."

I ducked under the police tape stretched in front of the crowd while he was busy relaying the report on his radio, lifting it slightly with my right hand so I didn’t have to bend too low, and in general just tried to act like I belong there. The officer’s face morphed quickly from the shocked expression.

“Hey, kid you can’t-”

He didn’t finish his sentence, but he also didn’t follow to stop me. Unfortunately it wasn’t like in the movies where after the heroine gets past the tape no one bothers them; I could already see several police turning towards me. Or at least they were turning towards the brief commotion that I had caused.

Deciding not to wait for any of them to reach me so they could stop me I took off in a sprint, past the line of preoccupied firefighters and towards the burning building. Now that I was past the obstructions of the crowds and vehicles I could see the state of the building more clearly. It was a four story affair of brick and mortar construction with little in the way of embellishments or decorations. One of the corners had been reduced to rubble. A gaping hole yawned there, belching smoke from two levels and inside I could see the inferno that raged.

My feet quickly carried me into the burning building. Smoke filled in the interior hallway and obscured my vision after a few feet but otherwise failed to impede me; a moment later he smoke cleared slightly. Hopefully that meant that the firefighters’ efforts were finally paying off.

The hallway I had entered through proceeded in a little farther before it split off into two branches that both ended in staircases which obviously lead to the other levels. From where I was the hole made by the bomb was located to my right; that was where I was most likely to find injured people but it was where I would have to be the most careful as well in case of structural damage. Anyone who hadn’t been injured in the initial blast would have headed away from the site of the worst damage, most of them would hopefully already be outside of the building so my priority had to be whoever hadn’t escaped already.

I went right, checking the doors as I went. All the rooms on this level that I had passed were empty, which made sense given how close they were to the exit. On reaching the staircase it became apparent the building had at least one basement level which meant I had another choice to make; either go upstairs closer to where the bomb had gone off or downstairs to see if anyone had taken refuge in the basement to escape the smoke.

Anyone downstairs would probably be relatively safe so upstairs it was. I had to force the door open on the second floor because it was warped in its frame, it started moving so fast I was afraid it would come off. I probably needed to figure out someway to force doors open without having to almost tear them out of their hinges. The smoke up here was worse that it had been downstairs, with a strong smell of burning plastic that reminded me of the time Emma and I had tried to cook
some of those plastic fake foods when we were seven. I was even starting to feel the heat from the fire.

Huh. I hadn’t actually seen any fire yet, that didn’t quite make sense. With the amount of smoke filling the building I would have expected to be fighting through fire almost from the second I entered. There was certainly enough heat for the entire place to have been on fire, but no flames.

There were more classrooms on this level, though they were of a decidedly different style. Each room was filled with long tables, things that looked like industrial sized sewing machines, and piles of fabric. I watched some of the piles catching on fire, there at least were some flames. I checked each classroom, but there was no one in any of them at all until finally I arrived at the end of the hallway.

The doorknob was practically glowing from heat so I just kicked the damn thing. This door, being made of wood rather than metal just sort of crumbled around my foot instead of coming unhinged, what greeted me inside was not exactly what I had been expecting, though maybe given the weirdness I had already noticed it should have been. Instead of fire, I found a single very brightly glowing sphere, levitating over a hole literally melted into the floor, and if I craned my neck to get a look towards the floor above me I could make out another hole with another glowing ball on the level above. Here the stench of melting plastics was stronger and there was even a tinge of that sort of metallic aftertaste you get whenever you bite the inside of your cheek hard enough to draw blood. Each device was also producing copious amounts of thick black smoke from its top and bottom.

Had to be Tinker tech.

For the first time in several minutes I heard signs of another person from basically right above me so I craned my neck again and caught a glimpse of gold on white. Glory Girl, two days and two run ins with Miss-Junior-Alexandria, what were the odds? She didn’t seem to have noticed me yet so I took the initiative.

“Uh, hey. Down here.”

She took a moment to locate the direction of my voice, then a look of surprise flashed over her face as she looked down through the hole. Whatever else could be said of Gory Girl, she recovered from surprise quickly.

“Hey, you’re a new face…” The smoke didn’t seem to bother her much either or the heat for that matter which gave us something in common and wasn’t surreal as all hell.

“I, uh, guess yeah. This is my fifth time out in costume, name is, uh, Princess by the way.”

And was I ever beginning to hate the name I’d given myself. Not so much because of the name itself but more for the fact that I couldn’t get it out smoothly to save my life. The entire cape name introduction thing was awkward as hell and the fact that I couldn’t get it out without starting to feel vaguely embarrassed meant that I stumbled all over it in mid-sentence. I actually liked the name, I figured that once I really got out there at least some of the stupider class of villains would underestimate me just because of my name.

Glory Girl had the decency to at least cover up her thoughts on my cape name, whatever they might actually be. She looked from me to the glowing balls for a few seconds before she opened her mouth.

“So, any ideas?”
We both shared a long mutual look. I considered the possible answers; frankly there weren’t many good ones. Waiting was right out, who knew when someone more qualified would even be able to get here in order to give the things a look and moving them didn’t seem entirely advisable what with them generating massive amounts of heat. Though, if they could be gotten to the bay the water would probably be more than enough to deal with the heat generation; of course that would entail moving at least one of them through heavily populated neighborhoods. I really wished I could fly. No, the best solution was to deal with them right here and now with just the two of us.

My logic was pretty straightforward; the bombs were obviously Tinker tech and just as obvious they had already been fully activated so they were the sort of bomb that produced a persistent effect rather than the kind that went boom when the clock reached zero. I wasn’t sure someone like Bakuda, who couldn’t have been totally right in the head to bomb her campus over something like her grades, would have put a way to turn the devices off so our options to put an end to whatever it was they were doing were limited. Basically they amounted to breaking whatever fiddly bits of Tinker tech inside made them work, find a way to contain them until some sort of Tinker bomb disposal team could get here, or transport the objects over the city and drop them into the bay and hope the water would contain any further danger. Frankly the last two options seemed both incredibly iffy and potentially dangerous as both involved leaving the devices in a populated area doing whatever they did for a prolonged period of time.

“Bash ‘em ‘til they break,” Glory Girl said.

“Hit them, until they crack,” I said at the same time.

I stared at her and she stared back before we both broke into giggles for a brief moment. Once I had my composure back I focused on the glowing thing in front of me and considered how best to demolish this particular problem. Well, considering that I wasn’t aware that I could do anything offensive beyond hitting stuff hard until it broke I guess there really wasn’t much to consider.

I reached for my target with my right hand tentatively, afraid that I might catch on fire but when nothing happened after a moment I started moving more assuredly. Now with the object in hand I swung with my left hand as hard as I could which unfortunately only seemed to dent the outer casing so I swung again, and again, and kept swinging until the thing in my hand was more a hunk of irregular metal than anything else. Thankfully it seemed to do the trick and nothing went boom in the process. I looked up at Glory Girl to find her holding her own misshapen hunk of former Tinker tech.

“Search the building?” With the two of us it would a lot easier to cover the entire building, specially since she could fly.

“Upper floors are clear, I noticed the smoking balls of heat after I finished checking this floor.”

I nodded at that. “Ok, I’ll check the basement then.”

The other heroine nodded at me distractedly, her attention turning to something she could see outside through the gaping hole in the side of the building. I was turning towards the door when I got an idea; the hole was about the right size that a person could fall right through, and that way I wouldn’t have to trudge down the stairs. Before I had the chance to let common sense to take over, I took a few steps forward and then a short hop brought me over the edge.

It was all a lot less exciting than I had first imagined. Granted it had accomplished what I wanted as I was now on the first floor in the room directly below, I stuffed the twisted hunk of metal into the pocket of my hoodie and then left the room. There was still a lot of smoke filling the hallways, but it almost disappeared completely once I went downstairs. The basement appeared to be some
sort of storage area: large metal shelves stretched across the entire room, fabrics, clothes and various other supplies burdening their surfaces.

“Anyone here?” she called out.

No response, but I thought I heard some sort of noise that might have been a whimper or maybe just the scurrying of a rat. Some of the stuff had fallen over, presumably during the initial explosion, so I had to pick my way through the basement a little. Nothing here actually looked dangerous but if there was anyone to rescue down here I’d really rather I didn’t fall flat on my face in the process of trying to save them, I couldn’t think of much that would be more humiliating. As I neared the other stairwell I heard the noise again, and this time I was sure it had to have come from an actual person.

“You can come out.”

Still no response, or at least nothing verbal. I followed the direction that the frankly pitiful sounds were coming from and there tucked between a pile of fabric and one metal frame stacked with boxes was a girl. She was all huddled into herself, her entire body shaking and periodic whimpers or sobs escaping. Even though I was sure she was several years older than me, right now she looked like a lost little girl hoping the monsters would go away if she couldn’t see them. I crouched down so that I was on her level and reached out tentatively with my right hand towards her knees, hesitating for fear of startling her I tried to speak as quietly and gently as I possible could.

“Hey, hey, I’m here to help and to get you out of here. You’ve just got to take my hand and come with me, okay?”

The girl startled but then raised her head, her long black hair framed a face that was a lot prettier than anything that had looked back at me from my mirror even if it was disheveled from what was looking like a great deal of crying. Her eyes were wild and for a moment I wasn’t quite sure if she was really seeing me, but then her gaze focused on my face.

“She didn’t want to do it, I could tell. She was crying, wh-when she t-took it out.”

Oh, fuck. She had been there or at least been close enough to see whoever had set the bombs off actually do it and it didn’t sound like they’d been willing. If Bakuda was using some sort of leverage to force people to set off or just plant, the bombs then that meant I really needed to get out of here and get to the PRT headquarters. If the ABB hadn’t already broken Lung out of his cell then it would be soon. First I had to get this girl out of here though.

“T-there was so much heat a-and she j-just turned all to d-dust, she didn’t even scream, just b-burned a-all up.”

She was back to shaking, crying and basically just not being responsive in general to any external stimulus so I grabbed her by the arms and tried to hoist her up. There was no resistance from her and once on her feet she just sort of stayed there, I looked around for something to protect her from the smoke upstairs and pulled a long piece of cloth from the pile next to us. Holding the cloth to her face with my left hand I grabbed her opposite shoulder with my right and started steering us out of the mess. The going was slow because she would just sort of shuffle her feet to move and so I had to move both of us around any big obstacles on the floor.

It took several agonizing minutes to get us up the stairs but then the going was relatively free through the first floor hallway, once I got us both outside I let go of the cloth and used my other hand to lift her. I carried the relatively short distance to the waiting line of firefighters and paramedics. Once they had the girl, and had handed the misshapen hunk of former bomb to a very
nervous looking firefighter, who used a pair of metal tongs and some heavily insulated gloves to carry it away.

“Glory Girl is on the-” Nevermind I could see the famous heroine standing a ways away behind an ambulance. I tried to put all of this out of my mind and focus on the next issue, getting to the PRT headquarters.

Running would take too long to get anywhere useful. I could take one of the cop cars scattered nearby, but stealing a police car didn’t seem all that smart and I didn’t know how to drive anyway. At the same time, trying to convince one of the cops here to take me there without any evidence but my own say - so didn’t seem likely. I needed something fast, someone that would- Glory Girl! I glanced around to relocate her and found her standing exactly where she had been, not too far off fiddling with a phone in a way that didn’t seemed to indicate it wasn’t cooperating. I dashed towards her.

“Piece of shit!”

I reached her just as she was throwing the offending item on the ground and getting ready to stomp it into scrap. “Glory Girl!”

She looked up at me for a moment in surprise, then her expression changed to recognition. “Oh, hey, Princess Girl, whaddya want?”

I grimaced at her tone, apparently she wasn’t the friendliest person but then again I didn’t know what was going on with her at the moment so maybe she just had a lot on her mind. I pushed that from my mind. “Just Princess actually, but that’s not important. I need a ride; Lung is escaping from the PRT headquarters, like, right now.”

The young heroine looked at me for a long second, then sighed, “Fine.”

In a moment she had her hands underneath my arms and was lifting me off the ground. In seconds we were dozens of feet off the ground, and then more until I could see the tops of all the surrounding buildings. We stopped rising and Glory Girl took a moment to orient herself I guess, but the we shot off again towards downtown. I glanced up briefly and even though her face was set into a serious expression there was a sort of relaxation in her body that told me she really enjoyed flying. I turned my gaze back to the ground, not wanting to miss Lung and his men in case they’d already broken him out.

For several seconds I didn’t see anything but then I saw some streaks of flame shooting into the sky, that had to be Lung fighting someone. Hopefully we wouldn’t be too late.

“Just drop me when we get there!”

“What?” Glory Girl sounded like she wanted to make sure if I was nuts or not.

“Drop me when we get there!”

She nodded. As we got closer I began to be able to make out the figures on the ground: Lung for one, someone in a red costume with a shield on it which had to be Aegis, another person in a black spandex suit who I didn’t recognize, and finally someone lying several feet away unmoving in a white costume with clocks all over it. Clockblocker. The other two were still fighting Lung, who was already bigger than the time I’d fought him, and it was quite clear the two Wards were outmatched. I felt Glory Girl drop me and then the wind was ripping past, me and less than a second later my feet slammed into the ground. I managed to only tumble a few feet forward before...
I righted myself.

As I stood up, I could see the guy in black turn his head just a little to see what was going on. Unfortunately he chose just the wrong moment, as Lung’s fist immediately slammed into him and sent him flying back first into a brick wall. The wall cracked but didn’t crumble, though for whatever reason the hero didn’t get up; whether because Lung was just hitting that hard or due to earlier hits against him I didn’t know. Now that I was on the ground I could see Clockblocker more clearly and what I saw made it worse than I had thought; there was a lot of blood, at least one arm was broken, and his costume had been burned away in places. Lung must have hit them fast and from a concealed position to take out Clockblocker so quickly, before he could freeze either his own costume or Lung.

Glory Girl entered the arena with a crash that showered me with bits of shattered pavement.

“Get your sister!”

“WHAT!? Don’t thi-” She spluttered indignantly for a moment, but I wasn’t about to let her start arguing.

“Those two need help and you’re the fastest flyer. So. Get. Your. Fucking! Sister!”

She hesitated a moment longer than I liked.

“There isn’t time to argue about this in committee!”

"I AM NOT A COMMITTEE!” Despite her response, she shot off into the sky. I turned my attention to Lung, who had himself turned his attention to me. The villain let out a rumbling laugh and then opened his mouth-

“OO!”

“Yeah, me.”

I wished I had something better to say, but that was really all that came to mind. Aegis looked very confused, his head whipping between the two of us like he wasn’t sure which one of us was the more interesting maniac. His confused reaction almost made me want to laugh, but the gravity of the situation soured any humor in it. At least two heroes seriously injured, any number of buildings already on fire and it was just me plus an already tired Aegis facing down a pissed off Lung already more powerful than the last time I had taken him on. I hadn’t thought myself suicidal before but I was really starting to question my own judgement.

Mister dragon face didn’t give me the chance to give much more thought to my own idiocy because he immediately shot a stream of fire at me and charged. I didn’t know if a barreling multi-ton, scaled asshole would really hurt me, but I didn’t want to take the chance so I dodged to my left out of the stream of flames.

Lung stopped on a dime, not giving me the chance to get any separation from him. I ducked underneath a right handed swing and kicked him in the stomach as I darted past his bulk, he didn’t even seem to notice.

He was rounding on me, flames already streaming off his hands when a human bullet slammed into his side and sent him reeling off balance for a few feet. Aegis didn’t stick around inside his reach, darting back with the reaction from slamming full strength into Lung's scaly hide, which gave me an opening to dash in and swing at the big brute.
My arm *Moved*.

It didn’t feel any different, not really, but at the same time it was like the frustrating barrier I noticed earlier just evaporated, just for a moment.

I was already swinging with my other arm when Lung’s backhand sent me tumbling backwards. Although I only got my feet under me again just in time for Lung to charge at me again, I saw a web of cracks spreading on his chest. That hit had done real damage.

Aegis slammed into his back and once again sent Lung stumbling, but the villain was more prepared for it this time so he recovered quicker. Before the red-suited hero could get back out of Lung’s reach a giant, clawed hand darted out and grabbed the Ward by his head.

I ran forward and scrambled up Lung’s back, trying to distract him enough that he would let go of Aegis, and swung at his head a couple of times. He was large and deformed enough now that it was actually a little hard to tell what was his head and not just his neck.

Lung slammed Aegis into the ground once, then twice, before he let him go flying in the same direction of his teammates. Meanwhile one of my fists hit him hard enough that a handful of scales came off and the surrounding scales cracked. It hardly seemed to faze the villain.

One arm came up and tried to grab me off his shoulder, but I dodged to the other side of his broad back to launch myself off the opposite one. His frustrated roar shook the windows in the surrounding cars and buildings.

“‘A HURRRH!’”

Honestly, it was a little hard to take him seriously when he talked like that. Of course the fact that he was a giant scaled monster who breathed flames and was on fire helped disperse any notions of comicality from his impaired speech. I could see blood trickling down the side of his face to drop onto the ground where it hissed and smoked.

Lung roared again and grabbed a nearby car with both his hands, then flung it at me. I couldn’t get out of the way in time, so I just caught it. My reflexes moved me before I even noticed he was moving, and I didn’t have time to give the weirdness of that another thought.

Before I knew what was happening Lung was on me, moving faster than I’d thought he could in his rage. He got a good hold of both ends of the car, then just folded it around me. I squirmed against the twisted undercarriage of the car and it even started loosening, but then the villain breathed fire. His flames were hot enough that the metal actually started softening, which made it both easier for me to manipulate and harder because the entire car moved less. Unfortunately, while he was sandwiching the car around me something must have pierced the gas tank because there was sudden and loud ‘whumph!’ sound while the world around me turned into nothing but flame.

Me and charred exoskeleton of the car were sent flying into the side of a nearby building. The proximity of the explosion had rattled something in me and so it took me a few seconds to really focus on what was happening around me; I was pinned against a wall by a partially melted vehicle with a dangerous and vicious superpowered gangster bearing down on me all too ready to finish the job.

Something else caught his attention though. And then I heard it, too. The rumbling of an approaching motorcycle and distant sirens following it.
Lung paused a moment, sent a last contemptuous burst of flame in my direction before deciding that this was no longer worth his attention and lumbering off in the opposite direction from the approaching noise. His form was already noticeably shrinking as I lost sight of him.

It took the work of a minute or two to extract myself from underneath the scorched and partially melted car. Actually I still hadn’t quite managed it when Armsmaster arrived, followed by Glory Girl barely a second later with Panacea in her arms. The Protectorate hero stared at me for a long moment before he said anything.

“Lung, again? I’d say you were pushing your luck with this, he’s definitely going to be after you now,” he said curtly and what seemed a dismissive tone.

What the fuck? I had saved his teammates, or whatever Wards were to Protectorate heroes, and he was lecturing me for it? Fuck him.

“He went that way. Hurry and maybe you can ask him nicely to go back to prison.” I pointed in the direction that Lung had gone for a moment, then turned away from the asshole and started walking. Maybe if he hadn’t been such a massive prick I would have gone with Armsmaster to track Lung and bring him in again, but now I just wasn’t feeling up to it. If anyone was going to lecture me today I would rather it be my dad.

As I passed the two New Wave members I thought I saw Glory Girl smiling but I didn’t pause to take a closer look, after a few more steps I felt an arm on mine. I glanced back to see Panacea looking at me with her mouth half way open.

“I’m fine. Take care of the others.”

I turned back away, shaking my arm out of her grip and started on my way back home. Just one more battled for today, explaining things to my dad. That couldn’t be worse than fighting Lung, right?
God, Victoria was such an idiot sometimes.

I had told her a thousand times I didn’t want to be setup on any dates, but she hadn't listened this time. Just like she never listened. Instead of just letting it go, she’d got her boyfriend to find some rich kid to go on a date with the famous Panacea so he could brag about it later. Worst of all was that Victoria herself was flat broke, which she hadn’t bothered to mention until this morning.

So I had to get money from the bank.

We'd argued for three minutes because Victoria wanted to go to the mall. I loved her, but sometimes I wanted to strangle her.

Dark clouds were gathering in the sky as we arrived at the bank; obviously the weather was taking a turn for the worse and of course the bank was packed. Three days ago I’d lost my ATM card and it would take until next week for the new one to arrive. So I had to stand in line and take out the money the hard way. All of this for a stupid date that wouldn’t go anywhere, when I could be doing important things at the hospital. I’d heard someone was flying in from Istanbul; a girl with an inoperable brain tumor who wouldn't be getting my help today because_Vicky_thought I needed to get out once in a while before I, and I quote, 'went fucking nutso.' Such a way with words my lovely sister has.

It took forever to get through the line and then actually getting the money was another entire ordeal. But finally I had money in my pocket for the double date that I didn’t even want to go on in the first place. Not for the first time today I asked myself why I had agreed to the stupid thing, though the answer was obvious right away: It was, as always, because Victoria had asked. I really needed to grow a spine one of these days, and stop caving on things like this. Of course, just like with the guys she went too far with, I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.

Maybe I couldn’t say no, but I could make her wait. Besides, it was still raining, so I parked myself on a couch in the lobby next to some girl and her father. The girl was plain looking but her curly dark hair was impressively long and well kept. For a moment I envied her how normal her life must be; she wouldn't have to go to the hospital tomorrow and spend hours fixing people or worry about some villain coming after her because they knew who she was or have to hide herself for months and change half her appearance just so she could get a little privacy. No she wouldn’t have to worry about any of that or anything else. She got to spend time with her parents, with friends and not worrying about who would die because she was there to save them.

Instead she got to go to the bank with her dad.

Ok, maybe a bad example.

It looked like the rain was letting up outside, I thought now was as good a time as any to get goi-

Suddenly I was being pushed to the ground by the curly haired girl along with her father. What the hell? In a moment later it became clear why, as three massive animals came into view and then I was momentarily smothered by an oppressive darkness. The darkness receded to reveal four villains: Grue, Hellhound and two others I didn’t recognize; a boy and a girl.

Fuck me, it was a bank robbery. The nearest dog shook itself and I felt droplets of blood hitting my arm along with bits of fur. Dead and dying bits of blood and fur, I only got impressions of the
biology behind them and all of it very much of the weird variety. I ignored all of that, as well as Grue’s voice.

I slipped my hand into my pants to get out my phone. Careful not to make any big gestures, I moved the phone so I could see the screen and then went to Victoria’s number before I started typing out my message.

‘atk on bnk. gru n hllhound + 2 othrs, dont kno’

I hit send and smothered my phone under me to muffle any sound. I had set it for silence, but just the vibration motor made a slight buzz and I just didn’t want to take the chance. I barely had to wait a moment before the vibration of a reply almost sent me out of my skin. Hopefully none of the criminals had seen that.

‘omw’

Relief flooded me. With Victoria on the way and seeing as she had been hanging out with Gallant, that probably meant the Wards were coming too. This would all be over very soon.

Sure enough, just moments later all four of the would-be bank robbers were clustered around a window. Then Grue and Hellhound went outside with two of the giant monsters, leaving just the two other villains to guard us with one last dog. The girl blathered on cockily, as if her two-bit teammates could deal with Victoria even on her worst day and then she left the entire room to be guarded by one monster and her last teammate. I figured this was the time to make my move, get the drop on the guy and take him out of the fight then signal Victoria to move in to finish off the girl.

A hand held me down when I tried to get up, curly hair shook her head rapidly. What the hell was with today? I tried to get up again, but gave up when it turned out she was a lot stronger than her apparent skinniness would indicate, god damnit. It turned out not to be a bad thing because a second later the guy was calling for the girl, who was apparently called Tattletale, and she came running to the window where they had a brief whispered argument. The guy left.

I texted Victoria again. ‘1 dog, n ttltale’

‘sec’

That was that. I put away my phone as quietly as I could and smiled at the girl. I could probably beg off the date because of all this, so silver lining. I saw Victoria come crashing in through the door at the same time that I heard the gun cocking behind my head. God damnit.

There was a pregnant moment where a frown crossed Victoria’s face which marred her beautiful face briefly, but then she recovered and then looked straight at me. I felt like such an idiot, celebrating before everything was settled, but I had to pretend not to be phased by my life suddenly being in the balance.

“I am now.” I answered to Victoria’s question.

Had to think of something; couldn’t make a move against this Tattletale girl, not with her standing right behind me aiming a gun at my head. I had to be touching her to do anything but she had positioned herself almost perfectly so that I couldn’t know how much I had to move to get one of my hands onto her. Even if I could get ahold of her, I couldn’t remember where the exposed skin was on her costume. I should have been paying closer attention to that stuff, should have paid more attention to Tattletale in the first place and not let her sneak up on me in fact. Victoria would never
let me hear the end of this when it was all over.

“...secrets should I unearth for this little demonstration?” What? What the hell was this girl talking about?

“Your’s or your sister’s?” Oh fuck me. She could ruin everything, fuck, what could she know? No, wait, I had to calm down, I had taken the same classes Victoria had, and I knew telepathy was impossible. The only known exception was the Simurgh, and this small time criminal didn’t have much of a family resemblance to the Endbringer so I knew it had to be something she could find out some other way. But what…

“I think I’m getting why you call yourself Tattletale, but it’s just retarded. We’re New Wave, that means there’s no secret identities, no hidden pasts, no secrets. That’s the shtick.” Victoria, oh Victoria, why don’t you ever just shut up. Why exactly are you taunting the girl pointing a gun at my head?

“Well, then all I’m about to do is tell a story. About eleven years ago a super team operating under the name of Brockton Bay Brigade, you might know some of them I think, in the area fought a villain in his own home in what is generally considered a decent fight. He’s a classy guy in a lot of ways, but still a real piece of work and so he gets sent off to the Birdcage.”

No no nononononono-

“All of this is public record, you’re not exactly making a strong case.”

Oh god I’m going to throw up. I’m going to lose my lunch all over myself, all over the girl with the curly hair. She has to shut up. Just stop talking, she has to fucking stop talking right now or it’ll all be ruined.

“Oh, I haven’t even got to the good part. See, there’s a problem; this baddy was a daddy and his little girl is now all alone in the world. It’s a real sob story. And who’re the two at the center of it all, why it’s little Panacea an-”

Shut up. Shup up! SHUT UP!

“No!”

The volume of my own voice surprises me. I draw in one shaky breath, and then two before suddenly another wave of darkness is enveloping us all and was I moving. Or rather, being moved.

There’s hand on my arm, an unfamiliar hand that I can feel. It isn’t like anything else I’ve ever felt; I could see all the cells in her body but there was so much missing that should have been there, and so much there that shouldn’t have been. It all felt wrong. Dimly I sensed something hot and active, beating steadily almost like a heart but without blood.

I was small, so very small and standing next to a giant. I wanted only to run and hide, to crawl into some small cramped space and curl up until the giant passed me by.

Then it was over, the darkness was gone and I couldn’t feel it anymore.

What the fuck was that?
I had felt *it* again last night, when I tried to stop that new heroine before she walked off. It had all been less intense, probably because there hadn't been anything cutting off all my other sense, but I had felt it all the same. I had been small again, small like I had never wanted to feel again.

Once I had helped Clockblocker and the others, I had made a decision: I would get to the bottom of this entire thing one way or another. It hadn’t been easy, it hadn’t exactly been hard either but still it had taken work, or rather almost an hour and a half of convincing to get the PRT officer I had cornered to give me access to the witness files for the bank robbery. I’d had to avoid Victoria the entire time, because she would ask too many questions there weren’t answers to yet.

Then I had to sneak away early in the morning to take a bus north towards the docks. It took two transfers, one because the bus line just didn’t reach the entire way and another because I’d accidentally taken the wrong route at first on the second leg but I finally made it. Another half hour was spent just finding the right street and walking up and down to find the right house, then I had stood there for probably fifteen minutes just debating what I should do. At around nine AM I took the plunge and opened the chain link gate, then walked up the short walkway to the door. My hand hovered over it for a moment.

I knocked on the door, twice.
Yesterday had turned into a long day, and then a longer night. After leaving the scene of devastation that Lung had left in his wake I realized I couldn’t just go straight back home, no matter how much I wanted to.

So instead, I spent hours pulling apart rubble and searching for survivors across the city. At first I had to run to get anywhere, but after I helped put out a warehouse fire in the north part of town near the docks, the BBPD started giving me rides whenever I’d finished helping with one emergency and needed to get to the next.

At some point the emergency responders started getting pretty friendly towards me, I think maybe I seemed more at their level than the Wards or Protectorate heroes because I didn’t really have a flashy costume or any sort of ostentatious powers. My costume was an obvious thrift-store job and being relatively unknown I probably felt more like theirs than the other heroes would.

Of course the other heroes were out in force as well but a lot of them were tied up with the attacks that had taken place closer to downtown and others were searching the city for Lung, Oni Lee and Bakuda. Still, I ran into Battery and Velocity early on working to help free people trapped in buildings and identify where others might be trapped respectively, and then later on Shadowstalker showed up to help find more trapped people. She didn’t strike me as very friendly and I got the feeling she felt like she was being wasted on the rescue work, but we didn’t honestly interact much so maybe she just had an abrasive personality.

I even got a few cheers, more a light whooping and hollering really, after I helped free some kids trapped inside Immaculata when Bakuda’s bomb had caused a collapse in the surrounding walls. More than a few of the men clapped me on the back once everyone was out. All of it felt really good to be honest, to be recognized and even sort of celebrated for what I was doing.

What didn’t feel so good was seeing the bodies two of dead kids and a teacher lying on the pavement. It made me feel sick to see them laid out like that, with blank eyes that would never see anything again. The image soured my own happy feelings. Those wouldn’t be the only victims of today’s attacks that would never go home again, never get to see another day and even if the death count was low when all was said and done those were deaths which hadn’t needed to happen.

It made me think about whether I had been right to take down Lung in the first place, but I dismissed the notion quickly; that was a stupid thought. He was dangerous and yeah his lieutenants probably wouldn’t have done all this if he hadn’t been captured, but that wasn’t on me any more than it would be the fault of any of the other heroes in the city. Bakuda had made the bombs and either her or members of her gang had set them off. It wasn’t like they had consulted me.

Nono had also proven invaluable today, even if no one else but me would ever know: by guiding me to trapped people, letting me know when things were about to collapse, what was a safe route. Those sorts of things.

Eventually it had all died down. Sometime around eight PM the calls for assistance here or there began to trickle off and eventually stopped altogether. There would be work in the days to come, clearing rubble and rebuilding, but capes weren’t really suited to that sort of stuff. Of the two dozen plus attack sites I had helped at about eight depending on how you counted the fight with Lung, so I was exhausted. It wasn’t in a physical way, but I was burnt out mentally. Just ready to go home and collapse.
I had to walk home, and because I didn’t have clothes to change out of my costume into it took absolutely forever. I had to detour constantly to make my way through alleyways, backyards, and other less visible pathways just in case someone had decided to follow me. I kept an almost constant eye towards my surroundings to catch the hypothetical stalker behind me but nothing ever materialized except a stray cat.

I walked in through the front door, not wasn’t thinking all that clearly, and found my father pacing the living room with the TV on in the background. His head shot up as I came in; red puffy eyes focusing instantly, on me while I took in the rumpled state of his clothes. Neither of us moved or spoke for a moment and then he strode forward me to wrap his arms around me. In general my dad wasn’t a terribly expressive person. The last time I’d seen him this worked up had been after the accident that had killed mom. Almost instantly I felt like shit. I had left my father to worry for hours with no way of knowing where I was or when I might return.

But then, what else could I have done? Even now I couldn’t think of anything that I could have said that wouldn’t have made him worry all the same or that wouldn’t have risked innocent lives by delaying me. But all the same I felt lower than dirt for not even thinking about how he would be dealing with all of this.

One of his hands came up and swept the hood off of my head. With my head pulled close to his chest I could hear his heart beating almost in rhythm with the mantra of whispered "love you's" he rained over the top of my head. It was one of the fiercest hugs my dad had ever given me and it felt good to feel those strong arms wrapping around my shoulders. Something broke inside me; the weight of everything that had happened to me over the last few years just got too much in that moment.

It just wasn’t fair, I had never been a bad person! Maybe I had stolen a candy bar when I was seven, or lied to my parents about breaking that old vase we used to have, but nothing I had ever done was bad enough to justify everything at had happened to me. Not the bullying, or the isolation, then the thing after winter break followed by months of trying to get a grip on the weirder and weirder escalation of my powers!

I wasn’t even sure what I was anymore... and then the image came back to me of those cold, pale bodies laid out in black plastic; of so many others hurt because someone like me had decided they didn’t matter. I couldn’t get those faces out of my head, couldn’t get the way the eyes just seemed to follow me like I could do something for them.

But I couldn’t.

I wasn’t fast enough or strong enough or good enough to be everywhere to save everyone. No matter what I did, there would always be people just a little beyond my reach. It all felt so hopeless that I broke down. I could hardly see through the tears in my eyes. Despite everything else that had happened that day, what popped into my mind at that moment was the oddest thought: do tears stain?

My dad held me until I was exhausted and I started forcing myself to breathe more normally, which calmed my nerves enough for the tears to stop on their own. I guessed that I probably matched my dad. His hands pressed to the side of my face as he held me at arms length.

"Are you okay Taylor?"

I nodded, not entirely sure of my ability to speak without breaking up again. Despite everything he was smiling and that simple fact made me feel better, like it was stoking a warm fire in my stomach. He pulled me back in close, wrapping his arms around me once more and his hands
started making those sort of circular, brushing motions. Another presence shifted at my back, one I knew had to be Nono and even though I knew without a doubt she wasn’t physically there, I felt her arms wrap us both in their embrace. Her voice whispered in my right ear in a language I didn’t know, but just the sound of it was enough to reassure me even more in those moments.

The three of us stayed there for several long moments, but eventually the entire thing broke up awkwardly, at least for me and dad. A noise from the living room TV caught our attentions, and I saw myself framed against the gutted school building in my costume, carrying out that girl. It was honestly pretty shocking to see myself like that, I looked a lot more heroic than I had ever imagined myself to be. Who would have guessed, even my poor excuse of a costume looked impressive in the right context. Oh shit, my costume! That I was still wearing.

Oh, fuck me.

I snuck a glance to the side and found my dad looking at me, but not with any particular shock. Of course, this couldn't be the first it me they had shown an image of me; the news must have been running that clip for hours. I imagine every hero in the city who had been out and about was getting some air time. It wasn’t like my dad was stupid, or my costume was particularly concealing; if anyone would recognize me, it would certainly be him. It wasn’t like I thought he wouldn't be able to connect the dots once images of me in costume started getting out, but I had thought I would have had months on the job, so to speak, by that point. I thought I would have enough that I could point to and say, “Look, see, I was safe! I can take care of myself, you don’t have to worry!” but instead I had less than a week of heroing under my belt.

Frankly, it wasn’t like I thought he wouldn't be able to connect the dots once images of me in costume started getting out but I had thought I would have had months on the job, so to speak, by that point. I thought I would have enough that I could point to and say; ‘look, see, I was safe! I can take care of myself, you don’t have to worry!’ but instead I less than week of heroing under my belt.

“Oh Taylor,” his voice cracked a little from emotion. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

That was, kind of, what I had been expecting. Only, he was taking it a lot better than I expected.

“I was scared. Scared you would try and stop me, scared you wouldn’t, worried what you would think of me. I-I’m not normal, Dad. I-it…”

I took a breath to steady my pounding heart and focused on my dad’s face, trying to bring my nerves under my control again. His face was so open, so worried, but also so full of relief that it all came spilling out. Well, not everything, but the important parts.

I told him about the bullying, at least in part, about getting my powers and experimenting with figuring them out in those first three months, and then I told him about my first night out. That part was tense, because I could see the way the idea of me facing Lung or really anything more threatening than a bee sting almost made him freak out. Thankfully he seemed to work through it and relax as I went on, telling him what happened the following nights, up to today.

It all took a while, because I’d never really sat down and thought about it. So I was constantly filling in details that I wouldn’t have thought if I had been paying attention to at the time. I left out the stuff that still freaked me out a little; about Emma, and Nono, and the niggling suspicions I was developing about what was happening or had already happened to me when I’d gotten my powers. Those last thoughts I was only beginning to grapple with myself, so I didn’t want to start laying the same burden on my dad when I hadn’t worked everything out for myself. Once it was all out we both sat in silence for a moment or two.
“So at the Bank…” A silent question hid in the trailing end of his words. I wasn’t sure what exactly what it was, but I had enough of an idea to answer it.

“I wanted to do something so badly, but I was afraid of getting others hurt. Of getting you hurt.”

He laughed at that, “That’s not something a parent usually hears. Their child worried about them getting caught in the crossfire.”

It was sort of funny, in a very strange sort of way. His laughter was a bit infectious. Enough so that I started giggling to and we couldn’t stop for several more minutes.

Eventually, once we did stop, the conversation turned again to more serious issues. We spent a long time talking, mostly about the changes that would have to take place. My dad of course wanted me to join the Ward, because it was really the only game in town for underage superheroes and would presumably grant me some manner of protection by way of teamwork.

I refused. For the first time in, ever frankly, we yelled at each other. Raised voices hadn’t been my parents style when I needed to be punished and then mom had died and both my dad and I had pulled away from each other.

I don’t know that it would have been a big deal in the eyes of other teenagers and their parents, but me and dad had never had that sort of experience so it was definitely a big deal for the both of us. The actual yelling really didn’t last very long, but we kept arguing for a good while until eventually we both just sort of gave up. Nothing got resolved really, but it exhausted us both and we just went to bed.

*

I wouldn’t have thought I would sleep well, but I slept about as well as I had every other night in the last several weeks and woke up at the same time as ever. The situation must have hit my dad harder, because he wasn’t up when I made my way downstairs, and he was usually up at the same time even on weekends. I figured a bit of a peace offering was probably appropriate after last night to show that even if I wasn’t willing to just cave in on the idea of joining the Wards, it didn’t mean that I didn’t still love him or that I was about to give up on fixing our broken two person family of misfit toys.

My cooking skills weren’t exactly top notch but I could manage not to totally screw up scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. I started looking in the fridge for breakfast supplies. The eggs were almost gone, the mushrooms were a little dried out, the cheese had a bit of mold to slice off, and I had to throw out half an onion but it would all do. Cutting the ingredients up was a repetitive enough task that my mind was able to wander towards how to convince my dad to drop the Wards angle but all of my ideas seemed to end up with “just hope he lets it go”, so that wasn’t exactly productive. Thankfully, Nono was there to distract me. She started to flit about looking over my shoulders as I chopped up some of the onion and shredded the cheese into usable sizes.

“Oh, what’re you making?” she asked.

“Scrambled eggs,” I answered, while I searched the drawers for a whisk.

“Will they be delicious?”

I had to laugh at her enthusiasm. Just as I was getting ready to crack the eggs and start scrambling it all together a series of knocks came from the front door. No one but the mailwoman ever really
came to our door and it was way too early in the morning for her, so it struck me as a little odd. I set the eggs back into the carton and made my way towards the door.

When I looked through the peephole to see who was outside I was surprised enough to do a double take. Amy Dallon, aka Panacea was at my front door. What? Two times in as many days?

This couldn’t be a coincidence. She must have tracked me down from last night, but why? Wait, no, her being here about last night didn’t make much sense. There had to be a different explanation, maybe it was about the bank? She could have gotten my address from the PRT, which sounded like it was probably a violation of some kinds but she was a hero after all. Maybe she wanted to thank me again, or get me to keep my mouth shut about whatever Tattletale had been on the verge of revealing at the bank? Not that I actually knew anything, but it had seemed to rattle her, so she might be nervous enough to come by just to double check.

I took a breath and opened the door as normally as possible. “Hi.”

She seemed startled for a moment, like she hadn’t expected anyone to be home, but she quickly recovered to answer me. “Um, Hi.”

A pause grew between us awkwardly before I realized that it was probably my turn to say something.

“Can I help you?”

“I know what you are!” she blurted.

Well, shit. You know, I was getting a little tired of being shocked by things. It would be really nice if the world would just give me a little time to settle into some semblance of normality before it threw another wrench in the whole works again. The way she blurted it out before I was halfway through speaking and her general demeanor demonstrated just how nervous about this she really was. So at least I probably didn’t have to worry much about her being here to blackmail me or anything. I hoped so anyway, I suppose she could just be really bad at it.

“Uh, w-why don’t you come in?” I hated the way my own nervousness came through just then. I moved to the side of the entrance way to give her enough room to actually get inside. Once passed I shut the door again, then I the kitchen. We both stood there awkwardly for another few moments, neither seemingly very sure of what to do next, though to be fair to me it hadn’t been my idea for her to come to my house.

“Do you want some juice?” I offered.

She just nodded, so I got a couple of glasses from the cabinet and poured us both some juice. Once both cups were filled and I put away the juice I sat down. Then Amy did the same on the opposite side of the table from me. I took a drink from my juice and she almost mirrored the action. The silence just grew while we both sat there just not looking at each other or saying anything.

"You have a really shitty costume."

Well, it was good to know that the capacity to say really stupid stuff wasn’t something that only I had developed, maybe it was one of those general cape powers that everyone got? There wasn’t really any good response to that anyway, so I chose the better part of valor and let the silence stretch.

Boy did it stretch.
Finally, what seemed like forever later I heard noise upstairs and then just a few moments later my
dad appeared at the bottom of the stairs in his red flannel pajamas. I would be tempted to say my
dad’s eyes bugged out, except that was just his natural sort of state of appearance, but he did pause.
As he got closer to the table I motion to Amy sitting across from me.

“Dad, Amy. Amy, Dad.”

When he passed by me my dad shot me a questioning look, but seeing as I didn’t have any good
answers, I just shrugged to which he gave off a little sigh and then proceeded to the coffee maker.
Once that was off and running he joined the two of us at the table.

Silence once again reigned absolutely.

God, we were all just the worst.
Dad broke the silence first; I saw his eyes catch on the food and cooking utensils strewn across the counters before he actually said anything.

“Taylor, were you cooking?” The simple question for some reason made me uncomfortable and embarrassed, probably because I did it so rarely. I wasn’t a bad cook but it was something I had only ever done at home: a few times with mom when she was still alive, and then for my dad and myself. Once, it seemed a long time ago now, Emma had joined us for for some holiday dinner. Not one of the big holidays but something like Fourth of July or Presidents Day. Given the way that had turned out maybe it wasn’t so surprising that I felt uncomfortable. I knew it was kind of stupid. I mean it was just cooking, but still it felt like some weird violation of a private thing to even talk about me cooking with someone else here. Still, it would probably be worse not to say anything at all, so I ignored the feeling of embarrassment and answered.

“Uh, yeah, I was just scrambling some eggs before I got distracted.”

My dad gave a slight smile at that and rose up out of his chair, turning his head towards Amy. “What do you like in your eggs, Amy?”

His question seemed to startle the uncostumed cape and she searched around for a moment as if looking for an answers in the the rest of the kitchen before her gaze settled on me with an unsure look. Why the hell she was looking to me for guidance I wasn’t sure. It wasn’t like I had invited her over. Besides which she had been more than a little rude so I wasn’t in a great mood to be super helpful. What I did instead of ’rescuing’ her was give her a look that I hoped said ‘get yourself out of this mess, bucko’. Although, to be honest, it could have been saying ’I’m about to release a loud smelly fart’ for all I knew. Amy got the message all the same, or at the very least realized I wasn’t going to be of much help, and answered before the atmosphere got too awkward again.

“Anything is fine with me, uh, Mr. Hebert.”

Dad nodded and turned towards the cutting board on the counter. He added some oil to the pans that was ready and set the heat before he got some mushrooms out of the fridge. He freed space on the cutting board by scooping up the onions and setting them in the pan before chopping up some mushrooms and adding them to the same pan. While he was working my dad turned his head towards the both of us, though his questions was more addressed to Amy than me.

“So, do you go to Winslow too Amy?”

“No, I, uh, go to Arcadia. I only just met Taylor, while I was doing some, uh, volunteer work.” As Amy answered, obviously trying to avoid inadvertently spilling any secrets, dad starts to scramble the eggs. They went into the pan with a sudden burst of sizzling and dad started to use a wooden spatula to mix the ingredients.

He responded to her statement with, “Oh, Taylor, have you started volunteering? Where?” I couldn’t see my dad’s face but just from his voice I could tell there was a smile spreading there, he wasn’t stupid and he wasn’t blind so I wasn’t surprised that the half-baked, spur-of-the-moment lie hadn’t fooled him at all.

She really must not have thought this through at all, judging by the utter lack of a good lie and the wide-eyed look on her face. That look almost made me lose it, but I held back to see if she could keep it up any longer. “Uh, I, uh, volunteer at the hospital, so sometimes, um I, what I mean is that
I, uh...”

Man, she was bad at this. I decided to take some pity on her and put an end to the whole charade. “We have a TV, Amy.”

The heroine gave me an utterly confused look at my statement for a minute before she finally made the connection and her eyes got even wider for a second and her head whipped back towards my father.

Laughter broke out of the man in question, not a loud boisterous laugh or anything else silly like a girlish giggle, just a normal laugh. Dad looks up from his cooking and over to Amy. “I’m sorry, the last few days have been very strange for us. That probably wasn’t very kind of me, but when else will I get the chance to say I tricked a genuine super hero.” There did seem to be a little honest remorse in his voice and thankfully any possible ensuing awkward silences were diverted thanks to pan of scrambled eggs he set on the table. “Taylor, get some plates please?”

I got up and went to the cupboards to retrieve some plates, along with utensils from a drawer near the table that I set in a stack next to the steaming food. As my father poured himself some fresh coffee, I turned away from the table to get the juice out of the fridge again, refilling mine and Amy’s glasses. Dad served a plate for Amy first, then me and finally himself.

We ate in silence with nothing but the clinking of utensils on plates filling the air for a few seconds before my dad came to the rescue again. This time I wasn’t sure the silence really needed to be broken.

“With a talent like yours it’s good you find the time to get out and do things for yourself. All that responsibility on your shoulders at your age, I don’t think I can imagine what it must be like.”

What the hell dad? Seriously, what kind of breakfast conversation is that? Just jumping straight past all the bullshit small talk conversation, past questions about school or interest in colleges; past friends or almost literally anything else and straight to the heavy stuff? I turned towards Amy, expecting some sort of reaction between offended and just plain confused.

“Thank you?” The confused part was in evidence, but she didn’t seem to be annoyed or anything. “I do what I have to - not that I think of it like a burden. Obviously I’ve been given a gift that needs to be used it to help people, but sometimes... sometimes, it is hard. Hard not to just... well, not do anything some days.”

It had seemed like there was something else she had been on the verge of saying, but at the end she straightened her posture out and looked up from her food to look right at dad. He set down his own utensils and looked back straight at Amy. He didn’t look any less like the bug-eyed beanpole he had always been in that moment but still he seemed different somehow. More like... more like the dad I’d had before my mom passed.

“You seem like you have your head on straight, mostly, but you have to relax sometime. No matter how much responsibility you have on your shoulders, if you exhaust yourself, you can’t help anyone,” he said softly but in a firm tone.

My dad knew. Years ago when mom was still with us and I was a lot younger I had heard my parents arguing. Honestly it was really just my mom yelling at my dad that he couldn’t “do this to himself, again”. Later on I figured out what she meant, mostly because my dad cut back his work hours: That Dad had been overworking himself trying to get jobs for the dockworkers and revitalize the docks. The 'again' part told me that it hadn’t been the first time either, but that must have been when I was even younger because I didn’t remember anything about that. While it had
been going on I don’t think I’d understood why I suddenly had more time with my dad or even cared, but shortly before the accident I figured it out. Enough time for my mother to confirm what I thought.

“With you hanging around I feel a little better about Taylor. You have to promise me to look after her,” he said as he continued looking at Amy steadily.

She swallowed visibly. “I don’t- I mean I’m not really the kind of cape that does...looking after. You want my sister, well maybe not my sister, but someone like her.” She scrunched her shoulders in a sort of half-shrug, as if in apology but my dad just shook his head.

“I don’t mean like that, from what Taylor’s told me she can take care of herself, but I need someone to keep an eye on her. What I need is someone to make sure my daughter comes back to me; in body and mind.”

Hearing him talk about me, without actually talking to me, was kind of getting annoying so I decided to interject. “You do know I’m right here, don’t you?”

At that my father’s head turned towards me, his gaze steadily focusing on me with those too-large eyes we shared but there was a smile on his face. He was still my dad even if the circumstances, him sitting here talking to Panacea about me like an overprotective dad from a bad movie, were beyond bizarre enough for me to actually question if I hadn’t fallen into some other world in my sleep.

“Yes, I know. Seeing as you’re dead set on not joining the Wards, though don’t you think we’re done with that discussion, I have to find other ways to keep you safe. From now on I want to know everything; every close call, every almost disaster. Everything! I meant what I said a few days ago. I spent too long blinding myself and now we’re changing all of that. You and me kid, we’re in this together.”

His vehemence shocked me a little. He’d only come close to sounding like that immediately after the incident following winter break. But back then I’d been able to convince him not to push too hard with the school. In the end he’d relented and we’d walked away with the hospital bills for a single nights stay plus some, well frankly, ‘hush money’. I guess he really was set on changing how things had been between us. I gave a weak nod to my dad and after a long pause he sighed.

“Well, Amy, I’m sure you didn’t come over to listen to me talk. I’ll clean up so you two can go on up to Taylor’s room.” With that he rose and started taking the used plates to the sink to be rinsed, Amy looked to me questioningly and without a better plan I decided that my room was probably the best place for whatever was about to happen, so I led her up there. There wasn’t anything really all that interesting about my room; it had a bed, a closet, and a desk with pictures of me with mom and dad. It wasn’t spartan or anything, just normal. Of course everyone probably thought their room was normal, Panacea didn’t react like anything about it was surprising.

“Ok, so what the hell? Why are you here?” Maybe not the nicest way to set this off, but I didn’t particularly care. My emotions were all jumbled up from my dad’s declaration.

She was the one who had shown up uninvited to my house after presumably violating at the very least good etiquette, if not the actual law, to get my home address. Nono appeared for the first time since I’d gotten distracted from breakfast this morning, but I ignored her in favor of keeping an eye on Panacea. Even if I didn’t really like her at the moment I still didn’t want to come off as crazy by talking to invisible people. I don’t know how she expected me to react; she took a short step back at the harshness of my tone, which I frankly found a little ridiculous. We were in my house, what
was I going to do, start beating her?

“At the bank, when I touched you,” she began, her voice losing any timidity, though still far from confident, “I felt something that I’ve never felt before. Other parahumans feel the same as people usually, but you, I’m not sure how to describe you. What are you?”

“Hey, fuck you! I’m a person.” At least I hoped I was. Honestly her question hit closer to home than I was honestly comfortable with; I had just been wondering if I was even still human and here was the world’s greatest healing cape telling me I didn’t ‘feel’ like a person to her, telling me I was different enough to be a ‘what’. What if I wasn’t anymore? Maybe whatever had given me my powers, whether it was Nono or something else and the pink-haired apparition was just a product of my own demented brain, had changed me into something else. Oh god, I felt sick, I wanted to throw up.

The heroine in my room didn’t seem to notice my own agitated state, caught up as she was in her own. “You don’t understand, I can usually understand everything; every cell, every ligament, and muscle fiber is always right there when I touch someone. Even the pieces of metal people have in them I get a sense of, I can taste what metal they are, what their shape is through the cells enclosing them. But you were all like that, a vague shape with indistinct function, so you have to tell me what you are.”

Breathe Taylor, breathe. I was struggling to keep myself calm in the face of what she was saying. I wanted to yell at her, but I wasn’t sure I had the strength and even if I did I was sure that if I started yelling I would come off as crazy as I felt. Walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, acts like a duck, is a duck. I am human. Parahuman, whatever.

My head turned to glance at Nono and found her looking unsettled, frightened even, what the hell had she done to me?

“Nono had to change you but she didn’t change anything that was you, only the outside stuff, the shell stuff. Nono didn’t even want to do that, but the other thing attached to you had already started and Nono didn’t know what it had been doing, so Nono made you like herself to save you.” My hallucination at least sounded sorry.

But, shit. I wasn’t human anymore, at least not strictly speaking. Now I was some sort of superadvanced warrior robot thing, or maybe I was just crazy; and wasn’t it really fucked up that I almost preferred the second option? If Nono really was just a figment of my overstressed mind then whatever she said was just some weird story concocted by my own brain and I could go back to being normal. Well, go back to being just a normal parahuman, at least as much as that was a thing.

“...my power has always made sense. Even if that stupid bitch of a villain has wrecked everything else my power has to make sense, so you have to tell me what you are. I need to know, and you have to tell me. You have to.” Panacea had apparently kept right on talking while I had been freaking out, not that I had stopped freaking out but at least I was getting a grip on myself enough to function while I continued to do so. I couldn’t exactly say the same about the girl in front of me.

She was staring intently at me as she finished ranting, and maybe her eyes didn’t give off ‘crazy' but she didn’t have the look of someone who had it all together right at that moment. It was clear there was something else going on though, something else besides whatever weirdness she was getting from her ‘feeling' of me and wasn’t it nice how she made that all about herself? Like I wouldn’t be freaked out by someone coming up to me and telling me I wasn’t human? Of course it was pretty clear she didn’t have it all together herself, so maybe it was a little harsh to really blame her.
“What I am is really none of your business. You don’t get to come to my home uninvited, start insisting I’m not normal and then demand answers from me. I really think it would be best if you left.” She seemed to deflate at my words, it made me think that she knew just how wrong she was but had hoped I would have the answers she needed apparently desperately enough to ignore all that. In a way I felt sorry for her, but I didn’t really have all the answers either and even if I did I wasn’t about to start sharing them with her just because she said she needed them. My thinking was that what she probably needed was to talk to her family, or a good therapist, probably both. I decided to say as much. “Listen, go home. Talk to your sister, whatever it is that’s going on, I’m sure she can help you a lot more than I ever could.”

She laughed at that, though calling it a laugh was probably a disservice to the sounds with how hollow it sounded. “Stepsister. And I can’t. If she, if any of them, ever found out they’d all hate me. I know it. Everyone would hate me and I know they should.”

What she was saying didn’t make sense, at least to me, after all she was freaking Panacea. She had saved thousands, given people with hopeless conditions new chances at life. I was hard pressed to think of anything that she could have done that would erase all that. And even of the things I could think of that would do it, none of them really seemed like the sort of thing the girl in front of me would do. Granted I barely knew her, but I was fairly sure she wasn’t secretly a mass-murdering psychopath. Whatever I thought though, the heroine herself felt differently going by the fact that I now had a half-crying world famous cape standing in the middle of my bedroom. Fuck me, I kind of hated myself for what I was about to do.

“I really do think you should go, seeing as I’m kind of pissed at you. But, and I can’t believe I’m going to say this, I’m going to give you my number. When you need to talk you can call me. Just give me a few days first?” She nodded, seeming much younger than I knew she was, younger even than me. Honestly, I was probably a really bad choice for this given my own issues, but she seemed set on not talking to her family so I didn’t see that I had much choice.

I had to give her my phone number twice, because the first time I gave the home number I had forgotten that I had a cell phone now. Then I put her number into my own phone. I left the name blank in case I ever lost the phone or something, and after that she left without a goodbye of any sort. After everything that had happened in the last few days I really didn’t care about that little bit of rudeness.

Once I was alone again in my room for a few minutes I turned towards Nono. I had questions.
When I turned back towards Nono I could see that she looked, not exactly guilty, but something close enough to it. To be honest I was surprised by how angry I wasn’t; seeing the look on her face had sort of drained out all the bubbling anger I had felt and left me sort of deflated, I still wanted answers but I didn’t feel nearly as vindictive as I had just a moment ago. When I spoke my voice was quiet, both because I didn’t want to get Dad’s attention and because I just didn’t feel like yelling at her.

“What did you turn me into?”

At that Nono did look guilty but it took her several moments to actually respond.

“Nono did not turn you into anything. You became a part of Nono and Nono became a part of you.”

What the hell exactly did that mean? It sounded, kind of like she was saying that I was inside of her, or she was inside of me considering no one else could see her; suddenly the image in my head was of one of those Russian nesting dolls. The image didn’t exactly make me feel better about any of this.

“What?” My voice rose a little higher than I had intended, enough that I worried for a moment if Dad had heard it, but when after several moments of silence nothing happened I relaxed and looked back to Nono. My maybe hallucination, maybe bodymate was looking thoughtful.

“Nono can show you,” she said, after a few seconds.

Honestly, at this point I just wanted answers and for whatever reason I had come to trust this person who I wasn’t even sure was real, at least enough to give her a chance to explain, so I nodded. How she meant to ‘show’ me I wasn’t su-

Warning! Connection Lost! Warning! No Signal. Hardware Check Initiated.

There was nothing, literally. I was, I guess you could call it adrift, in an absolute nothingness when just moments ago I had been fighting the Space Monster that had been about to destroy-


No, that wasn’t right. I had just been in my room and Nono had been about to show me something to explain what exactly she had done to me. Was this what she meant to show me? How was absolute nothingness an explanation, and why the hell had I thought that I had just been fighting something? Oh god, what if this had been a mistake; she could be running around in my body doing who knows what. But no, why the hell would she have asked for permission and waited this long if she was just going to steal my body for a joyride? Ok, so it wasn’t likely she was some sort
of bodysnatcher but still what the hell was going on?

Sub-space Signals Detected. Multiple Distress Calls- Unrecognized Senders. Languages Detected: 6988.

There was a tugging somewhere in my head, and it was like I was seeing a light in the distance that carried with it a cacophonous storm of voices to crash upon me. I was suddenly falling into the light, which was now brighter than any light I had ever seen before. The light grew closer by the second until it became not one light but innumerable, just as brilliant, motes; each spreading out in a thin spider web of cracks into more and more lights across a glassy surface that wrapped around itself and entrapped me. The voices faded in and out, each time fewer returned until I could hear only a handful whispering just at the edge of my understanding. Hearing them and not being able to understand them was frustrating so I focused, no, that wasn’t right- it wasn’t me that was focusing but something else, something much larger. A pattern seemed to emerge in the chaotic intertwining web of lights; some receded while others grew or rose in some way and connections shifted. It was dizzying to see something so immensely vast twist and contort itself, and just was I was beginning to think I could actually see the pattern at work something passed through.

Error! Cascading Failure of Energetic Entities Detected. Unknown Cause.

For a moment everything seemed to still and settle again, but then one of the largest of what I was beginning to think of as stars began to, well spin for lack of a better word out of control. The chaotic star tore at some of its neighbors; touching some and shifting some until roughly half remained of the original numbers. The victims of the maelstrom were not gone, but diminished somehow, faded and hollow in a way the others were not; now the pattern was thrown into chaos. Connections shifted, broke, reconnected and then broke again while some stars that had been bright faded and new ones rose to greater heights. I fell again, or rather my fall took on a new urgency, a new purpose.

Priority Target Identified. Partial Decode of Distress Signals.

One light seemed to grow and grow until it was all I could see; it became a world, and on that world a vast thing was growing and feeding but I could sense a connection to something small and human through the gargantuan structure.

“Let me out! Someone, let me out!”

How could I find one person in this vast, growing thing? It would be like searching for a needle in a haystack. No, worse than that, haystacks didn’t generally grow as you searched them, at least as far as I knew. What good could I do if I couldn’t save this one life. I was on the verge of just giving up when I saw it: a connection like the others, but smaller, really just a thin weedy little thing that went through, or around, or under the world on which the structure lay. That single thread led to a girl, one trapped and alone in filth and refuse.

Through that single tunnel the vast gnawing thing reached down into the mind of the girl. It probed at her brain, peeling back layer after layer or her mind until it found what it wanted and began to work. Something new began to grow there in the girl’s head.


It made me angry to see this disgusting Monster assault this girl. I dove, down and up, into the space between the girl and her attacker; it was like being thrown suddenly into cold water and set on fire at the same time. Now I was in a place between spaces, a thin corridor between realities. I
wanted nothing more than to obliterate the beast before me, to unleash all of my might upon it in a single apocalyptic blast, but the consequences on the victim would be uncertain. More time is what I needed, time to come up with an appropriate solution, but if I did not act fast then the entity would have irrevocably changed the girl to suit its unknown purposes.

I seized upon the end of the pathway which led to that vast, desolate world upon which the monstrosity lurked and fired, with just enough power to ward the thing off momentarily and give me the time to put in place some stop-gap measures. The solution was inelegant and in many ways a violation of the poor girl on the same scale that the entity had been engage in, but I was beginning to see the intent behind the changes and was confident that I could reverse any harm done by my own actions. Working quickly I did something unintended by my original designers—wait what?—and opened myself up to move the physical body of the girl into my own internal space, unfortunately having not been originally designed for habitation of any kind this required more adjustments to work around. Most of the body need not be directly stored, so I extracted the brain, careful to ensure it remained intact but unaware.

The rest I scanned and slowly dissembled over the course of approximately one and half seconds to guarantee accurate modelling of the physical body. Until I was sure that continuity could be ensured for the mind I was attempting to save I needed the brain intact, so I quickly repurposed some tertiary systems to construct an interface and support system and then slowly opened the connections that would allow my new companion access to our systems. Of course the danger there was that she would, in ignorance, do some terrible damage and so her initial access was limited until I could apprise her completely of her new abilities. With all of this complete a new wrinkle presented itself: the connection still persisted, meaning that our new common enemy could still threaten us, and though I still wished to destroy the thing outright it as too valuable for now as a potential source of information. Carefully, very carefully I positioned micro-singularities at the very edge of the aperture; not a perfect solution but with vigilance I could ensure our safety.

Now all that remained was camouflage. I recreated the body the girl had originally inhabited and discarded my own previous form—

I rushed to the wastepaper basket by the desk in my room, my mind insisting I should throw up, but nothing happened. Of course, I didn’t have a human body anymore, so why should I be able to throw up? That only made me want to throw up more, which reminded me I couldn’t, which—

“What WAS that?” My voice was a little louder than I had intended, but out of the corner of my eye I could see Nono fidgeting.

“That was what Nono did, Nono told you that she didn’t change anything that was, you.” She made a gesture at my, (her, our?) head. God damn it, if we were thinking with the same, whatever the hell we had now, why couldn’t she just get why this was all so fucked up?

“You—!” I started to yell, but cut myself off and took a couple of breaths to calm myself, sort of, I really didn’t want my dad coming up here now to ask why I was yelling at an empty room. “You dissected me, took my brain out of my body and jammed it into this thing you made to look like me, and you expect me to believe nothing has changed? How could anything more have changed?”

I got a little more heated than was probably smart, considering how easily dad could be hanging around in easy earshot, but after another few moments of silence which did not result in him bursting into the room demanding answers I breathed a sigh of relief. Nono was giving me a determined look.

“You saw, you know Nono had no other choice. The other thing would have given you abilities
too, but it would twist you to its own ends; Nono can give you a choice.” She paused, momentarily losing that sense of confidence, but then she straightened again, and looked determinedly at me; it wasn’t threatening, just sure. “You don’t have to do this anymore; you and Nono will separate. Taylor, you can forget about all this, and go back to your normal life, Nono will fix everything. Or you can help Nono to find whatever controls these looming monsters and stop it.”

It couldn’t really be that simple. Just a this or that choice, but of course it wasn’t; could I really go back to normal after the last few months? Go back to letting Emma, Sophia, Madison, and all the others torture me while adults stood by and did nothing? Go back to watching helplessly as heroes and villains battled for the lives of innocent people, while literal monsters straight out of myth walked the earth and wrought destruction on city after city some unfathomable campaign of pointless destruction? Part of me wanted to, the small part that had thought I could outlast my bullies, that I could out endure them in a broken system but if the system really was broken then shouldn’t someone fix it? Maybe I couldn’t fix it all myself, but to be the person I wanted to be, the person I thought my mother would have wanted me to be I had to try.

So I wasn’t human anymore? Of all the things that could have happened to me, was this really the worst? No, not in world with the Slaughterhouse Nine, the Endbringers, and hundreds of other monsters out there in human and inhuman form.

Damnit Taylor, stop feeling sorry for yourself and fucking do something! It was time to stop waiting for other people to fix the world’s problems and start taking them on myself.

“I still don’t like what you did to me, Nono, but...Screw it. Let’s go be a hero.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is one of my least favorite. Originally when writing it I struggled immensely to get past this point in the story and continue; I think ultimately this particular thread is both rushed and left dangling in an unsatisfying manner, if I were rewriting the story it would be either excised or given a whole hell of a lot more weight.
It turned out to be an easier thing to say than do. Apparently I had been getting lucky, for some weird definition of “lucky”, by basically having just ran into situations that needed me beforehand and now I was experience a serious lack. Sure I’d stopped two muggings, or at least potential muggings, but I hadn’t run into any of the big gangs or local villainous parahumans. I knew for sure they weren’t abstaining; over the last several days the ABB and the Empire had clashed at least twice that I’d heard of after I had come back from my patrol, not to mention that Uber and Leet had pulled off some tasteless stunt the day after Panacea had shown up on my doorstep. The two of them had decided that the now blasted remains of Immaculata presented the perfect backdrop for the reenactment of some scene out of a video game imported from Earth Aleph I wasn’t familiar with. I had missed all of it.

The truth was that even a city the size of Brockton Bay was too big for one person to keep track of all of it, at least when you were stuck with running, or the bus as a method of transportation, which mean I guess, that it was a good thing there was the Protectorate, the Wards, and New Wave in town to pick up the slack but I still felt pretty pathetic for not being able to do anything. I would have been worried that I was getting arrogant, but going by what I had learned from Nono about what I was part of; what she was, what she had survived against, and what she had done to do so, I was pretty sure that it wasn’t arrogant at all to think that beating up common street thugs was a waste of my talents. What I needed was some way to find out about the activities of the villains as soon as they happened, and then of course I needed some way to get to the scene of the crime quickly.

How exactly did New Wave do it? Transportation almost took care of itself, several of them could fly and could therefore carry those who couldn’t when the entire team was required on quick notice. How did they find out in the first place though? New Wave had to have some sort of connection with the PRT, or maybe the police, but could that work for me too? I didn’t think so, chances were they got away with it because they were known, both in the sense that they had been doing the whole hero thing for years and in that they didn’t hide their identities. Even though the emergency responders I had come met seemed to like me well enough I didn’t think it was enough to get them to stick their necks out like that for me, assuming that would even get me the information I wanted.

Glory Girl had shown up at the bank quickly enough when the Undersiders had robbed it. In fact, as far as I could tell she had shown up at the same time as the Wards and that meant that she had to have found out at basically the same time as them. If I could find out how New Wave got their information and then either get them to call me too or find some way to tap whatever source they had, I would have at least half of the problem solved. Luckily for me I had an in, and she owed me, even if I found it doubtful that Panacea herself would or could get me what I wanted, it was at least some place to start. Of course, I would have to be careful not to make it seem like she was betraying her family or anything.

I probably stared at the only other number in my contacts that wasn’t either my dad or the home phone for something like twenty minutes before I actually worked up the nerve to hit the call button. It rang, and rang, and rang.

She didn’t pick up. It was past four in the afternoon, so she had to be done with school which, shit, meant she was probably at the hospital where she had said she volunteered. Suddenly I was worried that my call my have interrupted her in some delicate operation, but that worry quickly faded; it wasn’t like she really needed to cut anybody open with her power. Maybe she had simply
decided that she didn’t want to talk to me after all, which was bullshit. I wasn’t the one who had shown up unannounced on her doorstep and clumsily lied to her dad! No, she didn’t get to just ignore me, she owed me at least one pretty huge favor and I was going to call it in whether she liked it or not. So I picked up the phone and pressed her number again.

It rang; once, twice, and then I could hear the indistinct sound of people and activity in the background.

“Hello?” Amy’s voice was weary when it answered, which pretty effectively managed to deflate whatever sense of self righteous indignation I had built up. Shit, maybe she really did need someone to talk to.

“It’s uh, it’s me?” Yes, very informative Taylor. “I mean, this is Taylor, you know, from the other day?”

God, I sounded like an idiot.

“Wasn’t I, uh, wasn’t I going to call you?” At least she sounded almost as unsure as I did, that was one small comfort.

“I guess it doesn’t matter. Actually it’s probably better that you called, I don’t know that I would have actually gotten up the courage to call you and I think I really need it,” Her voice sounded broken, and for a moment I was afraid she would just start sobbing but then she took a couple of deep breaths. “There was this man today, the father of someone I worked on weeks ago. He must have barreled past security; he came in screaming at me; all this stuff about how I was a murderer, a monster, worthless, a failure, and all sorts of other stuff. Honestly a lot of it didn’t make much sense, but for a moment while he just stood there and screamed at me I wanted to reach out and just, shut him up. I could have done it too, he wouldn’t have even felt it.”

Holy shit, now I was feeling like kind of asshole. It wasn’t like what I had been going to ask her wasn’t important, or even less important necessarily, because of anything she had said but still it was pretty clear that she was dealing with some pretty heavy shit. I still needed something from her, but I could at least sit here and listen to her unload for a little while.

“You know what the worst part is?” She laughed a hollow, unhappy, laugh as she paused. “I don’t even remember his kid; was it a son or a daughter? Was it even a kid for that matter? Maybe I hadn’t saved his wife, or his brother, or maybe he was the kid and it was his parent I didn’t save. He was right, I don’t even have the decency to remember the people I fail.”

I could practically hear the beginning of tears in her voice. The way she was talking reminded me about myself in way that made me feel incredibly uncomfortable; I didn’t want to sound that whiney or that depressing.

“Well, that’s a bunch of bullshit.” I could practically hear her freeze. “Sometimes you can’t save someone; if you blame yourself for the people you can’t save here, you might as well take the blame for the people you can’t save in China. You don’t have to be volunteering here, you could be off making billions of dollars making new drugs for the big drug companies, or ignoring your powers and pretending to live a normal life. I don’t know how many lives you’ve saved, but I’m guessing it’s a lot, it sucks that you couldn’t save this one, but it doesn’t mean you’re a monster, or a failure and I’m pretty sure that starting to think like that will drive you crazy.”
Silence stretched for moments and moments after I stopped talking. It got to the point where I started worrying if I had just said all the wrong things, which honestly would not have been surprising at all given my general ineptitude with the words and the talking, but thankfully I heard Amy sigh in what sounded like relief.

“Thanks, It’s nice to hear that it’s not all my fault. I just can’t talk to my family about this stuff; they would misunderstand in the worst way. Half of the reason I feel like I can talk to you about this is that, well, don’t take this the wrong way, but no one would believe you if you tried to tell them I said this kind of stuff.”

I wasn’t sure what the right way to take that was exactly, but because I wanted something out of her myself I figured that making an issue out of it probably wasn’t the best of ideas.

“Thanks,” I said instead, trying to keep any latent sarcasm or irritation out of my voice. “You and I are sort of in similar situations. Well, not really similar, what I mean is that I feel kind of useless sometimes because I keep hearing about fights after they’ve already happened. Your sister got to the bank pretty fast, I just wish I could find out that quickly, you know?”

Yeah, really subtle Taylor, I’m sure she doesn’t at all think you’re fishing for information. I wanted to groan, but I was afraid of making any noise that would break the new silence that had descended after my last comment. Now I really felt like an ass, her relationship with her family was apparently already iffy enough and here I was butting in almost blatantly asking her to betray their trust. Wait, what if she thought I only listened to her because I wanted her to feel like she owed me something? Fuck, now that I thought about it was kind of what I had done. Maybe not exactly, but it was close enough that I wasn’t sure I could say it wasn’t like that.

“Is that why you called? To find out how New Wave gets it’s information?” Amy didn’t sound angry, or even depressed exactly, but it had changed and she didn’t exactly sound happier.

“N-yes,” I had almost said no but I thought better of lying at the last moment, after all if she was going to be honest with me about her own life then I supposed I owed her at least the same courtesy. At least sort of.

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to just because of the stuff you told me. But I’m trying to help, just like you, only I have to do that with my fists and my feet. You, and your family can help me do that.”

She didn’t say anything in response for several moments.

“Ok, I’ll try. I can’t promise anything, with my power I’m not great at the front line stuff so I don’t get the call unless they know they’re going to need me, but I’ll try.” Her voice sounded resigned more than anything else, and I was worried that I had maybe screwed her up worse. At the same time though, I couldn’t make all my decisions based on what would and wouldn’t hurt her feelings, I had to think about the good I could do for the countless numbers of innocents out there.

“Thanks.” My voice was quiet, but her almost grunt was enough to reassure me that Amy had heard me, and even if it wasn’t then what she said was.

“I should go, more work to do.”

She hung up.

I didn’t hear from her again for two days. It was a lot later in the day when she did call, just after eight thirty in fact. For a moment I wasn’t entirely sure what the noise was, I still wasn’t used to
having a cellphone but after a moment of confusion I reached for my phone where it lay on the desk and answered it.

“Merchants,” Her voice was clipped, and she rattled off an address so quickly I was half afraid I would miss it. “You’d better hurry, I think it’s going to be bad.”

“Thanks.” I tried to say, but she had already hung up before the words even left my mouth. I thought that was kind of rude, but instead of dwelling on it I set off changing into my costume; which barely took a minute. Off to my side I could see Nono, not grinning exactly, but definitely looking like she was ready and willing to kick some ass. Then I was racing down the stairs to the first floor, past my dad sitting in the living room reading a book by the lamp.

“Taylor!? Where are you going?” He asked as I was halfway out the door, I paused a moment to consider how I should answer and decided on the truth, we had been arguing for the last week about how this would work and were only a little closer to actually having an answer, so I definitely didn’t want to give him the opportunity to drag me into an argument about it right now, but I also didn’t want him angry later because I’d lied.

“Merchants, warehouse district, be back later!” didn’t give him the chance to respond, dashed out the door and started running flat out as fast as I could.

Every second it took me to travel the distance from my house to the address Amy had given me was a second I worried it would all be over before I got there. It only took me ten minutes, which should have been impossible, but of all the impossible things that had been happening to me recently this was the last one I was going to worry about now. When I got within a block, I started hearing the telltale noises of a fight in progress very distinctly, and as I turned the final corner I saw maybe a dozen unpowered Merchants members plus all the Merchants’ capes against three New Wave Members.

It was just about an even fight. Glory Girl was zipping around Skidmark, trying to get in a shot that would knock him out of commission, but Mush was with the gang’s leader absorbing her best hits. His animated trash body could take her hits without falling apart for the most part while Skidmark peppered what looked like Lady Photon and Shielder with chunks of the old cracked asphalt, if I was judging their builds correctly. Nothing he threw at them was all that threatening, but it was distracting enough that the unpowered members plus Trainwreck could keep them from going after Squealer, who was in what might have once been a van or a truck but now looked more like a tank made out of junkyard scraps.

Strangely the foot soldiers looked better armed than I would have expected for the Merchants. My train of thought on that was cut short as Glory Girl took a sudden hit from Mush; reinforced, it seemed, by Skidmark’s power applied to his fist. It sent her crashing into the pavement of the abandoned parking lot that was serving as the battlefield, and I caught a flickering in the air immediately around the heroine. So, her invincibility was because of a force field? That made sense, given her family, but it looked like it definitely had a limit, which it had just reached. The other two were holding their own for the moment, so I angled towards Glory Girl to intercept Mush, who’d turned the follow through of that massive haymaker into a charge.

The lumbering juggernaut of trash barreled down on the two of us without any real sense of coordination or strategy. He barely seemed fazed by the appearance of another parahuman in front of his target, though it was hard to tell what with him being a vaguely human shaped pile of refuse.

His left arm swung, swung, fist still wreathed in the telling signs of Skidmark’s power, and I swung my right arm up to meet the oncoming mass of objects, trying not to think about what it was made
of. I could see our fists meet in slow motion and even as contact was made I could feel the gang
leader's power begin to affect my body; I was being pushed away violently, perpendicular to the
surface of Mush's fist. If I was thrown clear that would leave Glory Girl exposed, and even though
her force (space) field had already come back she still seemed disoriented enough from the impact
that the follow up attack would catch her off guard, so I couldn't afford to get thrown clear.

Suddenly I was no longer in motion away from Mush's fist. For a single moment nothing
happened, then the parahuman attacked with the other arm. This time, seeing as I was the main
target, I ducked under the strike. I grabbed some of the sturdier looking trash that composed his
body and launched myself at his head, or rather where I imagined his head to be in the heap that
was his body. My strike hit something at least, but Mush only staggered back for a moment before
he recovered and charged again. This time both his fists were raised, like he was going to try and
 crush me.

I batted aside the overhead blow, grabbing hold of his arm again, and swung myself upwards
towards the structure of his head. I hoped that if I got rid of enough of the trash body I could
deliver a knockout blow to the man inside. My body twisted in mid air, swinging my right leg into
the dome of the head; the entire head structure exploded into debris and took part of the left
shoulder with it as I continued over Mush and landed behind him. The rest of his body twisted to
face me, which allowed the now-recovered Glory Girl to catch him with a strike on his right side
and send another cascade of freed trash raining onto the asphalt.

Part of his real torso became exposed even as the larger body began to reform. I aimed again at
where I thought his head was, took a running jump and swung.

My arm Moved.

For a moment nothing happened, then the entire trash body slumped, and, and just deflated like
someone had let the air out of a balloon. In the center of the new pile of trash I could make out the
figure of Mush, a younger guy than I had been expecting for some reason. He couldn't be more than
three or four years older than me.

I turned back towards the fight; Glory Girl's had shot off towards Skidmark, so I figured that was
dealt with. Meanwhile, Shielder and Lady Photon had dealt with all the unpowered foot soldiers
and were now proceeding to double team Trainwreck pretty effectively, which only left Squealer in
her pseudo-tank for me. I guessed that with all her teammates engaged in close combat the Tinker
hadn't wanted to open fire in case she hit them, but as the tides were turning I suspected she would
quickly start losing whatever inhibitions had so far kept her back. That meant I needed to deal with
her quickly.

I charged, there was a loud boom, and for a moment the entire world turned upside down.
A moment ago I had been standing in the abandoned parking lot of some warehouse, now I was buried under chunks of rubble of the wall I had been thrown through when… something had happened. I was fine so far as I could tell, even my costume was still completely intact; but what the hell could have thrown me through the brick wall of this derelict warehouse? Lung maybe, except that I was reasonably sure I would have noticed a gigantic fire-manipulating man-lizard of the size he would have needed to be to do this to me. Think Taylor, you must have missed something; what is it?

Even as I wracked my brain for the answer to that question, I pushed against the debris piled on top of me. Surprisingly, it lifted right off and a second later I was standing upright at the far end of the desolate interior of the warehouse. I kept forgetting how strong I was nowadays.

Except I was pretty sure I hadn’t forgotten a single thing in the past three months.

So why was I constantly surprised when I survived something I shouldn’t have, or when I punched my latest oversized opponent and sent them flying? The answer was simple enough. I was still thinking of myself as the same Taylor, with my regular old Taylor body, but I had something… else now.

Okay, Taylor, time to turn your whole worldview upside down, time to stop thinking of yourself as plain human and start thinking of yourself as the weird alternate-future robot that you actually are. How do you do that?

In movies, TV, and the few video games I had seen there was always some sort of display with all sorts of numbers and diagrams that probably meant absolutely nothing in reality. Of course Nono wouldn’t need all that, after all did I need some colored window telling me how often I breathed? No, It was her body so she would just, know all the things she needed to when she needed to, well it was my body now too so why should I need my hand held?

I closed my eyes and concentrated on trying to feel all the robot parts of my body that I knew were there but nothing happened. All I felt like was an idiot, standing there with my eyes closed while Squealer went after the three members of New Wave I had left, if not helpless, at least vulnerable out there.

Squealer! I had ignored Squealer, but why? Just because she was almost the laughingstock of Tinkers on the PHO forums? Even a joke tinker was dangerous because you could never be sure exactly what they would come at you with, and I should have known that. In fact I did know that but I had let my own confidence get the better of me. I hadn’t seen the threat in Squealer, hadn’t thought she could hurt me. Given the results, I had been right, but it wasn’t me who would have to pay the price for my own lapse, instead it would be others who would pay for my mistakes. My failures could cost people their lives.

I would get to walk away untouched from almost anything I could think of, going by what Nono had shown me, but the people around me wouldn’t be so lucky. Others getting hurt because of my failures wasn’t something I wanted on my conscience. So the obvious solution was to get better control over my own abilities. I closed my eyes again and focused again on the feeling my not-so new body. Again I came up empt- no wait! There was something, not a wall exactly but something
like it, it was like reaching into the dark groping for something I knew was there, something I could even feel with the tips of my fingers but still couldn’t get a grasp on.

“Arghhh!” I screamed in frustration, throwing my eyes open and casting about for something to take my anger out on. That was when I noticed Nono, standing there looking at me with a serious expression on her face.

“Why can’t I make it work!?” Thankfully, I was reasonably sure no one was spying on me at the moment and so I couldn’t be labeled a schizophrenic. Hell, even if someone did see me they’d probably just think I was just frustrated. Though why this hypothetical person was hanging around the scene of a parahuman fight would probably be a better question, one with an answer that didn’t say great things for their own mental health.

“Nono can explain. Our body isn’t like a human body, when Nono saved you she had to make new connections to fit with the old ones but for some things there were no places for them to go. Nono has been teaching our body to respond to you. Some of it is ready now.”

God, it was hard to stay angry with Nono for long. Even when she said some of the most disturbing things I could imagine; was I just a brain somewhere floating inside this weird body, could I even trust my own tho-No, stop thinking those things Taylor. You decided to be a hero, she’s giving you the tools you actually need to be a hero, so stop thinking about all the weird disturbing possibilities and just… Go. Do it.

Suddenly it was like…

I don’t know what it was like, actually, and I didn’t feel all that different to be honest. Still, the entire world was somehow suddenly more real; like I was aware of more of it now than I had been a moment ago. Holy shit, I was more aware; I was still looking out through my own two eyes but I was also seeing everything else around me. The entire warehouse, out through the giant hole I had so unceremoniously come in through out into the parking lot, blocks and blocks beyond that the city outside the Docks. Downtown spread out before my eye, and past that; the water of the bay as well as the foothills and untamed forests surrounding Brockton Bay. Further still I could see the highway heading north and west until it all disappeared into a fuzzy indeterminate background, there was still even more I knew, but I couldn’t resolve the details.

I saw it all at once, centered on me in that warehouse, but it wasn’t perfect. In every building there were long shadows where rooms were cut off from the outside, where I could only make out the indistinct shapes of unresolved objects. Somehow I knew that if I tried I could find out what was in those rooms, could peek into the private spaces of every person in the city even, but I pulled back, both because it would have been wrong and because I also knew it would have been dangerous. Whatever was letting me see like this right now was only a passive system, if I actively looked into those rooms I knew that the energies involved could do honest to goodness real physical damage to people.

There were other places though, a number of them scattered all around the city which I didn’t even get indistinct shadows from. Places like bank vaults, what could only be PRT holding cells, the Protectorate building out on the bay, and strangely enough several private businesses and residences. Why would they need any-No. This was not the time to get distracted.

I, well the best way to describe it is that I pulled back; narrowing my focus to just the warehouse and its parking lot. What I saw was chaos, the pavement was shattered in a number of places where Squealer’s shots had landed in the process of missing the darting figure of Glory Girl as she attempted to penetrate the armor of the tinker’s tank. More craters clustered near where Lady Photon and Shielder were engaged in a running fight with Trainwreck, while Skidmark himself lay
in an undignified heap on a relatively undisturbed patch of the lot.


The tinker tank became more prominent in my vision. For the most part it matched my understanding of Squealer’s usual work; that is, crude but effective and powerful in ways not obvious from the frankly junk-like appearance. The entire vehicle had been built on the body of a truck, with armoring constructed from the scraps and pieces of dozens of other vehicles. Some construction vehicles had even been included, going by the anchors which extended from the tank. It was all heavily modified, even the materials themselves had been altered to provide significantly greater strength than would have otherwise been possible.

Squealer had apparently decided that shooting Glory Girl out of the sky was a futile effort, as the gun began swiveling back towards the other two members of New Wave. This caused Glory Girl to redouble her efforts, though to no more apparent effect than before.

That was probably as clear a cue as I would ever receive, so I started running towards the opening where I’d entered the warehouse. It took barely a moment for me to scramble out of the empty building and back into the open air, and in that same moment the barrel of the tinker’s tank swiveled again to aim at me. Well, at least it wasn’t pointed at the others anymore, I had accomplished that much.


This time I was ready when the cannon fired. The entire world slowed down to almost a crawl, slow enough that the projectile which had been fired seemed to drift along at only a couple inches per second. There was something odd about the shell that the tank had fired; I wasn’t any sort of weapons expert but it definitely didn’t look anything like I would have expected it to. Instead of something like a bullet, as I had expected, what sped towards me was a black ovoid with an orange band around its middle.

As the shell and I approached one another, I jumped. My right foot made contact with the top portion of the shell, and I saw a crackling of energy precipitate from the center band out towards the ends. Fortunately I was still in motion, already launching off of the apparently detonating ordinance towards the tank, still settling backward from the recoil. Behind me, both ends of the shell collapsed towards the inner band while it expanded around the increasingly luminous center, which a moment later began expanding. The pavement beneath the projectile cracked as if under immense pressure, scattering progressively larger chunks spiraling off into the surroundings until suddenly the roughly basketball sized sphere of searing light exploded in a more mundane fashion.

*Automatic Threat Detection Calibrated. Internal Clock Speed Adjusting.*

Time began to proceed closer to normal, and I slammed into the pavement just feet away from the tank. Almost instantly a white and gold streak shot down, slamming into the turret hard enough that the entire vehicle was rocked and a large dent appeared. Glory Girl clung to the side of the vehicle using her hands to pry at the irregular armoring. I heard a low whine begin to build up somewhere within the monstrosity sitting before me, and could practically taste the ionization in the air. Of course Squealer had built in a close quarters defense mechanism; laughingstock she might be, but she was just as dangerous as any other tinker, maybe more so in some cases where people underestimated her.

Miss Alexandria-lite might be able to survive whatever Squealer had in store, but I didn’t particularly think so. I was beginning to have a pretty good internal model for the scope of her
powers, and it was also pretty clear the Merchants were a lot more organized than they were normally given credit for. So, what were the chances that the tinker in question didn’t have a pretty good handle on exactly how powerful her defenses needed to be? Not high.

I charged, aiming not for the tank itself, but to knock Glory Girl off her perch. We collided a moment before the system activated. My body served as a momentary shield between the other heroine and the tank, taking the brunt of the discharge. I could feel the energy connecting with me, racing up my outstretched legs, and then just sinking into some distant part of myself.

Nothing else happened, except the two of us hitting the pavement several feet away.

When I got back up and faced the tinker vehicle, I found it putting space between itself and us. I don’t know if Squealer was actually looking to get away, and in the effort leave her teammates behind, or just get some distance to fire on the two of us but I didn’t want to give her the opportunity to do either so I went straight at her. She fired again; once, twice.

The world didn’t slow down like it had before, but it didn’t need to because I was reacting fast enough I didn’t need the extra time, my left arm came up to bat the first shot out of the air, then the second. These hadn’t been like the other ones; there was no immense pressure and no delayed explosion, it was all just boom straight from the get go. Either she was out of the special rounds, she needed more range to safely fire them, or she was saving them, whatever the reason though it didn’t matter because I was already on top of her.

I gripped the end of the barrel in one hand and put my other on top, then pushed and bent the barrel almost back onto itself in a single motion, so now that threat was neutralized. The whine from before had returned, but now that I was sure that I could survive it none the worse for the wear I climbed up onto the body of the vehicle.

“Come on Squealer! Give up!” There was no response from inside the tank except for the discharge of the defensive system, and once again I felt electricity racing up my body only to disappear into wherever it had gone before. I hadn’t honestly thought she would surrender that easily, but at this point there wasn’t any to lose by trying.

I placed my back against the turret, gripped the underside of it, planted my feet on the body of the tank, and heaved. It took several seconds - I knew I couldn't use all of my strength because I would have only torn off a chunk of the turret and I wanted to detach the entire thing from where it was connected to the rest of the vehicle. When I felt it begin to tear I gave an extra little push, and then it came almost completely off.

“Fucking BITCH! What the fuck did you do, you little cunt!”

Best guess, that was Squealer. And yup, when I turned around what greeted me was the skinny, dirty-blonde chick that had been identified on the PHO wiki, strapped into what looked like an old barcalounger bolted into the metal floor of her vehicle. She seemed to be having trouble getting out.

“Here, let me help you.” I couldn’t help the smirk that appeared on my face as I grabbed her with one arm and the bunch of straps holding her in lace with the other. I ripped the straps away, then yanked the tinker herself up and out of her makeshift cockpit screaming obscenities at me the entire time.

“Fuck you, slut! I’m going to shove my fucking arm so far up your ass I can use it to wipe when I shit in your mouth! I’m going to pound your bitch face ‘till you look like roadkill and stuff it down your whore throat!”
“Oh, just... shut up.” At that I tossed her down to the pavement, not hard but probably enough to rattle her, and hopefully make her stop running her mouth.

Lady Photon and Shielder had basically finished Trainwreck off by now as well. The massive machine-man was technically still on his feet, but one of his mechanical arms was simply detached and the other looked more like a chunk of junk metal than anything functional. He was actually making an attempt to run away, but I didn’t think that would be any more successful than the rest of the battle had been for him. Glory Girl had apparently recovered, and was now standing just a couple of feet away, looking at me with an odd expression on her face; like she wanted to thank me and kick my ass at the same time. It wasn’t a great look on her, really ruined the entire paragon of heroism image she had going on.

“Hey,” I said, the best thing I could do right now, I figured, was to act like nothing was wrong. “You all right?”

Her expression turned into an almost scowl at that. Great, the girl apparently had serious issues with being helped, hopefully the rest of her family didn’t have similar issues. Lady Photon was now making her way over to us, leaving Shielder to watch an thoroughly incapacitated Trainwreck. I could definitely see how they were related, in fact I might have almost mistaken them for mother and daughter if I hadn’t known Brandish was Glory Girl’s mom; they each had that tall, thin, blonde, and stacked build. Some people got all the luck when it came to the genetics lottery, meanwhile here I was still rail-thin and flat as a nine year old.

“Thank you, for helping out. I’m Lady Photon, that’s Shielder over there, and you seem to know Glory Girl already,” she greeted me.

Well New Wave mom #1 was certainly friendlier than her niece, so there was that to be thankful for. I smiled back.

“Yeah, we met a few days ago. I’m Princess, by the way,” I could see the instant of surprise as it flashed off the older woman’s face. To her credit it passed pretty fast and she didn’t seem to be about to make a comment about it. Glory Girl her self on the other hand seemed to be about to break out into hysterical giggles, she already knew my name though so I didn’t know what she found so fucking funny right now. “Don’t ask. Part of why I chose it though, is that I figured it might give me a momentary advantage if people didn’t take me as seriously right off the bat in a fight.”

Of course, that would probably work better if I there was ever time to introduce myself before a fight, now that I thought about it.

“Hey Squealer! Would you have gone any easier on me if you’d known my name was Princess!?”

“Fuck you, whore!” The tinker was sitting up against her tank, looking pretty sullen and muttering what were no doubt a string of obscenities and invectives aimed at me. Not exactly an answer. I turned away from the moping villain, back towards the New Wave members and shrugged.

“Yes, well, it is always good to meet another independent cape. I’m sure you and New Wave will be seeing plenty of one another in the future, but for now we need to get going. Would you mind sitting with these four until PRT officers come to collect them?” The way she spoke, it was pretty obvious Lady Photon was used to leading. For a moment I thought about refusing, but frankly I had my own shit to think about and I needed some down time to do it, so I just nodded at her.

She gave me a parting smile, then she and Glory Girl shot off with Shielder following just behind
them a moment later. Now I was alone with four incapacitated parahuman gang members and a whole slew of their regular human hangers on, just waiting for the PRT to arrive.

Wait, had New Wave already called them? No, I was pretty sure they hadn’t. I pulled out my phone and dialed 911; it took me four minutes and two different tries to get them to actually send out someone to collect the Merchants. Almost as soon as I hung up I realised that I had just called the PRT from my cellphone, which had my name on it I was pretty sure, so I had pretty much just given them my identity unless I wanted to cut loose and hope the Merchants would neither escape before Protectorate and PRT forces arrived, nor talk about who had taken them down.

Fuck me.

Chapter End Notes

What isn't there isn't as important as what is.
Once I was done having a mini-panic attack over maybe having just outed my secret identity to the PRT and had calmed down, I considered possibly calling Amy; to let her know that her family was safe or something. Going by her tone on the phone earlier though I didn’t think she would be happy to hear from me about anything, and besides I was sure her family would inform her. After all, what kind of screwed up people wouldn’t?

It felt like I was standing there forever before the PRT and the police started arriving to take away the various Merchants. Once it didn’t seem like Skidmark or any other gang members were at risk of up and walking away I made to make my exit; as I made my way I saw several uniformed police officers motion towards me. At first I was worried that they were about to try and maybe arrest me, or at least detain me for some sort of debriefing, but then the closest two simply waved in greeting. As I passed others, some of them waved too. I scanned their faces, and as for each face that waved I had clear memories of working alongside them on the day of Bakuda’s bombings. Honestly, the fact that even days after they still thought well of me because of what I had done made me feel really good about the choices I had made so far.

On the other hand, though I wouldn’t call them cold, the PRT officers I saw didn’t react nearly as warmly. Again I was worried that one of them would make an attempt to stop me for one reason or another, and if they did I wasn’t entirely sure what I would do, but I definitely wasn’t going anywhere right now but home. No one made any moves though and soon was on the run away from their presence back towards home.

A sense of relief flooded into me, the urge to just start laughing wildly and to yell joy to the sky hit me in a way I hadn’t thought was possible for a long time; every part of my life having been relentlessly shitty for what felt like forever. Maybe it was the sense of the accomplishment, or maybe it was the fact that things finally seemed to be going right for the first time in a long time for me, or hell; it might even be that I was finally honestly completely cracking, but I felt damn good!

I held the urge in and simply pushed my feet harder to just get home faster, so I could pester Nono with more questions about what had just happened back there. I knew on some level that I could probably have the same conversation in my (our?) head without any trouble, but it seemed better to me to have these sorts of talks… face to face, so to speak. After all, if I just started talking to Nono in my head like the weird ride along she was, it felt a little too much like I was accepting the situation. For all my declarations of being done with feeling sorry for myself and dwelling on the situation, I still wasn’t all that ready to just dive head first into pretending everything was hunky-dory.

So, I would wait until we got home, and them I would ask all the ques- Home! Dad! Shit, he would have all sorts of questions himself ready for me when I came busting in, and at least part of my tenacity seemed to have come from him because in the last week he definitely had not given up on trying to convince me to join the wards, or on anything else. He had been keeping up a constant running argument with the city, even as mayors, city councilors, and years came and went, over the ferries. That was just his job. I was his daughter.

Granted I was also invincible but I hadn’t yet, and frankly couldn’t much think of how to anyways, thought of a way to demonstrate that too him. I could see the house just a block down the street and I could imagine Dad sitting in there waiting for me to come home just like he had that first night weeks ago, ready with all sorts of questions that I just didn’t have the answers to. Even the
questions I could answer I wasn’t sure I wanted to. Ok, thinking cap time Taylor; what are you going to say to your dad? ‘Hey Dad! Tonight I discovered I can see the entire city whenever I want!’ Yeah, no. That was at least one thing I was leaving out. Another was probably the tank.

But, thinking about it, the rest I could probably be mostly honest about: I had fought the Merchants, but New Wave had been there to help. It would hardly even be lying, after all I would be telling my dad what had actually happened just without all the extra stuff that would make him worried over nothing. Well, not nothing, but it was stuff I could handle. Had to handle. Whatever.

I started on my way towards home again, this time just walking.

I stopped again.

I was still wearing my costume wasn’t I? My head whipped around as quickly as it could, thankfully I didn’t find any staring old ladies, gawking teenagers, blearily blinking vagrants, or indeed anyone at all on the streets at all nor did it look like anyone had suddenly stopped looking out of their windows. How exactly did everyone else do this? How did they go out fighting crime and get home without all but shouting from the rooftops their civilian identities? Well, Taylor, for one most of them are with the Wards or the Protectorate, or they were New Wave and just didn’t. Seeing as basically none of those were options for me, I would really have to get better about sneaking back home after going out.

In the meantime I needed to not walk into my house blatantly wearing my costume so I walked past it, and kept going for a couple more before I broke into a run again until I turned onto a little alleyway about two blocks down the street from my house. I was reasonably sure no one was peeking at me, but I double checked just to be sure, and then I started cutting through backyards again towards my house. Given that secrecy was what I was going for, I went as slowly and as quietly as I possibly could while also not dawdling; because of the cooling night air and the general humid condition of the air in the city this was actually a harder prospect that it would have been otherwise. Several minutes later though I was tumbling into my own backyard and, making sure to keep to the shadows, sneaking into the basement through the side window.

A sigh of relief blew from my lips as I eased the widow back into its normal position. I was making too many mistakes; ignoring Squealer at the beginning of the fight, the phone thing, and now almost running in through the front door in full costume. Not mistakes I should have made! Hell, I had thought a hundred times to myself even before I’d gotten powers that tinkers seemed the most dangerous, and I had all sorts of plans early on about where I could keep my costume, spares, and changes of regular street clothes when I had first discovered what I could do. What had changed? Nono, could the weird pink-haired hallucinations appearance be the reason?

No, thinking about it now, it had started before she showed up. The fact was, my power was too easy; I just need to show up, start hitting things hard enough and before long the problem would be solved. The simple solution was always sitting there for me no matter what so somewhere along the way I had forgotten to be clever. I had even stopped my experiments on what my powers could actually do. Maybe this was just what happened to people like me? Alexandria, Glory Girl, and all us other dumb brutes stopped seeing the problems to be solved and started, as the saying goes, to see all the world as nails. It was even clearer now, if it hadn’t already been pretty evident, that I needed very desperately to ask Nono a lot of questions.

I started up the basement stairs and as I neared the top of the steps I could faintly hear the TV on in the living room. My hand rested on the doorknob for just a moment as I steeled myself for whatever came next. The door opened as silently as it ever had but even so as I stepped out onto the ground floor I could see my Dad rocketing up from where he had been sitting and turning his whole
attention on me.

“Taylor! There you are, are you all right!? What happened? Where did you go? Don’t ever run off like that again!”

My Dad shot off his questions rapidfire while he proceeded to barrel towards me, at least as much as a man of his build and stature could barrel, and then tried to wrap me up in what was shaping up to be a bone-crushing hug. I put my arms out to stop him, at least for the moment.

“Yes, I’m fine. Dad. One question at a time,” I paused for effect and then spread my arms out. “But first.”

We hugged. I spent the first moment or two just standing there, trying to listen to my dad’s heartbeat in my ear while he took comfort in the physical reassurance that I was whole and all right. He provided me a different sort of comfort; even though I often hate my lanky too-thin body, seeing the way we matched was reassuring in a way; like reminding myself that I had a real history, that I belong in a place that wasn’t the absolute insanity of my life the past few weeks. My body may no longer have been exactly human, but I was still human in a way that wouldn’t just disappear because some time travelling body steal robot from a maybe-future had bumped into a weird fractal power-granting alien too hard. After several more moments we finally released one another.

“So, tell me Taylor, what happened? You ran out of here like a shot yelling something about, for gods sake, the Merchants, the Docks and then I don’t hear from you for nearly two hours.” He said, his voice concerned, and tinged with the slightest hint of anger.

“I fought the Merchants… Er, well I helped fight the Merchants. Some of New Wave was there, and then I had to wait around for the PRT to arrive to take them away. That took forever,” I said, finally pulling back the hood of my costume.

Dad looked at me, his eyes wider slightly than usual even by Hebert standards.

“Why didn’t you call me? We got the phones for a reason Taylor, I understand that sometimes you’re going to run off to… fight crime. I’m not going to lie and say I like it but I know it. But when you’re done and you’re okay, you need to call me; you know what, forget the okay part, just when you’re done call me. Promise.”

His voice was insistent and he had a look in his eyes that definitely told me he was being serious. Honestly, I guess I could see his point and hadn’t I been thinking exactly the same sort of thing about New Wave? I probably wouldn’t be winning any daughter of the year awards.

“I promise, I will. I wasn’t thinking I guess, I just wanted to get home.” I said, nodding to reinforce the promise. “Though, I think I screwed up kinda big in a totally different way…”

I called the PRT from my phone.”

My Dad’s face broke into a smile, then he started laugh and he pulled me into another hug, this one a lot less intense but comforting all the same.

“For someone who is an actual cape, you haven’t paid much attention to this stuff have you, eh kiddo? The PRT doesn’t record identities of callers, it was whole big issue years ago when some thinker or tinker villain cracked their database and used it to take revenge on a few witnesses; they started wiping ID’s from calls after that. Well, you’re home now kiddo.” He said the words into the top of my head, but I heard them just as well.
“Thanks,” was my only response, and I wasn’t really sure what I was thanking him for to be honest; maybe for not going absolutely insane over any of this, maybe for easing my fears, maybe for loving me, maybe for everything. Whatever, it wasn’t really important why I was thanking him anyways. The two of us stayed like that for several minutes without saying a word, before I extracted myself and told him I was tired. As I made my way upstairs I heard the TV shut off behind me, a moment after I shut the door to my own room I heard the door to Dad’s room open and shut.

My room was just as I had left it earlier in the evening. I made my way to the desk by my bed and sat down in the creaky wooden chair that stood there, I cast about for a moment expecting Nono to have already appeared but nothing happened.

“Nono, we need to talk.” My voice was low and quiet so my Dad wouldn’t hear me from his room, the aforementioned pink-haired girl appeared almost as soon as I was finished speaking; her own voice rushing out excitedly.

“Nono is sooo happy! You were awesome! All smash, boom, bam, hiyah! Super cool!” She careened around the room, making punching, kicking, karate-chopping, and even few finger-gun motions despite the fact that I was certain I hadn’t done half of that. It was weird the way her hair, her clothes and she herself moved; like the air and everything else in the room was actually there but like gravity just didn’t exist for her.

“Nono. Nono!” I had to whisper pretty harshly to get her attention fully, and get her to stop playing around.

“Nono knows, you have questions,” She sighed, then perked up again. “But you were awesome Taylor! Don’t forget that!”

“Alright, I get it.” I smiled a little at her insistence, whatever else she was definitely good for my self-esteem. “Questions first, we can think about my awesome might later. I guess the biggest one is, what exactly happened in the warehouse, what did I see?”

Nono smile at the comment on future discussions of my awesomeness and then her face turned more serious.

“It is like Nono said, for some of the systems we have there were no ways, at first, to communicate between you and it without going through Nono herself, not without introducing delays. Delays of tens of milliseconds, sometimes even hundreds!” At that she looked, the best way I could describe it was ashamed but there was a hint of indignant as well, like someone somewhere had failed her.

“Nono has had to teach the systems to take commands from you, from your brain, and teach your mind how to give the commands correctly. It took a long time, but Nono is finally getting everything done!” She paused, looking proud of herself.

“You’ve been fiddling with my brain?” I actually stood up and took a couple steps towards her, my voice still low but angry as well.

“What? No! Yes! No! Not with the important bits! It’s more like Nono has been putting new pieces in. Nono doesn’t ‘fiddle’ anyways, she is very careful, very methodical.” The future robot paused, looking for a moment, almost insulted, before her expression morphed again into embarrassment.

“But, Nono understands that she should have asked permission.”

I sighed, it really was hard to stay mad at this girl, she was just so unrelentingly genuine in basically everything she said and did that it was hard to stay pissed. Part of it also might have been
that she was giving me super powers that let me be someone, probably more than part of it if I was honest; I had a suspicion that I could forgive someone a lot if they gave me super powers. And weren’t an asshole, that part was important too. However, she hadn’t really answered my question.

“Okay, okay, but what was it? How did it let me see the entire city like one of those model train setups?” I asked.

“Passive Integrated Sensor Suite, Environmental Modelling. All the background radiation, all the sound waves, and the light gets collected by sensors that build a real time model of the area up to several kilometers out depending on complexity of the given environment. Beyond that detail is not accurate enough to be resolvable with only local passive sensors.”

It was surprising, how easily she could switch between sounding like an over-excited schoolgirl on her birthday begging to open her presents, and a character out of a science fiction movie.

“So, I can just… do that now? Anytime I want?” If I could, I guess my problem of not knowing when villains were on the move was done with. Hell, I could probably find them right now if I tried, maybe take the fight to them. Nono nodded at the question I had asked.

I sat down again, closed my eyes and focused on seeing more. It happened all of a sudden; the world opened up around me like a blooming flower, except I wasn’t watching from somewhere above the flower but from inside and even as it finished blooming the flower got bigger and bloomed again. I saw my house, my street, my neighborhood and beyond in an instant, then the city again and even past that.

I struggled for a moment to get a handle on details; all I could see was the streaking lights of rushing cars out on the streets and the highway, the crashing of the waves on the bay. A car or a face would catch my eye, and I would follow it as long as I could, but then another would catch my attention, then another, then another. After a while I pulled back, looking at the end city again; it was like searching for a single needle in a haystack full of millions of needles and the needles kept moving, plus I didn’t actually know what the needles looked like. Each face was clear, for the most part, but even though the details were there I couldn’t make sense of them.

Frustrated, I gave up on that, and started scanning the city just to test that I could monitor it myself; at first it was easy, I found one accident and several near misses. In a couple of alleyways kids were spray painting ABB tags on buildings that must have recently been cleaned of previous defacement, there was activity on Boardwalk; one shoplifter that the guards completely failed to catch, and the guards themselves trying to keep weary eyes out for trouble. Then there were a couple of fights that spilled out of two separate bars, and a man hitting a woman in the park.

No, that wasn’t right. There was one fight by a bar in the docks, not that two drunk college kids shoving each other really qualified as a real fight, and a group of friends stumbling around trying to keep each other from falling flat on their faces. At the park, the man kissed the woman, stroked her cheek tenderly, and each of them laughed as tears streamed down their faces as they held tightly onto each other and huge smiles split their faces. The more I tried to watch, the more I tried to look, the more things blended together and the less I could be sure that what I was seeing was actually what was happening. I cast things away one at a time, dropping individuals scenes as fast as I could until I was all that remained in my vision; then I pushed myself back behind my own eyes.

“Shit!” I put my face in my own hands. It wouldn’t work, I even if it had was I just going to sit in my bedroom all day looking over the city in case something happened? Or would I just occasionally look over the entire city, and hope I caught whatever was going on by some miracle?

“It doesn’t work. It’s too much to go over without some way separate the actual events from
regular people going about their lives.” I felt defeated, for a moment I had hoped that I had a way to identify parahuman villains, better than even whatever system the Protectorate and PRT used to monitor cities, but that was all dashed and I was left with nothing but the goodwill of a teenage girl that I didn’t even think liked me.

“Nono can maybe do something. It will take time though, the system was originally designed for military threat designation and orbital mechanics assessments, crime is a bit more ambiguous.” Just as she finished speaking, her entire face lit up. “Wait! Maybe-”

Her eyes suddenly got a far off look like she was somewhere else. I wondered what-

Search Available Com. Networks...

Backtracing Signal Propagation…

Originating Sources Location.

Pinging Source WhoIs.

93% Civilian Sources. Discarding.

Piggyback onto Remaining Sources…

_Warning! Unauthorized Access to Government Signals Forbidden! Warning!_

Override Authorization: Hebert, Taylor- Designated Sole Local Terran Imperial Authority.

Signals Tapped. Signals Decode.

Integrating Data Stream.

Watchwords: [parahuman, Wards, Endbringers, ABB, Azn Bad Boys, E88, Empire Eighty Eight…] -thought had suddenly struck her. Her eyes refocused.

“Done! When the PRT, or the Wards, or the Protectorate know of something, we will too.” Nono smiled, broadly and genuinely. I was about to ask what she had done, but it almost wasn’t necessary, I knew what I would have done; found some way to tap into the alerts the PRT themselves used to let the Wards and Protectorate members know when something was happening. If I would have thought of it, well the chances were that she had either thought of it too or read my mind, or something.

“Ok. Well, I guess that’s fixed then.” It was weird in a way, to have a problem and have it fixed almost immediately but I wasn’t about to complain, and besides I was too tired to really question it right now. I guess I wasn’t really tired, but I wanted to sleep all the same.

“Taylor…” Nono’s voice reached me as I was moving towards my bed, which was looking more and more appealing by the passing second. It did not sound like she had good news. “You have to call Amy. Thank her, apologize, make sure she knows her sister was safe last you saw her.”

Shit. She was right of course, I didn’t really want her to be right, because I wasn’t sure I wanted to deal with the other heroine right now; she was a little bit of a bitch if I was honest, and even if she was justified in it sometimes, it didn’t make talking to her anymore pleasant. But Nono was right, she had helped when she really didn’t have to, even after I had basically kind of violated the spirit, if not the letter, of our agreement. Plus I was thinking that maybe her own family wasn’t so
great on the communication either, and it had probably been a bit stupid of me to assume they would be given what she had said about them so far. So, I grabbed my phone out of my pants again, opened up the contacts and then my finger hovered over the dial button for a second.

I dialed.
It rang; once, twice, three times. I was on the verge of giving up, of hanging up and saying that I’d tried, when the ringing abruptly cut off. Unlike the previous times we’d spoken I couldn’t hear the indistinct background noise of activity over the phone, so it didn’t seem like I had caught Amy at the hospital again. Crap, had I woken her up? The thought of just hanging up crossed my mind, but it wasn’t like that would have actually made anything better, if anything it would only make me seem like some stalker creep instead of just an asshole.

“Hello?” She didn’t sound like she’d just been woken up.

“Hey, this is… uh Taylor. I thought I should call, to let you know I’m all right,” Yeah, because she really cares what happened to you. “I mean, your sister is, well was, fine the last time I saw her. And the rest of your family! I don’t mean they aren’t still, it’s just I don’t know where they went after! Anyways, I’m sure you already knew all that, I’m not even sure why I called...” Even when I was aware of it, I could not seem to get a grip on how to not make myself look like an idiot

There was a significant pause.

“Ok. Victoria always calls after they debrief, which probably won’t be done for another few minutes. So, I guess thanks?” Amy didn’t exactly say it like she really meant it; maybe she thought it was unnecessary, or maybe she thought I was sticking my nose where it didn’t belong, or maybe she just plain didn’t like me. Whatever her reason, it didn’t really seem like she was thankful.

“Anyways,” She continued. “I should probably go…”

“Wait!” I hoped she actually listened, because I needed a minute to actually get up my courage. I’m not a particularly proud person, the last few years at school have sufficiently beaten that out of me, but it’s embarrassing all the same to have to admit I was wrong. Nothing much changed in the noise on the other end, so it at least seemed like she’d given me a chance to get out whatever it is I wanted to say.

“Um, I want to say I’m sorry. For how I acted a few days ago; I shouldn’t have asked you to give away your family’s secrets like that, especially not the way I did. You don’t have to do it anymore either, I found another way, so you can ease your conscience. Not that you should’ve been feeling guilty or anything! You didn’t do anything wrong... Anyways, I’m sorry.”

I stopped talking, mostly because I was afraid that if I didn’t I would say something even stupider, and let the silence sit there heavy in the air. As it stretched I struggled against my instinct to find something to fill the awkwardness, partly out of a sense of guilt that screamed at me to let her decide what happened next. Whether she wanted to scream at me, just hang up, or accept my apology, I figured I owed her the opportunity to choose how this played out. Finally after an eternity of silence I heard her reply faintly.

“Thanks…” Amy didn’t sound shy exactly, just like she wasn’t used to saying the word to anyone. Given what she did it kind of made sense, it only made sense that most often people would be thanking her for what she did and not the other way around. “Thanks. I guess it’s partly my fault too, I should have asked why you were calling not just assumed it was all about me; I just hardly talk to anyone that isn’t my family or someone from the hospital so sometimes I forget to be polite.”

She gave a small chuckle, and I couldn’t help but relate to her a little; my own social circle having
shrunk pretty drastically itself in the last few years, I knew how hard it was sometimes to know the right thing to say when you didn’t get practice talking. Like right now. I wondered a moment which one of us was worse; maybe we could have competitions to see which of us could screw up faster?

“Anyway, I really do probably need to go,” she continued. Pausing again, her voice changed a little though I wasn’t entirely sure how to characterize it; it was softer, kinder maybe? “But, thanks again. Bye.”

“Bye.” Once again the words were barely out of my mouth before the line was dead, but this time it didn’t feel like she was just trying to get out of the conversation as quickly as possible, instead it just felt like we were both really bad at talking to people and neither of us had the rhythms down right.

I put my phone away and went to bed.

*

Amy called again, later on in the day the following Sunday; this time the I recognized the source of the ringing immediately as being my phone. When I answered I took an educated guess as to who was on the other end.

“Hello? Amy?” I asked. Frankly it wasn’t such a big leap, It wasn’t like anyone beside s Dad had my number; and he was downstairs watching TV.

“Yeah, it’s me. I uh, you’re not busy are you?” She asked, hesitantly.

“No,” I answered, looking at the half-filled page that was my Math homework - actually writing the answers out took longer than solving them now, and even that wasn’t much - and putting it out of my mind as I leaned back in my chair. “Bad day?”

“You could say that. Ugh.” Her drawn out half groan, half sigh was what I imagined a person collapsing sounded like. Emotionally speaking I mean, someone physically collapsing probably involved more smacking and squelching noises but that would be a very different sort of phone call. “The latest animal influenza panic has everyone and their grandmother rushing to the hospital every time they get so much as a runny nose, and I have projects due in AP History and AP English this week plus a test in AP Chem. On top of that Vicky, I mean Victoria, broke up with… her boyfriend, again and she just won’t stop feeling miserable.”

It was a little annoying, to hear about all the stuff they had at Arcadia when I knew Winslow had a total of two AP classes, neither of which was really anything to speak of; I mean Mr. Gladly taught one of them for crying out loud. None of that was her fault though, so I didn’t make any sort of issue out of and instead just let her talk.

“That sucks, but do they really need you to deal with the flu? Isn’t there more serious stuff for you to be dealing with, especially when there’s already medicine for that stuff.” It seemed really inefficient to have someone like Panacea dealing with stuff like that, but I supposed everyone involved had their reasons.

“There is, in fact a lot of pretty serious cases end up in town because I’m here; which is usually
what I deal with. It’s just, with all the extra people coming through… all those extra numbers mean the entire hospital is stressed and that means more overtime for all the staff. I’ve ended up staying an extra hour or two everyday, just to help out, but that’s cutting into my projects. Vicky’s no help either, she just keeps moping around the house.”

She paused a moment, and I heard the sound of fabric on fabric as Amy probably readjusted her position on whatever piece of furniture she was on at the moment; I guessed probably a sofa of some kind, or her bed.

“She’s broken up with him before you know, or he’s broken up with her; so many times I stopped counting. You know, I don’t even get what she sees in him. He’s a smug jerk with too much money, always getting in your head, and saying just the right things. God he pisses me off. You know she tried to set me up with some friend of his? Some stuck up, pretentious, rich boy I’ve never even met. God, can you even imagine that?” She laughed a little, I guessed at the idea of her dating this hypothetical date of hers.

Actually most of her complaints seemed to come back around to that, her sister and her boyfriend, which seemed a little weird to me but I’m an only child so what the hell did I know. Plus, with a sister like Glory Girl I could imagine how annoying it could get; especially if her aura worked like I thought it did, that would mean Amy probably got a faceful of whatever emotion hit her sister in time of stress. That had to suck.

“Um, I guess you probably can’t. Not, I mean, not that you can’t get a date, if you were looking. I don’t mean you need to be looking, I just mean that you don’t know me that well… Oh god, I’m rambling now. How… how are you doing?” She asked, apparently realizing she’d been totally monopolizing the conversation.

I was even tempted for maybe half a second to tell her about Emma and the others, but then I figured; it wasn’t like they could actually do anything to me anymore, so what was the point of bringing it up? “Uh, I’ve been fine. I’m not really interesting; I go to school, I come home, I do homework, I sleep, I eat, all the normal stuff. School is boring for me; I’m not smart like you, the most advanced class I’m in is my computer class, but that’s super easy. Honestly I’m barely even a superhero; sometimes I break up a fight or a stop mugging, but it’s never anything big.”

“Oh, that’s… good? I mean, it’s good that you having run into anything… big.” She sounded like she was asking a question, like maybe she didn’t completely buy it. Amy didn’t make an issue out of it though, which I was glad for.

“Uh, I guess, yeah. Did you want, I mean, is there anything else on your mind?” That almost came out horrible sounding, but thankfully I’d softened my words at the last minute.

"Oh, no, not really," Amy replied, obviously as uncertain about how to continue as I was. Neither of us really knew much about the other, or were social enough to feel comfortable breaking the ice. "Um, thanks for listening, again. Maybe we can talk again, sometime?"

"Sure, I, um, I don't mind. It's... nice, to have someone else to talk to," I told her, a little distracted. Nono was giving me a big thumbs up from where she'd appeared in the corner, for some reason.

"Okay. I'll let you get back to... whatever you were doing, I guess," she said.

Awkward as both of us were about it, she did sound less tense than when I first picked up. "Oh, don't worry about it, just some homework, and I was almost done. Uh... good luck with your, uh, everything I guess."
Amy said thanks and hung up, and I heaved a huge sigh of relief. At least I had made it through the entire conversation without making myself look like too huge of a dork.

At least, so I hoped.

If the motions Nono was making were any indications she at least was happy with the way it had all gone.

Over the weekend I also practiced with my newly discovered abilities, I had decided to stop going out on patrol; I mean what was the point when I could see the city at a glance and I was getting alerts straight from the PRT? Pretty soon I was actually better at taking in the whole city at once and at focusing on a few things at a time, I still hit a limit where things started to bleed into each other but now at least I knew where that was and when to stop. Honestly, it was actually pretty freakin’ cool to be able see people living their lives, well up until a point, then it started getting creepy. Especially when people moved in or out of something that blocked my ability to ‘see’ them; they sort of faded back into existence for me, it was really weird so I stopped after a while.

It wasn’t until Monday afternoon that I really discovered anything cool about my powers. I was sitting in Mr Gladly’s class, bored as he sucked up the ‘cool’ kids by trying to make history ‘fun’, just zooming around my view of the city city lazily with my new vision. The city itself was losing my interest, actually. There’s only so many lines of cars you can watch chugging along the streets before it loses any semblance of novelty, so I had turned my gaze out from the city and into the surrounding area. While I had to admit it was prettier, and I’d no idea the sheer number of cows there were within just a few miles of my school it still wasn’t particularly interesting; but as I was scanning my field of vision something in the distance caught my eye. It was some fast moving object; well, fast compared to everything else I had seen so far, though I knew it was practically moving at a crawl compared to the things the system was meant to track.

When my attention turned to it, at first all I could see was a blurry, indistinct outline of what looked like plane flying; towards Boston it looked like. As I struggled to resolve any details, I felt some switch at the edge of my attention and suddenly the plane exploded into detail while everything else fell away in the same instant. My entire field of view was suddenly focused tightly on this single plane, but something was strange about the way it moved - No, actually what was strange was the fact that it didn’t move at all.

The plane just hung there, like some model that someone put together in their basement, but rendered in exquisite painstaking detail. I could make out faces in the windows, rivets on the wings and body of the plane itself, and a number of other details. Then it moved, like someone had taken two pictures seconds apart and just switched them in an instant; it was like watching a video over a bad internet connection. I watched the plane for a few seconds, but then I saw something else farther off and suddenly I was streaking off towards the horizon. It wasn’t like I imagined it would be, the world didn’t just rush past me, but it bent as I crested over the horizon and zeroed in on the moon.

It was surreal to go from staring at a plane one second and suddenly be seeing the entire moon in the next. The experience wasn’t like I would have expected it to be; though I’m not honestly sure what sort of expectations I could have had for this, it wasn’t for a lifeless, dusty, gray ball to be so very breathtaking. As I took in the image of it I could practically feel the fine powder between my fingertips like ground up chalk that worked its way under my fingernails and would only turn into an annoying cake when I tried to wash it off. I shuddered at the imagined sensation, and suddenly I was in the classroom again, pulled out of my adventure by who knows what.

Over the course of the rest of the day I played with this new ability, picking this or that distant
object and trying to get as much detail as possible. Some things I could get a clear picture of even if that picture hardly ever moved, others I could only get details up to a certain point and the image would constantly jump around every few seconds. It frustrated me to no end sometimes. It seemed that the larger and more stationary an object was the better detail I could get and the steadier it would be. That made a certain amount of sense, because of course it would be easier to get pictures of something that didn’t move. Why I only got still pictures in the first place wasn’t as clear to me, however. I had some ideas but I wasn’t sure, so I decided to ask Nono when I got home from school.

Mostly I decided to wait until I got home because I didn’t know anywhere at or near school where I could guarantee myself privacy and I really didn’t want rumors to spread that I was talking to myself.

“Lightspeed lag,” She told, once I finally had the opportunity to ask. At my questioning look, she explained, “What Nono means is that when you focus on something outside of the range of the modelling system you look at snapshot images taken over periods of time; depending on the size of the object involved and the distance at which you are viewing it the data may be hours old. Of course, if the things you’re looking at are so slow the systems barely needs to pay attention. Isn’t it super cool!?”

It was all basically stuff I was already kind of thinking, just maybe without all the right terms to describe things accurately. This time I was definitely in agreement with Nono though, that the entire thing was definitely totally awesome, even with the limits that I discovered. There was a maximum range, though it was strange because there were things on the earth that I couldn’t see but looking at the Moon and other things out in space was relatively easy. Nono explained that too, it had to do with the angles and how much light bounced around in the atmosphere compared to a vacuum. I didn’t understand it all, even though I could do all the calculations in my head almost as soon as she started talking about them.

Over the next couple days I played more with the capabilities, further testing the limits and I noticed that as I reach out further and further or tried to look at distant things from wildly different angles it almost felt like something was missing. I would get this itchy, tickling sort of sensation in the back of my mind and I would be struck by the impression of a void where there shouldn’t be one. Like there was a sense I should have, but didn’t.

Nono was reticent on the subject, she didn’t outright refuse to answer, but she would only confirm that there was something that should be there without going into what it might be. I didn’t like that she was keeping stuff from me still, but when I considered that I was only beginning to get a handle on the range of things I could accomplish with what I had now it made some sense. More options would probably do nothing but paralyze me into inaction for the time being, so if I wanted to get at the other stuff I would need to start mastering what I already had at my fingertips. With Nono’s help I was confident it wouldn’t take long to discover the ins and outs of my capabilities for myself through a little creative trial and error.

The next couple of days were split between surreptitiously asking Nono questions at school by writing them down in a notebook during class, and putting into practice what she had explained in the basement at home. It became clear pretty quickly that just having her talk into my ear when I couldn’t respond wasn’t very helpful. Even so, there wasn’t any way I was going to start having conversations out loud with her at school even at a whisper and I definitely didn’t want to wait, so we came to a sort of compromise: I let her borrow my arm. Honestly, it was an odd sensation, because even though I could still feel my arm attached to my body I didn’t have control over it. It was disturbing enough that I had to constantly remind myself not to grab my arm to get it to stop.
Working this way we were able to cover a lot of ground. First she started with some basic stuff about her body, stuff like materials, layout, limits, and raw capabilities. I found out that I could now survive in a vacuum, or under immense pressure, that I didn’t need to breathe, or eat for that matter though I had already discovered that I could still enjoy eating and I could still smell things just fine. In fact my sense of smell was even better now, to my own perception at least. Acne was a problem of the past too seeing as my skin, and a large part of the rest of my body, was now made of beyond space-age materials meant to stand up to direct exposure to hard radiation and worse. My eyes were multi-spectrum cameras, my ears microphones with a sensitivity and frequency range far beyond human, and even my skin was filled with micro-sensors that picked up ambient radiation of all types. All of it fed into what Nono called ‘smart-matter computers,’ orders of magnitude more powerful than any super-computer on Earth, nestled deep within my body. Most of the functions of my new body were handled by subconscious parts of our mind, which filtered only the relevant data into my awareness; that was how I was capable of identifying material composition, potential injuries, and more all at a glance in a way that just wasn’t possible for a normal person without being overloaded and distracted.

It took basically everything I had not to have another panic attack in class once I’d really taken all of that in. Several moments of processing and deliberate, steady deep breaths got me through it through; after all it wasn’t as if I hadn’t already known I wasn’t quite human anymore. Maybe I wasn’t quite ready to confront all the details of it, but the gist wasn’t news to me at all, so I basically forced myself to be okay by drawing on the same well of will that had kept me from snapping at Emma and her pack. Turned out there was some silver lining to the entire ordeal after all.

Once I’d worked through that the next thing Nono explained was something she called a Physical Canceler. I can’t pretend to have understood the mechanics of what the thing does, even as all the calculations flooded into my head, but the function was at least clear enough for the most part at least. What it amounted to was a device, or maybe multiple devices, that altered the fundamental physical interactions of within a specific area centered on me; the simplest applications seemed to be to simply make something essentially utterly impervious to everything, or to disrupt bonds between atoms, but I knew just as well that there were innumerable more complex possibilities waiting to be explored. Irritatingly this was not a guarantee of victory for me, Nono explained that whatever the overseeing entities that gave parahumans their powers actually did to give them those powers interefered with the functioning of the system. How much, it seemed, depended on the expression of those powers so far as Nono was able to determine, though she admitted that she hadn’t actually been able to conduct much in the way of experimentation. Still, once I mastered the more complex aspects I knew it would be immensely powerful.

Finally, the last thing Nono told me about was called Cogitative Propulsion, which she simply explained as a device capable of imparting momentum in an instant. I recognized this immediately as being responsible for those moments of sudden movement that I had experienced during fights before this. Once again though it seemed like Nono wasn’t saying everything, after all I didn’t think that whatever she had originally been designed for would have required a system just to punch harder which meant that it probably had a very different purpose that she hadn’t told me about, yet. Or that this was merely the application of some broader ability which I couldn’t work with yet.

For two more days the both of us went back and forth; me asking questions and her trying to explain as simply as possible how these things worked, and then I would experiment in the basement after school. Since I was doing all my experimentation in the basement, I had to be careful of doing too much damage; even though dad knew about my having powers now I still didn’t think he’d be happy if I accidentally cracked the foundation of the house. I still wasn’t able to do everything on command at that point, more specifically I couldn’t make any part of me Move
at will, but I could do something similar with the *Canceler* by tweaking the way my arm, or leg, interacted with the air around it and at the same time making the extremity in questions heavier. It was a work around with subpar results, but I thought it was better to have a reliable alternative and not rely on something I couldn’t control.

The lack of activity from villains in the city that had allowed me to do my experimenting only lasted until Thursday afternoon; just after four I felt something like a tugging sensation at the back of my head. When I looked up, Nono was standing where she had been just a moment ago off to my right, her head now angled like she was trying to catch a distant sound.

“Taylor,” She started, turning back towards me. “Something is happening.”
‘Something,’ it turned out, was a bit of an understatement. A mixture of Empire capes, the
Undersiders, and a few other capes I didn’t recognize by sight but suspected belonged to a gang
new to Brockton Bay called the Travelers, had simultaneously hit one ABB hideout while the rest
of the Empire people went after two more. For the moment the PRT only knew about the Empire,
but my power let me see that this was way more than a simple gang clash; recent events had
apparently catalyzed the other gangs into what had to be a pretty shaky alliance against Lung’s
gang. Though the alliance had numerical superiority in parahumans, the ABB had Lung who had
taken on entire Protectorate teams and was rumored to have fought Leviathan. Having fought Lung
myself a few times I knew that if they didn’t take him down fast they wouldn’t take him down at
all, and if Lung was on the battlefield I wasn’t sure the rest of them would make any difference at
all.

So as outnumbered as the three Asian gang was, it was a more than even fight, especially if any of
the cracks that had to exist in whatever bargain had been struck amongst the other gangs began to
show themselves. They wouldn’t be able to trust their supposed allies at their back, and that would
lead to hesitation and doubt. That simple fact would lead to failure, and that failure would lead into
outright warfare between all the gangs as the fight turned against them. Any war would eventually
have only one winner, Lung, and a whole lot of losers scrabbling in the ruins of what had once been
their homes and their city.

So. Time for me to get to work then.

Did I think that I could prevent the worst all by myself? Yes and no; I was confident that if Nono
let us go all out I could take on any of the players setting themselves afield, but I was just as
confident that if we did go all out there would be just as little to come back to. I did think that I
could maybe turn the tide though, that I could push things enough that the situation wouldn’t
completely dissolve into a war with Brockton Bay as the abused battleground. I needed to get
moving, Lung and the other ABB capes weren’t out yet but soon enough-

Almost as if on cue Lung appeared, already looking powered up and still growing. The only
opposition to meet him was the Undersiders' Grue and Regent, Fenja, Menja and Othala from
Empire 88, and two others I didn’t know the names of who must be Travelers. I couldn’t be sure
without knowing the powers of the two unfamiliar capes, but given who Lung was it didn’t seem
like enough firepower to bring him down. They would have to wait for reinforcements which
would only give our draconic friend more time to ramp up.

Sure enough I saw one of the twins pull out a cell phone hit a few buttons - it must have been some
sort of prearranged code. This was the plan then, to hit the ABB hard enough to draw out Lung for
a big confrontation? Well someone had made a critical error in judgement if they had thought that
would ever work. I might have despised everything the Empire stood for and espoused, but it had
always seemed like they’d been one of the smarter operations so I couldn’t see why exactly they
and the others had gone in for this. Something had to have pushed them into it, something
significant which had convinced them that they had to act now or not at all, but what?

It hit me; the Merchants! There had been something strange about the weapons Squealer had used,
tinkertech would fit, but that sort of stuff wasn’t something Squealer had ever used before. The
Merchants weren’t a gang with a lot of resources, and they definitely weren’t strong enough to take
on the ABB on their own turf to steal something like that from Bakuda, so the best explanation was
that they had been given them. There must have been a meeting where the whole alliance had been
hashed out between all the gangs, and just as surely the Merchants, being essentially a perpetual
joke amongst the more serious gangs of the city must have been insulted at some point. Ego
bruised, and eager to get back at the others, Skidmark must have gone to Lung and struck an
alliance of their own... and then promptly got himself into PRT custody where he would be
thoroughly useless to his new partner should other parties come calling.

It made some sense at least. Not, admittedly, a lot but then people were chaotic and unpredictable
even when they acted at their most rational, so it was probably as close to the truth as I was likely
to get for the moment.

The question now was, what I was going to do about all of this? I certainly couldn’t take on all the
gangs of Brockton Bay on my own, I would need back up. The Protectorate I knew would already
been on their way in some capacity, but even with the Wards I didn’t think it would be enough and
at this point the situation needed more bodies. New Wave would come, if they found out; I didn’t
know how the learned of stuff like this and I had a sort of in with them, so I could take care of that.
I didn’t have the money or the time it might take to persuade Faultline’s crew. Who else was there
in the city? L33t and Uber? Ugh, no, both for being utterly unequipped for the fight itself and for
almost certainly being self-serving cowards.

Once again my phone was in hand and I was dialing Amy’s number. She picked up halfway
through the second ring.

“Taylor- ?”

“Amy,” I cut her off. “This is an emergency. Your family might already know, but in case they
don’t I need you to tell them. Practically every gang in the city is about to come down on Lung, but
they’ve given him too much time and it’s not going to work. Ok?”

“Wha-Sure. Yeah, I ca-I can do that.” She sounded stunned. I grabbed my costume and began
stuffing it haphazardly into my backpack even as I responded.

“Good. Thanks, bye Amy.” I hung up without waiting for a reply and was out of my room and
halfway down the stairs in seconds. My hand was practically on the door handle when it occurred
to me that I should leave some sort of note for Dad, he deserved at least that and it would only take
a minute. Dropping my pack by the front door I rushed back towards the living room where my
Dad’s small home office was; grabbed a pen and an old opened envelope to write on. Hastily I
scribbled: “Something big going down. will call when done. love, Taylor”. That done I picked up
my pack again and was out the door a second later, barely pausing to drop the note on the dinner
table where it would be nice and obvious.

I needed to find some place to change before I got much farther, then maybe I could call Amy back
and ask her to see if her sister would pick me up along the way. A back alley behind a gas station
and auto shop only a few blocks from where I was stood out; there was a little alcove where one
part of the building met the sheer wall of the building to the side after turning a corner. There were
no cars at the pumps despite the time of day and the attendant inside was utterly uninterested in
anything except what’s on the second of two small TVs, the one showing soap operas and not the
one connected to the surveillance cameras, so it was as close to perfect as I thought I’d get.

Soon enough I found myself in the aforementioned alley, changing out of one set of clothes and
into another in an annoyingly tedious process. I wished one of my powers had given me some sort
of shortcut for the whole costume change thing, but unfortunately I had not been so lucky and so
was forced to do things the hard way. As I stuffed my civilian clothes into my pack and shoved it
onto a ledge formed by a large metal box with large tubes connected to it, my phone rang. I looked at the screen and saw that it was Amy calling me back, for which I sighed with relief because it meant I wouldn’t be grilled by Dad right now and I had the opportunity to ask if she could get her sister to pick me up.

“Hey, I was just about to call you! do you think you could ask.”

“Taylor, they’re not coming,” she interrupted. Her words hung there for a second as I processed what she had just said.

What the fuck?

“What the fuck?” I sounded angry; I was angry, but not at her. “I’m sorry. I mean, WHAT THE FUCK!”

“Vicky isn’t happy about it either,” Amy started, sounding pretty shocked herself and not at all like she was happy about what she had heard either. “But the PRT needs to wait so they can concentrate forces. It sounded like they’re hoping to come in and sweep up...they’re even asking for volunteers from other cities.”

I could see the logic, from their point of view; it was only two gangs wailing on each other as usual, perhaps a little more serious because of Lung’s direct involvement but they didn’t know there was an alliance. A major defeat for the Empire would be destabilizing, but the other gangs would act to prevent an all out take over of Empire territory by the ABB in that scenario. In the real world though the Undersiders and the Travellers would both be reeling from the loss themselves, possibly dealing with losses or injuries and Coil didn’t have any other parahumans working with him so unless his power was a total game changer he was almost a non-factor. It would be a disaster; Lung would capture old Empire territory, Coil would make his own grabs, outside elements would be attracted by the sudden opening up of real estate, and the Protectorate would be stretched thin on the ground trying to cover everything.

With an opening I was almost completely sure I could replicate my earlier feat of putting Lung out of commission, but to get that opening I would need a other people to distract him otherwise he would be able to outmaneuver me. The other gangs probably wouldn’t attack me outright but all the same if I showed up and attacked Lung they might not press him hard enough on their own to give me the opening I needed.

“Amy, listen to me carefully; I need your sister’s help and I need it before the entire situation goes completely to hell.” It was actually already sort of going to hell in a strangely sort of literal way, several of the structures in the area where the fight was taking place were already on fire and with the rest of the gang alliance enroute the situation would undoubtedly quickly devolve. “Tell her she has the chance to be part of taking down practically every gang in the city. Tell her the PRT plan is stupid and New Wave needs to force their hand into doing something. Tell her she’s a scared, weak, coward, I don’t care how you do it, just get her to come, because if she doesn’t the city will burn and thousands will die.”

Without waiting for her to reply I hung up, hoping to whatever deities might actually exist that Amy herself believed me and that she could convince her sister. If I Glory Girl showed up I knew the rest of New Wave would follow, if only to keep up appearances for the public or out of some sense of familial responsibility. I tossed the phone into my backpack with my clothes and then set off again.

The fight itself was still a ways off, but now that I was in my costume I could push myself as hard as I needed without drawing undue attention, or at least without that attention leading more or less
immediately back home. Still, it would take me few minutes to actually get to the fight; which had continued escalating as more capes trickled in every few minutes. Strange, their numbers were off; only three Undersiders and the same for the Travelers, which meant there was at least one member from each team missing assuming their rosters hadn’t drastically changed. Out of the the Undersiders the only one I couldn’t find was Tattletale, and despite that fact that all I had to go off of was a blurry internet picture and a fleeting interaction I was sure I could spot her. I was kicking myself now for not having read up more on the Travelers once I’d heard they were supposed to be in town, it was not only irresponsible but it also meant that I didn’t have any sort of good idea of who might be missing and what their powers could be. Of the probable Travelers members that were there, one was a young-ish guy wearing a suit, red mask and a black top hat, another a girl about the same age wearing a black armored costume with red blotches that might have been suns. Last was some hulking animal thing that looked like a cross between a bear and an ape, which was currently harrying Lung besides a newly arrived Hookwolf. The girl in black was just standing back, looking kind of useless with the guy standing next to her; at first I wasn’t sure what he was doing but then I noticed that occasionally he would shift his gaze and something or someone would move in an instant. Some sort of teleporter then, that was at least something.

Already several Empire capes were out of action; one of the twins, Victor, and Rune were all laying out of the main melee where someone from their own side must have moved them next to the two Travelers who weren’t directly fighting. Everyone else was definitely looking the worse for wear, and the fires that had gotten started were spreading fast, leaping from open windows to adjacent buildings. Despite what Amy had said, or maybe as further proof of its truth, I could see firetrucks moving into positions away from the battleground, presumably in preparation to block further spreading, while squads of uniformed police and PRT agents tried to move surreptitiously in the efforts to warn civilians of the danger. There was a gathering of Protectorate capes farther away. Fortunately from my point of view they all looked distinctly uncomfortable as they stayed steadfastly in that single location, so maybe I could essentially guilt them into action. If only Glory Girl and the rest of New Wave would show up then this might all just work out.

Almost like she had heard me thinking about her, I saw movement that quickly resolved itself to be Glory Girl heading straight for the fight, as fast as I had ever seen her fly. The only problem was that she would completely pass me by on her current course, so I searched around for something to get her attention with and settled on a chunk of crumbling brick a little smaller than my fist. I promptly flung the chunk at her.

It sailed for a moment and then splintered on impact against her shield. Immediately the other girl began casting about looking for the source of the sudden attack, so to better get her attention I flung myself halfway up a two story, flat topped building with a single leap, onto the metal fire escape. From there I made another quick leap onto the roof itself and then I waved my arms as violently as I could. Thankfully, Glory Girl caught on pretty quickly and angled towards me. She did not look happy as she neared, though whether that was because of my methods of getting her attention or the situation in general I wasn’t really sure.

She touched down a lot more gently than she had in the Bank, but then I already had suspicions of that being more for show than out of necessity.

“Sorry about that, I didn’t have a better way of getting your attention.” I said, by way of a pseudo-apology. “Also, I don’t know what your sister told you I said, but I’m probably sorry for it.”

I figured it was better to ask for forgiveness even if Amy had chosen a more diplomatic approach, but Glory Girl waved me off like it wasn’t a big deal at all.

“Whatever,” She said, giving me a once over look. “You were right anyways, this entire situation is
bullshit. I would’ve gone freakin’ nuts waiting for the douches at the Protectorate to make a move.”

“Uh, speaking of,” At least we were on the same page about some things. “The situation that is, not, uh- douches. Is your family coming?”

“They fucking better!” she snorted, crossing her arms. “I swear I’ll drop them after this is over if they don’t, fucking assholes. They talk all this big talk about being better than the fucking PRT, then what do they do? Dance to their fucking tune, fucking bullshit.”

“Uh, right.” I could already see the rest of New Wave moving, though they too looked to be heading straight for the action, which would mean the Protectorate capes would miss them. I had been hoping the sight of New Wave rushing to the rescue would guilt Armsmaster and the rest, but that wouldn’t work if they didn’t see them at all. “Listen, theres just one thing I need your help with…”

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I had Glory Girl pass close enough to where the Protectorate capes were gathered so they could see the two of us clearly before I let her zip back towards the action. Hopefully it would be enough to galvanize some action out of the crowd down below, but I couldn’t afford to waste anymore effort worrying about them so I turned off that power and focused on how I was going to deal with the oncoming altercation. The forces currently arrayed against Lung and his ABB were already fraying and weakened so if I wanted to preserve as much of a fighting element I would need to provide some sort of initial distraction to get everyone else a breather.

“Higher!” I screamed, to be heard over the rushing air. “Drop me when we’re close, once he’s focused on me hit him hard. Keep him off balance.”

Glory Girl nodded, already angling up to gain more height. I could already see Lung, large gouts of flame shooting off as he struck at smaller figures that darted about him and already larger than I had ever personally seen him before. In the next instant I was falling and I noticed that the members of the Travelers were now conspicuously absent as well as at least one member of the Empire that had not been unconscious when I’d last checked. The Undersiders were still there, Regent and Grue standing away from the fight with the latter’s left arm hanging awkwardly while Hellhound and her dogs harassed Lung. All of this I noticed in the time it took for me to fall from where my ride had released me to the point where I had to brace myself to control my impact.

I landed in a three point crouch, like people alway did in movies and TV shows. When I stood up a second later there was a sudden sharp whistle and the Undersiders started to book it, leaving only the remaining Empire parahumans to fight Lung. As I’d expected the entire alliance had indeed collapsed, which meant it was basically up to me to keep Lung occupied until the rest of the heroes arrived and this entire affair could hopefully be mopped up without turning Brockton Bay into a smouldering crater.

Luckily I only need to keep him focused for a few minutes before help should arrive, and with Glory Girl’s help that seemed well within the realm of possibility.
“Hey! You overgrown iguana! Remember me?” When in doubt, insult.

The hulking form of Lung turned swiftly towards me, his beady little eyes narrowing as he saw me. There was a rumbling laugh that emanated from his body as he rounded completely on me.

“‘OO!’ He roared, backhanding the attack Cricket out of his way with a lazy swing of his scaly arm.

The man didn’t waste anymore time talking; he roared and started charging straight at me while flames gathered around his arms. I decided to meet his charge with one of my own. The two of us were still several feet from colliding when something slammed into the back of his head, causing him to stumble forward several feet. Lung’s head and upper torso turned instinctively to meet this new and unexpected threat, and he realized just a moment too late the mistake.

I jumped onto one of his outstretched arms, then pivoted on my left leg and extended my right while performing the one trick I’d actually gotten a good handle on in my few days of practice. My foot struck him on the side of the head with a sickening crack.

I pushed off as soon as I registered the hit, grabbing at his scaly hide to vault myself over his left shoulder and onto the cracked pavement. He only let me get a few steps before he was on me again, closer than before and now more than a little pissed off at me which was exactly how I wanted him. Also, probably right where he wanted me.

He tried to catch me off guard with a stream of fire, but I simply let it wash over me and accomplish nothing after which it pretty quickly cut off. As I was ducking under a right hook Glory Girl smashed into his head from the left causing him to wobble for a moment but this time he did not take his eyes off me.

Whatever else, he was a quick learner in a fight.

Of course if he wasn’t distracted by attacks like that anymore I would need something to extend my reach because I just didn’t have long enough arms to hit him without putting myself practically on top of him. For several moments neither of us did anything except stare at each other. Well that wasn’t completely true for me; I was trying to see if there was anything laying around that I could possibly grab to hit him with.

Glory Girl hit him again, or at least tried to, but this time Lung was ready and his arm shot out to grab her. He missed, but only because the heroine had darted to the side a second before his fist would have closed around her, he roared in frustration at missing the annoyance interfering with his fight. Meanwhile I used the moment of distraction to grab a charred section of two by four, once I had it in my hand I concentrated on pushing the part of my power that gave me apparent invulnerability into the piece of wood.

I swung my weapon at Lung’s head, but a sudden movement on his part put his shoulder in that space instead but the wood held and didn’t splinter or even crack. Unfortunately he didn’t really seem to notice the impact either, he grabbed it with his other hand and engulfed it in flames but that didn’t do anything to the wood. I was counting that as a success.

A sudden noise distracted us both as the rest of New Wave crested over a building and then dropped to the street below. Lung’s face split into a smile at the sight, or at least I thought it would’ve been a smile on his human face, and he began to laugh again. He decided to do that trick where he explodes, and though it normally wouldn’t have done anything to me I decided to let it throw me. This was after all too prime of an opportunity to let him become occupied with someone else to pass up.
Sure enough after waiting a moment or two where the explosion had thrown me, Lung was occupied battling the rest of New Wave. The gang leader was big enough now that I didn’t think I would have to worry too much about him staying still, most of the battle seemed to involve him planting himself in one spot and letting his opponents come to him.

“Come on, Nono. Let’s do it.” She didn’t appear to respond, but I felt her agreement and so was confident that she would get our body to do what it needed to.

Glory Girl swooped down to pick me up, paused a moment to make sure she had a good grip and then shot upwards as fast as she could. Barely a moment later she was letting go again and I was dropping for the second time in less than ten minutes towards Lung and a fight, only this time I meant to end it.

I took aim, extended my right foot like a knife.

And.

Then.

Moved.

One second I was still more than twenty feet above Lung and the fight and then in the next my foot was hitting him on the back right part of his head, sending shattered scraps of scales flying in all directions and leaving pale, slimy, bleeding flesh exposed underneath.

But it did not knock him out...

Shit. Shit. SHITSHITshitshitshitshitshit.

He stumbled forward under the impact, one hand coming up to touch where he’d been hit. It came away covered in blood, and little rivulets were already running down his scales, though I could already see it starting to heal. A strangled sort of roar shook itself out of Lung and his entire body whipped around towards where I had hit him, obviously indicating that he was supremely pissed off at whatever had attacked him. What that revealed was a ragged and bloody hole where his right eye should have been and a jaw that was twisted into an unnatural shape; a shudder went through my body as I took in image of his ruined face, partly out of revulsion and partly because he was still standing, still ready to fight in spite of it.

A far off rumbling sound, familiar and nothing like Lung’s own rumbling laugh, reached the both of us at the same time. He gave one last agonized, frustrated, roar and then scream one near incomprehensible word.

“NHAOW!”

The next thing I knew there were half a dozen Oni Lee’s in amongst all the gathered capes; each of them holding a small round device that promptly exploded in a blinding and deafening detonation.

Or it would have been blinding and deafening if I hadn’t been me. As it was it still distracted me for a second or two while I reoriented myself using whatever it was that took over for my eyes in this case. When I had my bearings again, I found Lung already sprinting away at full speed, so I turned to give chase. I was catching up when another Oni Lee slammed into me bodily holding a distinctly different type of bomb, managing to wrap his arms around me in a moment of total surprise.
Water burst out, expanding impossibly quickly into a fifteen meter diameter sphere around me. As I struggled to move through the uncharacteristically viscous water Oni Lee’s clone dissolved around me. Past the shimmering mirror surface of the weird opposite of a bubble my advanced senses let me see Lung recede farther and farther down the street. A movement in the opposite direction caught my attention, and turned automatically to see Glory Girl plunging into the water on a direct course for the retreating villain. She was still only part-way in as the thought of asking Nono to simply move us entered into my mind when the entire ball of water froze around us in an instant.

Stuck in the solid chunk of ice there was nothing I could do but watch Lung disappear around a corner but at least the city wasn’t likely to go up in flames, so that was some good accomplished. A moment later the Protectorate capes swung into view behind me, but Glory girl was the one who had my attention, stuck in the ice alongside me up to her waist as she was.

**Perfect**.

Chapter End Notes

Eh, end of this chapter I have mixed feelings about.
In the end it didn’t prove that hard to to get out of the ball of ice that the bomb had formed around me, I just reached inside and pulled at the Physical Canceler power; focusing on raising the temperature immediately around me. It wasn’t something I’d tried before, but if I understood the intended function it should do it all the same, assuming that was that I had ‘access.’ After a few seconds I had some room to move and was also completely soaked, so I focused on raising the temperature higher both to melt the water faster and maybe dry my clothes once I actually got out. It only took a moment or two before I had enough room to move pretty freely, at which point I was able to bust my way out in a couple good cracks but I still needed to get Glory Girl out.

Thirteen seconds had passed between the both of us getting trapped and me getting myself free, I was pretty sure she would still be all right for at least a few more, but I knew that hurrying was probably best. Seeing her half in and half out of the ice, feet kicking as she made her own efforts, would have been comical had her life not been at risk. I moved around the sphere of ice, careful not to touch her so that I wouldn’t burn her with the heat I was generating, and began to melt the ice surrounding her. In another moment or two the ice immediately around her was sufficiently weakened that she was able to extract herself, and with an audible ‘pop’ she shot backwards and came to rest floating in the air a few feet away breathing only slightly harder than normal. I let go of the power, letting the heat of the air surrounding return to normal. It had freed the both of us but my clothes were still soaked.

“Great,” I thought sourly, picking at my clothes before asking aloud, “You okay?” I was surprised to find that she distinctly did not look okay at all despite the nod she gave in response.

In that moment I would have almost described her as looking like a scared little girl, but then I supposed there were things her power couldn’t protect her from and I guessed suffocation was one of them. Describing her like a ‘little girl’ suddenly seemed pretty dismissive which made me feel guilty for thinking it. If I had been confronted by one of my weaknesses, not that I actually knew of any that I had, and been presented with the real possibility of my own death I would probably have been just as frightened probably. I think anyone would have. Strangely enough that thought made me miss fear; not that I was really fearless or anything, but I was starting to really understand just how indestructible I was and that made me feel alone all over again.

I shook that unpleasant thought off as best as I could and surveyed the scene before me. Fire engines were already starting to arrive to put the fires that Lung had started out, while the Protectorate capes had spread out in what looked like a pretty practiced pattern, probably looking for ABB stragglers or possible bombs or booby traps. I briefly used my enhanced vision to verify that they wouldn’t find anything besides the obvious; I even tried to find Lung but he had apparently shrunk enough to disappear from my view, at least as far as a cursory sweep went. I considered going after him, doing a more thorough search, but given that he had just taken my trump card and kept going I wasn’t sure it was a good idea. There was too much risk that if I did encounter him he would already be primed for it and just bulk up too quickly for me, which might lead to the exact sort of scenario I wanted to avoid; namely the entire city going up in flames. Given how things could have gone I was happy anyways, the destruction of my hometown had been prevented, and some villainous capes were even going to be put away; granted it was only two of the Empire, looked like Rune and Stormtiger, but it was still something when everything could have very much gone to hell.

Given everything that had happened today I didn’t exactly feel enthusiastic about hanging around and talking to the Protectorate capes, and besides Dad would be home soon. I turned back towards
Glory Girl and was pleased to find her looking better than before already, though she had a concerned look of her own plastered on her face.

“Are you okay? Kinda zoned out on me there…” she trailed off at the end, like maybe she wasn’t sure if she actually cared.

“Yeah. I, uh, just need to get back to my D-family,” I answered, pausing for a moment before I continued. “So, yeah, I should go. Listen you can tell them whatever you want, blame me or whatever for making you come out here, just don’t, uh, make me sound like a villain or anything.”

I nodded my head, to emphasize my point, I guess, before I turned sort of awkwardly and just started walking away. I heard Glory Girl call out behind me.

“Sure!”

No one really made any moves to stop me, which would almost have been disappointing if it hadn’t been basically what I wanted, and soon enough I was back on the block with the gas station where I’d stashed my clothes. First I made sure the coast was clear of potential witnesses and then I snuck around to the back of the station to where my bag was hidden and changed back into my normal clothes. Now with my phone in hand I dialed home; Dad would be there if he’d come home and if he hadn’t gotten home from work yet and seen my note I didn’t want to spring all the news to him over the phone when he might be driving. He picked up just as it was starting to ring a second time.

“Taylor?” I could practically hear the relief seeping into his voice.

“Yeah, it’s me Dad. I just wanted you to know I’m ok, I’ll be home soon. We’ll talk then?” I didn’t want to get into anything right now, not with people who might overhear.

“Yeah. Oh, kiddo, I love you.” It was stupid, he’d said it a thousand times before but this time it just hit me harder. Maybe because I had just been feeling lonely, or maybe because today had been so stressful, but for whatever reason it had.

“Love you too, Dad.”

I hung up, wiped hastily at the tears in my eyes and smiled.

Yeah, today had been a good day.

*  
*  

When I got home we didn’t do a whole lot of talking, I mean we talked some about what had happened, but after making sure I was okay Dad didn’t really seem all that interested in the details of the fight. I gave him some anyways, nothing to scare him, just the highlights so he knew what had really happened just in case what the news had reported wasn’t everything. I guess I had a bit of an issue with trusting authorities, but then the system had failed me before, had failed the both of us really. Dad had fought for years to get the ferries functioning again, so the workers he was responsible for might have new and better opportunities, and the authorities had always stood in his way. So yeah, I didn’t exactly think the system was doing such a great job.
Mostly what we ended up doing was watching TV together, not the news, but some old movie on one of those channels that only shows TV and movies from the fifties to the eighties. Eventually I lost interest and went up to my room but with my day I didn’t feel like doing homework, which wasn’t honestly much in the first place and wouldn’t take more than a few minutes for me to do in the morning at this point anyway. I ended up lying on my bed and staring out the window at nothing in particular, and studiously thinking about nothing as well until something suddenly occurred to me.

“Nono?” I asked, careful to keep my voice low.

“Uh huh?” she answered, appearing doing lazy loop de loops as her pink hair haloed chaotically around her head.

“Can you, I mean, could we track a single person? Like, a specific person?” Lung wasn’t exactly the sort of person who struck me as likely to just forget the sort of damage I’d done to him; he might be out of the fight for right now but he was supposed to heal ridiculously fast. If he wanted to get his pound of flesh from me when he was healed enough, I was afraid he would do something violent to get my attention. Today had been good, but it had also been a bit of a close call, so I was wondering if there was a way for me to be basically the first one to know if he made another appearance.

“Nono doesn’t like this, it leads to a bad path.” She stopped doing the loops and stared straight at me, frowning.

“It wouldn’t be permanent, Nono, just for the next few days. If he doesn’t do anything by then I don’t think he’ll do anything at all, at least not like I’m thinking. It’s just I feel guilty, for misjudging what would happen.” At the last part, Nono frowned and looked a little guilty herself.

“Ok, Nono will see but the systems were not meant for these things, so she makes no promises.” I smiled in response and nodded then she disappeared suddenly.

As I waited for her to come back with an answer I thought about the possibilities. If this worked it might mean I could track every villain in the city. I’d told Nono it would just be for a short time, but if I could it at all, didn’t I have sort of a responsibility to my city and all the innocent people walking around who had been or would be hurt by these people? The power to stop villains before they got started would be at my fingertips! If I didn’t take advantage of it wouldn’t I be partly to blame for all their future victims as well? Of course from there, it was a short hop to monitoring everyone, hell I would probably have to do that anyway just to figure out who was a villain and who wasn’t, and then I would have to keep doing it in case someone new showed up. Soon I would be watching everyone, and it would only be me running things, only me standing over people as judge and jury, unless I got other people that I trusted but then soon enough they would need more people to help as well. It would go on and on, and soon enough I wouldn’t be able to guarantee everyone was trustworthy and then would I be any better than what we already had? It would, after all still be people all the way down; what good would it do to replace the current system with someone I wasn’t sure would be any better. So no, that wasn’t a road I could go down, at least not with a lot more thought put into it.

“Nono makes no promises, this is not what was originally intended, but it should work.” Nono said reappearing a moment later half smiling, before her face got more serious a second later and she started speaking sternly to me. “But a few days only, until it’s a certainty the City will not be destroyed in the current situation.”

I nodded, glad we were on the same page as far as this was concerned. Anyway, nothing came of it that night and eventually I went to sleep. Nothing came of it during the day on Friday either; I went
to school, trudged through my now much easier classes with a sort of irritated boredom, and managed to avoid interacting with the trio almost completely. It was a good day as far as I was concerned, during lunch I talked to Sparky and though I wouldn’t call us friends it was nice not to spend lunch alone again. Though in fact this wasn’t the first time, or even the second, that we’d had lunch together, it was beginning be a sort of routine that every other day we would have lunch together. I didn’t know where he went when he didn’t have lunch with me, but seeing as before he’d started I hadn’t even seen him hanging around school anywhere during lunch I was almost certain it was somewhere off campus. I could have just asked but neither of us had been very talkative so far during our lunches, so even though I thought he probably would have said, I didn’t ask.

At home I did my homework in a ridiculously short amount of time, watched TV with Dad, and had dinner. All the normal everyday stuff which wasn’t exactly a great help in distracting me from constantly worrying whether or not the alarm would go off, not that I thought it would actually be an alarm though maybe I should have asked Nono to make it an alarm, no that would be ridiculous and useless. Finally, at around eleven that night it happened.

It definitely wasn’t an alarm; one moment I was staring at my ceiling, thinking about new ways to manipulate my powers to produce different effects, and the next I was staring at an only half lit empty street. Well not completely empty, walking down the center was a distinctly normal looking man who looked like all the pictures I had seen Lung, none of which had been of all that great quality so I wasn’t absolutely sure.

Nono was next to me, so I asked her how sure she was it was him.

“92% positive match on identification, based on both available physical statistics, file photos, and geographic bounding. Nono thinks it is him, but she can’t promise.”

At that I was back in my room, sort of at least because I could still see probably-Lung walking down the street. Seeing as it was pretty late at night I figured I could probably sneak out of the house with my costume on without anyone seeing me, so I changed into it in my room before I went down to the basement and left the house. I kept a metaphorical eye on probably-Lung as I ran in his direction. He had come to stand in an abandoned lot just a few blocks from where I’d first fought him that night a few weeks ago and just continued to stand there not doing anything. Once I was closer I started sticking to the shadows so I he wouldn’t see me and so hopefully I could find out exactly what he was up to standing out here in the middle of the night like that. Lung’s right eye was nothing more than a mass a scar tissue but his jaw seemed fine, I guessed he’d been at enough power that he’d healed most of it pretty quickly but eyes were probably pretty delicate things so that would take longer. After ten long minutes I was still just as baffled. He wasn’t doing anything, just standing there with his arms crossed staring out at the night like he expected Eidolon himself to walk out of the thin air. When nothing happened for another fifteen minutes I started moving around him, hoping that if I could get behind him and see exactly what he was looking at it might provide some sort of explanation. Unfortunately I was paying too much attention to the villain and not enough to where I was going and I apparently put my hand a little to hard on a pipe to my right which caused something metal and long at the top to shudder and clang as it knocked against the brick wall. I darted away from the wall of the building I was standing next to and into the shadows of the alley just as Lung swung in my direction. Besides that he didn’t move, but he did start to change; he didn’t go full lizard on me right away, just got a little bigger and his skin started getting this creepy dimpled quality like it was pulled taut over scales.

“Are you here, girl? I thought you might, you’ve shown up every other time I so much as stuck my nose out, and I wanted a rematch!” He shouted, his eyes wide open and then he breath deeply
through his nose a couple of times like he was trying to sniff me out.

I chose not to respond and edged further into the alley, if I could get to the other end I could go around the back of the building and get into a better position but there was light at the end so I would at least be briefly visible to him. Whether or not he could smell me out I wasn’t entirely sure but he would start moving in this direction soon probably and then it would be harder to move without being seen so I thought it was worth the risk. I edged back, staying in the shadows until I was as close as I could get without entering the light.

“Well, are you going to show yourself, or do I have to start burning things down!!?” As I dashed around the corner Lung’s voice faded a little because of the building now between us, I checked on him and it didn’t look like he reacted so he didn’t appear to have noticed me.

He didn’t say anything else as I moved around the back of the building to get a new vantage point, in fact he started to look distinctly unsure of himself. Given that he hadn’t gone his full draconic self I was doubtful he would even be able to conjure up his regular gouts of flame, after all I’d never seen anything about him using his flames when he wasn’t in fighting form. Frankly I didn’t think that noise had gotten him feeling threatened enough for him to really be ready for a fight, it was just a startled response to the possibility of a fight that I was seeing.

It was interesting though, that he’d apparently come out tonight looking for me specifically, hoping that I would just show up. Maybe he thought he had something to prove after being driven off twice by a teenage girl? I could see Lung being that sort of prideful person, but at the same time it didn’t seem like it would be the whole story; after all he’d been around long enough that he must have known that appearances weren’t everything when it came to parahumans, so the idea that a teenage girl might be a match for him couldn’t do too much to his ego. What else could he want from me other than revenge though? I wasn’t much to look at and Lung didn’t strike me as the sort of creep who would look for a high school girlfriend at his age so I didn’t think that was it either. I couldn’t see many other options, unless… Lung was one of the most powerful parahumans out there; he’d taken on entire cape teams, and an Endbringer, and won each time in some sense at least plus there was the way he’d been yesterday, laughing every time more people showed up. The thought struck me that he might like fighting, especially against tough opponents, and so far everything he’d done to me hadn’t so much as scratched me; maybe this was all just about getting a good fight.

It seemed like a cliched sort of answer, like something from one of those badly dubbed asian fighting movies from the seventies, but then cliches had to come from somewhere. I didn’t have a better explanation, but now the question was whether or not I should give him what he wanted; on one hand it might avoid outbursts from him but on the other hand it might just set him off. How exactly had I ended up psychoanalyzing villains?

By the time I made it to the other side of the building so I could see Lung directly with my own eyes again I still hadn’t figured out what I was going to do, or rather I had but I wasn’t sure it was the right decision. Frankly I wanted to fight him, it would be a chance for me to push myself, to test myself against one of the most infamous capes in the world without having other people’s lives necessarily at stake and if I beat him there would be the bonus of being able to put him in jail, again. Of course, that was assuming the two of us could keep it contained.

Fuck it, if he wanted to do this I would force him to do it my way. I walked out of the shadows but it took a few seconds before he noticed me though once he did I immediately started to see the changes in his body. Shit, I would need to talk fast.

“Hey! You wanted to fight right?” I asked.
Lung’s only answer was a nod.

“Well, then I’ve got some ground rules,” he started at that, and made to say something but I barred over whatever he might have said. “You can either agree, or I can leave. You might chase me down, but by the time you do others will have gotten involved. Agree, or don’t, I don’t care.”

He paused a moment, considering the offer, then seemed to grumble his assent through his already distorted face.

“Okay, then; first, we keep it here which means no setting fire to the buildings,” the lot was pretty big so I didn’t think that would be much of a problem, Lung nodded. “Second, we don’t fight for more than an hour. It’s already late, and I have things to do tomorrow,” he nodded again. “and finally… we don’t hold back.”

At the Lung laughed his great rumbling laugh.

“AGREHD!”

We met in the middle.
There was no yelling, no roar to accompany the start of the fight, just the whooshing of displaced air as I ducked under Lung’s fist. I rolled underneath his outstretched arm, popped back up at his side and then had to scoot back almost instantly to avoid his other arm.

He was quickly bulking up, scales sprouting and spreading across his skin, and with every passing moment he was less and less recognizably human. The scars around his eye disappeared into a twisted mass of discolored scale while his other eye was like a droplet of molten metal trapped in a mold. Going by past experience he was about two thirds of the way through his transformation from man to monster already. It wasn’t likely he stopped changing after that of course, but from what I’d seen he mostly just got bigger at the point. There were those persistent rumors that he turned into an actual dragon at some point, but I didn’t put much stock in them, and even if they were true I didn’t think we would get there tonight. Hopefully not ever.

I reached for the Physical Canceller, pushed on it in a familiar way, and felt myself become lighter. Ducking under the next attack Lung sent at me, I grabbed hold of his arm and extended my right foot as I swung myself upwards, aiming it towards his head. Lung shook his arm violently as he reared back to avoid the blow. My grip loosened and started to slip, then suddenly the world ignited around me.

I was borne up and away on the force of the explosion he had created, roiling flames slipping past me harmlessly like the confetti from my ninth birthday party. For a second I floated, my body twisting as I tried to reorient myself perpendicular to the ground, and then I released the weight I had pushed away and the wild tumble slowed dramatically as my body returned to a more normal mass. I crashed back to the ground, landing and rolling forward a few feet before I righted myself.

The two of us stared at one another and circled; neither of us had really gone after the other yet.

“You cahn do better, ghirl. Ohr does that only work for surprhise attacks?” Lung’s voice wasn’t yet distorted too much by the alterations to his form, in fact his face was still in large part humanish looking. That was, if you ignored the scales and his one aforementioned glowing metal eye.

“Forget the surprises, girl. I will take everythhing you hhave, girl, and then I will break you over my knee. Hhow does thhat sound?  You surprised me twice, but now it is just you and me and I want to find out just hhow hhard you can hhit in ah real fighht. So, cowm. Ahnd ghet me.” His speech slurred worse towards the end, as presumably some part of his mouth transformed in a way that made normal speech impossible. Well it didn’t matter anyways, we’d probably done enough talking.

“We circled each other for another few moments before charging towards one another again, I pushed again to make myself lighter before I launched myself into the air above Lung. A little over halfway through my arc over him I shifted again. Turning and pushing back towards him I let the power go and started plummeting towards the earth. My foot cracked his scales on impact but his
hand, already on its way up when I started falling, now large enough to wrap around my waist, 
does exactly that. Fine spiderweb cracks radiated out through the scales around his shoulder, some 
shattered flakes popping off to fall lazily towards the ground. They caught the light from the 
flames dancing up and down his other arm, as he twisted and brought me slamming bodily into the 
ground. Pinned underneath his hand at my waist I watched him raise his other hand, wreathed in 
flame, and then I was engulfed in a universe of of fire.

I wrapped my right leg around his forearm and planted it firmly to the ground to anchor the rest of 
his arm into that position while I reached across my body with my right hand and began prying his 
hand off of me. Once I managed to get halfway loose I tensed and pushed; twisting myself 
suddenly out of the tangled position under Lung’s grip. I escaped all but a glancing blow from his 
next strike as it passed my spinning body, and was several feet away before I landed, already 
planning my next attack.

I could hit him hard enough to do damage, but nothing close to what I needed in order to take him 
down, sure his scales would crack and break off in chunks, but then seconds later they would have 
healed back to new. Without a distraction he would just move out of the way if I tried the same 
trick that had worked yesterday or the first time we’d fought; maybe if I could get at the system 
directly I could have done it, but the way Nono treated it I didn’t think that would be happening 
soon. So, if I had to do this on my own then I had to figure out something else to really put the hurt 
on Lung.

We continued to fight, each of us trading the advantage back and forth over and over. I would wait 
for him to open himself to a new angle of attack, then I would explode into action to take 
advantage of it; sending Lung off balance, and shattering scales. When I tried it again Lung would 
be more than ready, sometimes he moved out of the way at the exact right moment to escape a hit 
or he would counter attack and force me to either abandon my own assault or take the hit. By 
twenty minutes into the fight his formerly ruined eye was nothing more debilitating than a 
swollen-shut mass of distorted scales. Lung would occasionally press his own offensive. He 
couldn’t actually hurt me, but he didn’t know that and he could toss me around easily enough if he 
got a good grip so throughout the fight I ended up hurled or slammed against brick walls, the 
pavement, and scattered junk at a number of points. The noise of our fight sounded deafening to me 
whenever it punctuated the otherwise eerie silence of the night, but it couldn’t carry that far and it 
wasn’t like there was anyone really around to hear it in this part of town at this time of night.

I wasn’t getting hurt but all the same I could really push myself against Lung, where with other 
opponents I think I would have been afraid of hurting them. I’d noticed it when I was fighting the 
Merchants; the way I would pull back on hits even though my opponents had armor of their own, 
of a kind at least. Here and now though, I wasn’t holding back at all; I was actually reaching for 
more power instead and that was an exhilarating feeling, to be pushing myself, to test my current 
limits. I could sense the power Nono had been using to move, faintly just beyond them, not in the 
sense of distance but in some other way which I couldn’t quite define. It was like touching 
something with only my fingertips as I stretched my arms painfully just to get that extra 
metaphorical inch, just barely unable to grasp it.

Not when I straddled his shoulders and brought both my fist down on his skull.

Not when I ducked under his outstretched arms and tried to uppercut him, and only ended up giving 
him the opportunity to try to crush in a bearhug me for my trouble.

Not as I launched myself off a wall and tried to kick his head, causing the disturbing mass of scales 
around his injured eye to split apart to reveal his healed eye through ragged flaps of skin and 
scales.
Or when feinted to left, then lunged right and struck at his exposed side.

Or in my attempt to throw rocks hard enough to do the job.

Or as I dodged being pinned under his clawed foot, and kneeed him in the ass on my way past.

Or even when I… well, you get the idea.

I tried everything I could think of; I pulled on what powers I sort of knew how to work to try to make my limbs go faster, tried just pushing harder and harder, tried ‘flexing’ every part of my limbs that I could feel, and hell I even tried just thinking about going faster really hard. None of it seemed to have any effect whatsoever, and eventually I just gave up.

At some point Lung had stopped growing; I first noticed at about the forty five minute mark that he hadn’t changed in size even the slightest bit in the last ten minutes. He hadn’t shrunk or anything, and it wasn’t like I’d stopped hurting him but nothing I was doing seemed to inflict any damage that lasted past a few seconds, even the flaps of flesh around his eye had receded to reveal a perfectly normal looking eye, or at least as far as normal went for giant transforming dragon men. The flesh surrounding it was still slightly off-color from the rest of his scales, but that wasn’t likely to last.

When an hour had passed since the fight began, somehow I knew it exactly. I decided that enough was enough and that I just didn’t want to continue what was becoming somewhat of a frustrating fight, and I was worried that if we kept up it would eventually get out of hand or that the Protectorate would show up sooner or later. I dodged a couple more swings while backing away from Lung, but eventually he seemed to get the message.

“Enough!” I shouted, and then more quietly, “Enough. I still need sleep.” A lie, but I figured it wasn’t a big deal to lie to someone like Lung.

He didn’t seem happy, his face had distorted into something that might have been a grimace or a snarl before it relaxed again. I think it relaxed at least, it was hard to tell.

“TAHRRAHR!” I had no idea what he meant by that.

“What?”

Lung paused, took a deep breath and spoke slowly. “TOH. MAHW. RHAOW.”

Tomorrow, he was trying to say tomorrow; which I guessed probably mean he was asking, or more likely demanding, a rematch tomorrow night. I wasn’t quite sure how to respond, on the one hand I wanted to fight him again if only to push myself farther and maybe break past whatever barrier I had encountered to finally understand how the power that Nono used actually worked, and on the other hand it seemed basically pointless to engage in some weird sort of sparring match with Lung without knowing for sure I could take him. I might figure it out tomorrow, or I might figure it out years from now, or Nono might just one day drop the answer in my lap because she suddenly thought I was ‘ready’ or something, but there were no guarantees of when I would pass that barrier. Still, I wanted to test myself more, so what was the harm in one more sparring match?

“Okay, tomorrow. Same time and same place.” Lung stomped his feet and nodded in agreement, then he simply turned turned away and started stalking off. Meanwhile I stayed there staring a little dumbly at his retreating back, until I came to my senses and turned to head for home.

Walking home took longer, mostly because I wasn’t in any sort of hurry to actually get there anytime soon. On the way I considered my night; it had started off normally enough, at least
relative to my life in the last few months, as I did my homework and worried about whether or not a super villain would do something tonight. So, how exactly had I ended up facing off against Lung himself, all alone and in some sort of weird sparring match instead of an actual fight? This had turned into such a weird night.

My entire life had turned weird.

Was it right for me to be fighting Lung like this? Should I call the Protectorate, let them know about my appointment with him for tomorrow night so that he could maybe be taken in and off the streets where he presented a serious and significant danger to the entire city? I didn’t want to because I still wanted to find out just how far I could push myself and maybe in the process unlock some of the secrets of my new body, but was my pride worth it? I wasn’t sure that I could excuse not contacting the Protectorate just because I wanted a chance to fight one of the most powerful parahumans in a one on one fight, but at the same time it wasn’t a sure thing that calling in the Protectorate would even be enough. He’d fought teams of heroes before and emerged the winner, so what was to say that he wouldn’t this time or that the fight itself wouldn’t lead to the worst case scenario I wanted to avoid? In a way my fighting him one on one was a sort of safety measure when you looked at it like that, he wanted to fight me after all and so long as he was preoccupied with trying to defeat me at a time and place I could control he would be less likely to go off attacking somewhere else. Unless that was just a self-serving rationalization that I was making up to justify the decision I had already made before of my personal pride.

I hated thinking about this stuff, because I was never sure what the actual right decision was. Well I’d already sort of given my word, not actually but it still felt sort of… wrong to call the Protectorate on Lung now after I’d already agree to meet him tomorrow night. So, tomorrow I would fight him again and then that would be an end to that.

I hoped.

Oh god, how could I have been so stupid.

Lung definitely wouldn’t leave it at that. Shit.

* 

When I woke up on Saturday it was bright and sunny outside. After having breakfast with dad, making small talk about school and my, ah, ‘work,’ I took a quick shower and went to the basement where I spent the next several hours accomplishing essentially nothing. I had a list of methods I’d tried with no results, or at least not the results I wanted, that was reaching almost an entire notebook page. Nono was virtually no help, she just floated there smiling vaguely and occasionally playing with my hair as I thought long and hard about everything I could remember of what she did whenever she used the ability. It wasn’t much, just a vague similarity to the Physical Canceler and a weird sense of incongruity.

I was kicking myself for not taking physics this year, not that I thought it would be all that helpful but it had to be better than being basically completely ignorant of all this from the start. Actually, given my experiences in school so far I was fairly confident that I could just start teaching myself physics at this point, and that sooner or later I could probably make some interesting ‘discoveries’
which would change the entire field.

That was one advantage of sharing the body of an advanced robot girl from an alternate universe where humanity had achieved essentially everything we’d ever dreamed of achieving in space. Probably not a good idea though, as it would invite a lot of questions I just didn’t want to even think about answering any time soon. The point was that maybe if I knew a little more figuring this out might be easier. Of course even with my new abilities it was probably too short a time frame to teach myself the physics and figure out how the power worked.

I tried a number of different tacks over the course of those few hours. One of the first was to try turning my super snooping power on myself, in the hopes that it would reveal something about how my new body actually worked. It maybe wasn’t the smartest idea, not because I thought it would do anything dangerous by itself but because I doubted I would understand half of what I saw anyways. That turned out not to be true, I barely understood a quarter of what I saw and given all the things I could conspicuously not look at I wasn’t seeing the entirety of myself; entire vast parts of myself were simply invisible to me even as I could detect them through their connection to other systems. Probably most of that was a result of the system I was using being passive and the fact that some of it wasn’t all here anyways, rather than any effort to hide stuff from me on Nono’s part.

What I did see was weird enough.

My hair was normal at first, until my sight carried me closer and instead of the sort of layered, scale-like pattern shown in textbooks and in those commercials for dandruff shampoo on TV, I saw only smooth, glossy black material off of which smaller spiny hairs radiated.

I pulled my viewpoint back from that and spun around myself to focus on my face. Something about my eyes caught my attention: as I focused I could see faint images of little circles behind my irises that grew and shrank as I watched. Those had to be the other visual sensors that allowed me to do things like see through the smoke in the college building and not get completely blinded by Bakuda’s tinker flashbombs. There had to be some way to activate that stuff more consciously so I let go of my other powered vision and found myself instantly back behind my own eyes staring at the cluttered basement. Experimentally I tried to think about the ways the mini-iris I had observed were arranged, then tried shifting their positions with where I knew my normal iris was. My vision exploded; strange indescribable shapes and unnamable colors kaleidoscoped across my vision, and in surprise I let go. Everything returned to normal.

That had at least produced results, if not anything that was particularly useful or telling. It had seemed like my vision was switching across a dozen different modes each second, like some demented and bizarre stereoscope. I probably hadn’t been specific enough in what I’d wanted and so it had given me everything at once which wasn’t very useful as it turned out. I would need to focus on one or two at a time, but I didn’t know which ones would do what. Of course so far everything else had responded to my internally expressed needs to some extent; I concentrated on ‘seeing details’ and ‘more than just the surface’ as my two thoughts and then raised my hand so that I was looking at the back of it.

I focused on my hand which expanded and expanded over and over again until all I could see was an expanse of skin. It was more regular than I would have expected; there was a regular geometric pattern of hexagons and the occasional more complex shape to it that gave the impression of precision manufacturing. Along the borders between shapes small structures were nestled, many of them were little more than tiny curved lenses while others were small depressions with hatch marked surfaces, and where hairs sprouted hundreds of thin antennae split off of either side of the follicles. Within the ‘cells’ other shapes were just beneath the surface; ovals, circles, spiderweb...
structures, snakelike patterns, and more besides lurked under my skin.

I focused, trying to resolve those indistinct shapes from beneath my skin. Then my vision swam and I was through the surface, only briefly catching sight of what looked like devices from one of those old magazines from the fifties where people predicted what the future would be like. Then I was past that and great lengths of cored ribbons bundled together, most tensing and flexing in synch but some expanding or contracting to some other rhythm lay before me, and great fat pipes were nestled within the bundles in a creeping network. Tiny figures flowed through these; great bulbous shapes with squirming little protrusions, lithe slithering minnows, tiny crawling and skittering spiders, needle sharp lances, and other, weirder shapes were carried along in the tide of some unknown fluid. The smaller, crawling kind occasionally worked their way out of the pipes to race across the pulsing ribbons, they would sometimes stop to pull at frayed or broken fibers, coiling them into great (for their size) spools or reattaching two broken ends, but otherwise they simply went from one pipe to another pipe. Millions crawled across the fibrous bundles in my arms… in my arms… oh god.

These things were inside of me, crawling who knows where, pulling little bits of me apart or just skittering like creepy invisible bugs.

My vision swam again, and I was staring at the floor, my hands braced against the cold smooth concrete basement surface. I gagged for a moment or two, my body trying to throw up all the food I’d eaten barely two hours ago.

“Okay, calm down Taylor,” I thought, desperately trying to bring my scattered thoughts back into order and calm trembling nerves. “It’s your body, none of that is weird. It’s all part of you, it doesn’t make you less than a person. Calm down.”

I had to repeat something along those lines to myself at least five separate times before my body finally listened and I recovered from the shock of it.

That had been… something. Not what I’d been expecting and probably ultimately not very useful, even if I could somehow turn my eyes on the rest of my body, I doubted that I would be able to identify anything by sight alone and even if I could I didn’t think that would be of much help in figuring out how to use my powers.

After that I spend a long while doing basically nothing except staring blankly at the boxes piled up in the corners of the basement, before I eventually decided to get back to original goals. It was clear I had to try a different tack, especially given that I didn’t want to go through whatever the hell what I had just recovered from was again. Physical examination had been a strikeout, so the obvious next attempt was the opposite; something mental. I needed to see if I could trace the connections I used to control my other abilities to get at it. The only question was how the hell I was supposed to do that? Maybe some sort of meditation exercise?

I tried to clear my head of all thought, which was exactly as easy as it sounded but I managed it eventually anyway, or at least something close. At first all I noticed was a weirdly heightened sense of all the little things going on with your body all the time; things like little twitches in my hands or legs, the way I stood with one leg bent at a slight angle, the phantom sensation of prickling sweat, a rhythmic thumpathump that seemed to reverberate through my entire body, and a dozen other tiny little sensations. None of it very useful for my purposes.

I reached out, not with my actual hands but with what I could only describe as ‘mental limbs,’ testing the interior space of my own mind, and at first nothing happened as I undoubtedly fumbled around like an idiot. My frustration was just about total when suddenly it all opened up before me like a great glittering rainbow web, except calling it a web was altogether too simplistic for the
structure that confronted me. It was like a sphere, except as soon as I had that thought the shape distorted and unfurled like a great flower where each petal was itself a web just as complicated and intricate as the original. My mental fingers traced the edges of the vast network before me, encountering protrusions, depressions, and perforations that littered the surface and whose function and purpose I did not understand.

I was swallowed by the flower-web-network, enfolded in a great cocoon of data and information which humbled me in its vastness. I became lost in tracing out connections between structures I encountered; vast monoliths which dominated the impossible landscape, crystalline palaces of jagged blades, undulating baubles of fluid, and shuddering mechanical mountains.

My attention was wrenched from my explorations by a hand on my shoulder, I turned my head to look and found my Dad standing behind me with concern etched across his face. How long I’d been standing here since I’d started my little journey I wasn’t sure. 3 hours 43 minutes 15 seconds.

Okay, so it was just after two. I’d missed lunch and obviously Dad had gotten worried after hours of not seeing me, so he’d come down here and caught me totally spaced out and staring off into nothing. Whatever was going through his head right now couldn’t be good.

“Taylor, are you all right? You’ve been down here for hours.” His voice was soft and tinged with worry.

“Sorry, I got caught up trying to figure out some… stuff.” I felt bad at the lie, even though it wasn’t really a lie, it probably counted if only because I was trying to keep stuff from him even if what I was saying wasn’t actually untrue. Right now though, I couldn’t think of any situation where telling him about all the various weirdness going on with me currently didn’t just complicate our barely functioning relationship even worse.

Dad didn’t seem totally reassured by that vague answer.

“You know you can talk to me about anything, right Taylor? I know it probably doesn’t seem like your Dad would know anything about the stuff your dealing with even since you got your… ah, powers but sometimes just talking out loud can help with tough problems.” He smiled gently as he spoke, an expression which was made slightly creepy on faces like ours.

“I know, I know, this is just stuff I think I have to figure out for myself, you know?” I answered.

“Okay Taylor, okay.” He sighed a little and turned to go.

I was the worst daughter ever.

“But! I think I’ve figured out as much as I can for today,” A lie, I hadn’t figured out anything and I only had more questions than I’d started out with but I was frankly exhausted anyways. “I’ll come up now.” I paused, trying to think of something else to say. “Did you already put away lunch?”

Dad smiled again slightly at that and I followed him upstairs.

For the rest of the afternoon and into the evening I did my best to completely forget about all the things that I should have been trying to figure out but had no clue where to even start with, and instead just be there with my father. After a late lunch of some sandwiches we sat down in the living room and started watching old movies; stuff from the the seventies and sixties, before there were parahumans. Before Mom died I remembered the two of them cuddling up on the couch late at night on the weekends to watch movies like this; they were my Dad’s favorite, I remember he used to say that nothing after Scion was ever much good. I knew for sure that after the Endbringers
appeared people weren’t as interested in that sort of stuff. None of the people at school went to movies except for the “rich kids”, or at least what passed for them at Winslow, I mean when just about every two months some city had actually for real gotten trashed it kind of made the whole spectacle of watching it happen on a screen feel sick. They still made movies, so someone had to be watching them, but I hadn’t gone to any in years, not since everything had gone to shit with Emma.

I liked the older movies too, they tended to be about regular people in a world of regular people without all the insanity of capes and powers. It made them like looking into a sort of bizarre, funhouse mirror reflection of the world. I knew Earth Aleph was out there in a vague, intellectual sort of way, but these movies gave me something of a look into what living there must actually be like, or at least I thought they did. Probably life there was nothing like them, since they were just movies, and from more than thirty years into the past of both our worlds.

Spending time with Dad like this was nice though. We watched movies through the afternoon and into the evening, then ordered pizza and ate it in front of the TV. We didn’t talk much, just the occasional comment or question during the commercial breaks, but that too was nice, to be able to escape from the pressure of having to think about anything or to do anything for at least a few hours. I think it made him feel better too; slowly we were finding ourselves a way back to something resembling an actual father-daughter relationship.

There are only so many movies I can watch in a night though, so about eight or so I begged off and went up to my room. Of course now that I was alone all the things I had been very much not thinking about downstairs flooded to the forefront of my mind: Lung would be showing up in the abandoned lot in a little under three hours, I had no clue how to activate the one power I needed to really fight him, and today I had seen things which made me question my own sanity in completely new ways. I knew for sure now that I definitely was not human, human looking maybe but not human in the way everyone around me was still human; I was like one of those capes that you hear about in the news every once and a while that has their entire body changed into something almost unrecognizable when they got their powers. Wait, no I wasn’t just like that, that’s exactly what I was! Except I’d also gotten a voice in my head, though nothing I’d ever heard said that those types of capes didn’t have voices in their heads. After all, I hadn’t told anyone so why would they?

So, maybe I wasn’t as completely alone as I’d thought, the only difference was that I’d apparently won the power lottery and ended up in a body that looked completely normal even though it wasn’t. The problem was I didn’t know who those capes were and I doubted there was any sort of list that wasn’t in Protectorate or PRT hands, who probably wouldn’t be chomping at the bit to hand it out to either teenage girls or unaffiliated parahumans. I could maybe ask around the PHO forums but that would probably send up warning flags of some kind. There might some sort of member group for those kinds of capes that I could take a look at, though. Even if I could contact someone I wasn’t sure what to say, how to start a conversation like that, so for the time being I decided that it was best just to focus on what was happening tonight and deal with the other stuff… later.

To distract myself from all the thoughts that I didn’t want to be having right now, I turned towards the bookcase in the corner of my room. Contrary to appearances, I hadn’t been a huge bookworm for my entire life; in fact I had been more of a tomboy until about a year and half before the accident.

It had been a way for me to try to be like my mother. She was after all an english professor, and I had thought that if I started reading a lot that would make me more like her, maybe even make me as beautiful as she was. It hadn’t worked of course, not that it’d been a serious or even conscious thing I was trying to do, but still I’d been a voracious reader for the months right up until the night
my world collapsed.

Now, almost two years past that night, I could finally stand to look at those books against the wall and not feel terrible. They reminded me of my mother, of the way she lit up whenever I showed her a new book I wanted to read, the way she would sometimes give me books she’d loved at my age, or how sometimes she would read the same book and we would end up talking late into the night about it after we both finished. I decided to rearrange the bookshelf, though I didn’t know how libraries did it so I just went in alphabetical order. I pulled all the books out into a great big pile and then started going through them one by one.

By the time I finished it was nearly ten thirty, I didn’t actually have that many books but when I picked up one that was particularly meaningful I felt compelled to open it back up and get lost in its pages for a few minutes. Eventually, I put the last book on the shelf and sighed.

Lung would be showing up in half an hour. Since I already where he was going to be, and when he would be coming I figured I might as well get going myself. I could take it slow and probably arrive at the right time, so I changed into my costume and turned out the lights so Dad would think I had gone to sleep, then snuck out again. The journey there was interesting, before I had been rushing to get there but now I could move at a more leisurely pace and that gave me a new view of the city; late at night when almost no one was around. Streets without cars turned from sometimes impassable barriers into wide open expanses of pavement, and it struck me that there was a certain wastefulness in the way the streetlights stayed on even when no one was around, that is when they were on at all.

It was near eleven when I reached the abandoned lot. Evidence of last night’s fight greeted me: scorch marks on the pavement from Lung’s fire, new cracks in the walls or indentations from various impacts on the ground, but not the man himself. I didn’t have to wait long though before he himself showed up, dressed in sweatpants and a wife beater that showed off his tattooed body.

He was admittedly an attractive guy but I don’t think he’d intended to show that off, these were probably just clothes he wouldn’t mind losing. Lung spotted me right off, and the two of us quickly fell into a familiar pattern of squaring off and then circling each other warily.

My curiosity got the better of me.

“Why do you want to fight me so badly?” We were close enough to one another that I didn’t need to shout.

He only grunted in response at first but then after a pause he spoke. “You are strong.”

It wasn’t exactly illuminating.

“What the hell does that mean? Armsmaster is strong. Kaiser is strong. Miss Militia is strong. You’re not fighting them.” I was a little pissed at the vagueness of his answer so the words came out a little harsher than I’d initially meant them.

“What? They are shackled, little better than slaves. The strong do not bind themselves to anything but themselves; like you, like me.” What? He thought I was like him, that I wasn’t part of the Protectorate because I didn’t want to put myself under someone or somethings’ thumb? It was true in a way, but I suspected not in the same way he meant.

To me it sounded like he was saying the you either submitted to someone else’s rules or you made your own. There wasn’t room for right and wrong in that type of worldview, only the rules you made or the rules you followed. The idea that I might be like him frightened me.
“All those others, the heroes and the villains they settle into their little roles and are content to 
pretend they serve some purpose. I am singular, I am Lung and the only purpose I have is to rule.” 
He pulled himself up straighter as he went on, and I could see it in my mind; see Lung standing 
atop a mountain of ash in the midst of a burnt landscape, ruling a dead world. “Perhaps I will let 
you live, make you one of the ABB. True, in the past I have accepted only Asians, but perhaps the 
time for that has passed and you are strong enough that our enemies would tremble to face the both 
of us.”

This was so beyond fucked up, he was talking about inducting me into his gang like it was a done 
deal, like of course I would want that. Well to hell with that, I wasn’t going to be one of his 
lieutenants. I am hero!

I charged at Lung and his entire face split into a grin at the same time as his body sprouted the 
telltale metallic scales of his transformation and he started bulking up.

He was still roughly human sized when I reached him so the punch I threw should have thrown 
Lung through a loop.

He moved like lightning though, throwing his head to one side and answering my attack with a 
swing of his scaled fist.

I took half a step back, and slapped his arm off to the side with my other hand.

Lung had grown almost a foot in height and half again that in width already. Almost in the same 
instant I was slapping his arm away, he was pivoting on one leg, wreathing himself in fire that 
turned his clothes to ash and throwing his other foot with its great claws up in a high kick.

I dropped low under the blow and rolled away from him. He grew several inches in both directions 
even as I moved. If I didn’t think fast he would just get larger and larger and then we would be in 
the same situation as last night where I couldn’t do anything close to permanent damage. Knowing 
what I did now about his thoughts I didn’t know what another fight like that would result in; he 
might think we were evenly matched or he might get frustrated at his inability to defeat me and 
look to vent his frustrations on others. I needed time to think, to figure out how to use the only 
power that was proven to work, but Lung wasn’t about to give it to me.

A great flaming fist, now almost as large as my head, entered my vision and I dodged away from it. 
Where the hell did he get all this fire from anyway? He couldn’t just be making it- He 
made it! Of course, he fucking made fire from nothing. 

God, I was an idiot.

This whole time I’d been thinking of the power in terms of pushing or pulling energy and motions 
from somewhere else and putting it into whatever limb I was using to hit him with, but it wasn’t 
like that. The motion didn’t come from anywhere, it didn’t get moved, one moment it wasn’t there 
and the next it just was.

I shouldn’t think of it like making my attacks suddenly move, I should think of it as making them 
already have been in motion! The difference was that making my attacks move like that required 
them to follow certain rules the universe had about energy and causality, whereas the other just 
told all the rules to sit down, shut up and listen.

I threw a strike at Lung’s head and he dodged deftly to one side.

Perfect.
My left leg was already up in the air before he had finished his move, on track to strike him square on the side of his head.

I imagined my leg moving; not starting to move but already moving. It had always been moving, forever, and there was nothing that could stop it.

There was a crunch, Lung went flying and crashed limply several feet away.

My leg continued to move.

Shit, I needed to stop it. How do you stop something that has always been moving? You don’t, because you make sure it was never moving in the first place.

I fell in an ungainly heap as my foot suddenly lost all its momentum.

Once I’d picked myself up I made my way over to where Lung’s body was sprawled face down on the pavement. He was still breathing and his power had already healed enough of his injuries that I was pretty sure there wouldn't be permanent or long lasting damage. With the fight finished, there were several options for what I could do. I could call the PRT to take him away, but he’d already escape once with Bakuda’s help and that had resulted in pretty serious destruction. I could also just leave him here but who knew what that would result in. Or... I could kill him.

The last thought didn’t appeal to me at all. I didn’t want to make myself out to be some sort of judge, jury, and executioner vigilante. It would just be wrong. On the other hand I really didn’t trust the PRT to be able to keep him in custody without more massive destruction being visited on the city, so that left me with only one option; to just let him go. The only problem was that I had no idea what he would do when he recovered, unless...

Lung believe the strong ruled, and I had beaten him fair and square, one on one. No tricks. No distractions. Just me. I would leave him a message which would hopefully keep him in line until I could actually get him put away with the rest of his gang.

I picked up one of his slowly returning to human hands, singling out the pointed finger claw and use it to carve two words into the pavement in front of him.

“I WIN”

Then I turned and left.
That following morning, Sunday, I spent a lot of the morning in a semi-panic, convinced that I had done the stupidest possible thing last night. I was worried that at any moment I would learn that Lung had gone on a rampage, turning wholes swathes of the city into raging infernos. It was a stupid thing to panic over; for one nothing I knew about the gang leader so much as suggested he was likely to fly off the handle in that way, in fact everything I’d read online and all my own interactions with him painted a very different picture. Sure he looked like a big brute at first glance and even acted a little bit like one with his penchant for charging straight into a fight, but that tendency seemed more a result of his desire to deal with threats head on rather than an issue of temper.

Simply put, he charged because he wanted to get in close, wanted to throw off his opponents with how suddenly and furiously he could attack. Lung didn’t just want the upper hand in a fight, he went straight for victory and his power worked well for that because it responded to bigger threats more quickly with more power. In all of our fights I’d seen the vicious cunning in his eye; his powered up body might restrict some of the movements he could make with its bulk and inhuman structure, but it didn’t stop him from understanding exactly how to dismantle an opponent in a fight. In a way he had been right last night, we were alike, just maybe not exactly as he had meant it because it wasn’t our mindsets but the fact that people were more likely to underestimate us because of how we looked.

That thought made me shudder; I didn’t like thinking of myself as like any villain. On the other hand, our similarities helped in convincing myself that Lung wasn’t currently burning down our city. I know it couldn’t be true, because even without having to resort to Nono’s more targeted peeping from the night before I could, at a glance, take in the entire city in an instant and see that there wasn’t even evidence of the smallest fire anywhere. Whatever Lung was actually thinking after last night it hadn’t lead him to start rampaging across the city looking to exact vengeance on me. Still, the concern itched at the back of my head all morning and into the afternoon.

Nothing I did occupied my mind enough to banish the worry for more than a few minutes, and so most of the day dragged on interminably. What was more, I didn’t feel comfortable leaving the house because I was worried that disaster would strike after all and then I would be caught without my costume. It developed into a vicious cycle where I would start thinking about last night: all the ways it could have gone wrong, that I could have done better, what could happen now, or what Lung was thinking; until I realized I was working myself into a panic and tried to occupy myself with whatever was closest at hand. By three I had organized my closet twice, started five separate books, changed clothes three times, cleaned my room once, and read ahead in two of my textbooks. I was actually nearing the end of my Trigonometry text, and solving the practice problems in my head almost as soon as I finished read the associated material, when my phone rang. Well, it vibrated, since I’d discovered over the last couple of weeks that I really didn’t like it when it rang, so I had switched it to vibration and kept it in my pocket ever since.

There was little question about who was calling as the only people who actually had my phone number was still limited to two, and one of them was just downstairs. Sure enough, when I pulled the slim rectangle out of my pants pocket, I saw Amy’s name on the screen. I’d put her name in once I’d realized it was probably less suspicious just to have a normal persons name in there than nothing.

“Victoria is a moron.” Amy definitely has an interesting way of starting conversations.
“Hello?” I’m glad for the distraction she’s presenting at the moment, but I’m not really sure how I’m supposed to respond to that opening. Would agreeing make her angry for insulting her sister? Did she want me to agree with her, or did she just want to rant?

“Shit, I’m- I’m sorry. Probably not a great way to start off a conversation, but she just pisses me off so much sometimes! ARGHHH!” There’s a pause after her scream and I can hear her breath in and then out a couple of times before she finally greets me. “Hello Taylor.”

“Hi Amy,” I responded awkwardly, my own words sounding painfully stilted to my ears. I wondered for a moment what I sounded like to her, as neither of us made any other response for several seconds.

“Uh, what did your sister do to piss you off?” I finally ask once the tension has gotten so bad there’s not really any other choice.

“She got back together with the boyfriend I told you she dumped last night,” she said and then quickly continued, sounding like she’d just said something bad. “Not that that’s bad or anything. It’s just… well, you know the Mayor’s gala every year?”

Mayor’s what? I wracked my brain, trying to think of any big regular events that happened around this time of year while Amy just kept on talking. Nothing came to mind until I remembered when I’d been younger, when the Dockworkers’ Association was floundering but not yet dead, and Mom had been alive. I remembered Mom and Dad getting dressed up a few times and leaving me with a babysitter.

“The thing’s always pretty boring, but we’re expected to show up, cause we’re New Wave and all that. Usually the only thing that gets me through the entire night is having Vicky by my side, but this year she wants to sit with her boyfriend and his family; she says I can hang out with them and even suggested I could ‘get to know’ one of his friends,” she derisively snorted at that. “Like I want to have some rich asshole trying to get into my pants while the two of them fawn over each other.”

My parents had come home way past my bed time, but I’d snuck out of my room and parked myself at the top of the stairs when I heard them arguing. The two of them were in the kitchen, Mom standing in her black dress while my dad sat at the table looking miserable. Even at the time I didn’t think I would ever be as beautiful as my mother, I must have still been at least a year away from puberty but I distinctly remember being tall for my age and being well aware that I’d inherited more of my father’s looks than Mom’s. So, I remembered feeling awe at how good my mother looked in her dress but I also distinctly remembered the argument they’d been having because it was the one where she’d been talking about how he couldn’t “do this to himself again.”

“She’s just so fucking clueless sometimes,” Amy continued. “I don’t understand why she’s even getting back together with him! I just wish she would realize how- ” she cut off, not hung up because I could still hear her breathing, but just shut herself up like she’d been about to say something she shouldn’t. “I mean… I just can’t deal with her right now. Which is kind of why I’m calling, I know we don’t exactly know each other well and I’ve been kind of a bitch but, I mean- that is, I kind of have a favor to ask? Would you, assuming you’re not busy, mind coming to the party with me? Just as a buffer, I mean not just as a buffer… like a- like a friend I mean.”

That argument would finally make sense if they’d been going to some political party, what with Dad being the dockworkers spokesperson and Mom a respected professor at the college they probably would have gotten invited to that sort of thing up until my dad made himself too much of a nuisance. My memories told me it had been around the same time of year too, so it could be- wait, what?
Had Amy Dallon, Panacea, just invited me to a party as a friend? Granted it didn’t sound like the sort of party high school kids normally went to, but still. I was mildly embarrassed to realize I hadn’t been paying much attention to her while she’d been talking and instead had been caught up in my own thoughts, but even as I thought that the entire conversation seemed to flood into my head.

“I, uh, I don’t know if that’s a good idea…” I hesitated, figuring that it would be incredibly awkward to be sitting there with the rest of her family who I didn’t really know at this fancy shindig.

“A bunch of the Wards will be there, for the PR, and some of the regular Protectorate capes will be there too. They won’t know who you are- I mean, they won’t know you’re a cape, but you can get to know them.” If the Wards were going to be there why couldn’t she hang out with them? Unless, maybe she didn’t get along that well with them, or more likely as Wards they would probably have to mingle more and couldn’t sit around distracting her all night. “And- and I could buy you a dress, not that I’m sure you don’t have something perfectly fine, I just mean that if you wanted a new outfit for the party I would buy it for you. As a thank you.”

She had to be pretty desperate if she was asking me to be some sort of social safety net for her; I mean who in their right mind would pick me to go to a party with unless they didn’t have any other choice? While I wasn’t exactly what you would call terribly fashionable, it would be nice to go shopping given that I hadn’t really done so since Emma had turned her back on me. Sure I’d gone shopping with Dad, but that was different because even if I’d been willing to ask him for advice it wasn’t like he had any better idea of what was in fashion than I did. Emma had always been my source for advice on the subject, because even if I wasn’t as obsessed with it as the other girls my age seemed to be sometimes I still liked looking good, before I’d started dressing to avoid any notice at all. With Amy along for the ride, there was at least a chance she would know more than me.

“I’ll go. You’re right, it’s a good opportunity,” I wouldn’t make her buy me a dress or anything though, that would just feel weird. I could get some money from Dad, plus I had a little cash saved up, which should be enough to get me something that wouldn’t be too embarrassing. “When is this thing anyway?”

Amy made a tiny coughing sound before she responded.

“Thursday…” She said it like she was ashamed or something, but that sounded like plenty of time to me. Unless, maybe this was a bigger deal than I thought; but how fancy could some political party for the Mayor of a small city like Brockton Bay really be? It wasn’t like there would be royalty there, or foreign dignitaries, or anything like that.

“Is there… is there something I should know? Is this party special or something?” I asked.

“No! No, I just, I know it’s sort of last minute,” Amy answered, still sounding vaguely embarrassed. “I didn’t want you to think this was all some sort of last minute thing, I mean it is, but… I don’t know what I mean actually.”

I shrugged, then realizing that she could see me through the phone obviously I said, “Three days seems like plenty of time to me. When would you want to go shopping?”

“Tuesday? I can only volunteer so much in a month, and it’s one of the days I have off from practically everything else too, so I have almost all of the afternoon free.”

Seeing as my social calendar had been strangely clear for the past couple of years pretty much any
day would work for me, but that sounded depressing even in my own head so I didn’t say it out loud. Instead I answered, “That works for me.”

After that we talked for a few more minutes; not about anything serious, just the sort of small talk you make when you’re looking for an opening to talk about something else. or a way to end the conversation. Amy asked about my dad, I said he was fine, and I asked about the tests and projects she’d mentioned last time, which had all apparently gone fine despite her worries. Then she asked about the computer class, and I was momentarily thrown that she’d remember that I’d mentioned it at all, but I recovered and said it was going fine. It was the truth after all. In fact the computer stuff was coming to me even easier than it had before I’d become a cape. I had some suspicions why, but I wasn’t exactly about to share them over the phone, nor was I totally comfortable with mentioned them to Amy in the first place so I didn’t. Eventually we agreed to meet up in the food court at the mall on Tuesday at around four, said our goodbyes, and mutually hung up, or at least I hoped we did so mutually. If we hadn’t then that could make Tuesday weird.

The conversation had managed to distract me from what I’d been concerned with before, which I was grateful for, but now that was done and my previous worries were starting to creep back in. I needed to occupy my mind with something a little mindless that could take up the next few hours. The only thing that came to mind was practicing with my newfound control over my powers, but first I probably should let Dad know that I would be out on Thursday. I wasn’t sure how much exactly I should tell him, but there didn’t really seem to be any reason to hide anything about this from him.

I made my way downstairs and found him sitting in the corner of the living room at his desk, hunched over an array of papers with his glasses pushed high up on his nose. Pausing for a moment, I thought briefly about how I was going to say all this.

“Hey, Dad…” I started, causing him to glance up in my direction.

“Yes Taylor?” It was weird; telling my dad I was going to a party was about the most normal teenage girl thing I’d had to do in a long time, and it was still colored by my burgeoning superhero career.

“Uh, I’m going to a party on Thursday.” We were both sort of shocked into silence by the words. For me it was the idea that just last night I had been out fighting with Lung and now here I was, telling my dad I was going to a party later that week. I don’t know what it was for him, maybe he was worried it was a little lie to cover for something dangerous, or that someone was going to play a prank on me, or maybe it was just the suddenness of it all. Whatever the cause, I didn’t give him time to ask.

“You remember Amy? The girl who showed up last Saturday in the morning?”

He nodded.

“Well, she invited me to this thing she has to go to with her family that night.”

Another moment passed in silence, and then Dad stood up and moved closer to me. “Do you need a ride? What time will you be coming home? Where is this party?” he asked.

“I, uh, I don’t actually know. I can ask though! We’re- actually that sort of brings me to something else I need to ask you, I was wondering if I could maybe borrow some money? I think it’s sort of a fancy party, so I think I need a new dress. It doesn’t have to be much, I still have some cash saved up, but I don’t really know how expensive dresses are.” I was starting to ramble, so I cut that thought off and got back to the point “Anyway, we’re actually going to meet to go shopping, so I’ll
“Mmm. Okay, I trust you,” He patted at his back pocket, then frowned and looked a little embarrassed. “I don’t actually have any cash on me right now, kid, but if—”

“Oh, that’s ok! I don’t need it now, we’re not going shopping until Tuesday.” I explained, he relaxed and nodded at that.

After a moment of somewhat awkward silence I decided that that was probably all that really needed to be said on the issue.

“I’m going downstairs to, uh, practice.” I hesitated, and half started to turn away before turning back towards my dad. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too kiddo.” We came together and hugged, then I turned away and headed towards the basement.

As I made my way down the creaky steps leading into the basement I considered what it was that I could actually practice, after all how much time would it really kill to practice what I discovered last night? Not more than a few minutes. I would have to find a new project to focus on that could occupy my time for the next couple of hours if I had any hope of distracting myself, but the special move thing Nono did had been the only other ability there had been that I hadn’t known how to do myself. Sure, I knew there were more capabilities hidden away from me, but I didn’t even know what they were and I didn’t think randomly throwing ideas at the wall to see if maybe something happened would be very productive.

Of course, it didn’t look like I would have any other choice.
Waking up Monday morning was something of a relief, it was irrational but just knowing that a whole day had passed without Lung going off on any sort of rampage had eased my mind more than any sort of rational examination of the facts had or ever could have. Now with that not so minor weight off my mind I was actually starting to get excited over the party Amy had invited me to. I couldn’t care less about the party itself, there were few things I could imagine being less interesting than some politicians fundraiser, but the opportunity to meet more capes? That I was definitely looking forward to, even if none of them would know I was a cape. Honestly, it seemed a little unfair to meet them like that but I was going to take this opportunity. Besides, that seemed to be the running theme with my powers, unfairness. Even to myself.

It turned out that throwing random ideas at the metaphorical wall to see what stuck exactly was useless as I’d suspected it would be, at least in terms of helping to figure out anything at all about where to go next with my powers. All I was able to accomplish was distract myself for a couple of hours and confuse myself even more by repeating my earlier attempts at ‘meditation.’ I still had absolutely no clue what any of the various ‘structures’ were that I saw whenever I explored what I had taken to calling my ‘mindscape,’ not exactly original I know but it wasn’t like I had anyone to impress with this stuff anyways. Explaining that place and the things in it would definitely have stretched me to the limit of my descriptive ability if I did was forced to describe them to someone else. Nothing there was, for lack of a better word, ‘real.’ When I touched things with my ‘mental limbs’ I got sensations like touching something with any part of my physical body, but at the same time I knew that everything was malleable, or at least I knew they had the potential to be. When I gripped at a piece of any of the structures to try to push or pull it out of position or reshape it, it didn’t exactly resist but there was no give; I had the feeling that it was waiting, as if on some signal it would jump into activity and give in to my desires.

It was equal parts frightening and frustrating; frustrating because I was aware that I should be able to alter something about the structures I saw but just couldn’t produce any actual results no matter how hard I tried, and frightening because I didn’t actually know for sure what the hell it was that I was looking at. Was this bizarro landscape my own mind that I was somehow seeing, or the computer stuff that controlled all the parts of my new body that I couldn’t access, or something else entirely? I just didn’t know, and so because of that I treated everything delicately even as I strained to test its limits. Nothing had happened though.

I didn’t want to give up on figuring out my full capabilities completely, because that felt too much like failure or like admitting I was beaten, but my current options were limited. What I needed was a new way of thinking about the problem, like how I’d solved my issue in the fight with Lung, but I didn’t even know what I was looking for at this point so how was I supposed to think about something I didn’t even know about differently? I needed Nono. She had all the answers I needed but even though she was still around, seeing as we shared the same body, she’d spoken up less frequently in recent days. With her help I was sure that all the little secrets and hidden abilities of my new body could be unlocked in an instant but she’d kept quiet on that front before. I wasn’t sure this time would be any different, and what if she had a good reason for not being upfront with all of this stuff? Was I ready to confront the full unvarnished reality of this situation that I now found myself in, whatever that was?

That was one question I did have the answers for, considering how long it had taken me to adjust to each new revelation: No, I wasn’t.

Sure, I had accepted my situation but it was one thing to know acknowledge a fact intellectually
and something else entirely to be confronted with the concrete demonstration of it. My experiments Saturday night had gone some ways towards showing me that.

It occurred to me in that moment that it was now 6:54:59 AM.

Shit! If I didn’t want to be late for school, I needed to leave soon. Being late for school wouldn’t have really bothered me except that Emma and the rest would only use it as future ammunition, not that they wouldn’t just find something else, whether it was true or not, but I could at least control how I handled it. Skipping school sounded plenty appealing, but it felt too much like letting them win and even before I’d gotten my powers I’d promised myself I would never let them do that.

In just a few minutes I was downstairs grabbing an energy bar for breakfast and making myself a quick lunch, then I was outside and rushing off to the bus. As I ran towards my bus stop I reflected on how weirdly normal everything was; there was nothing which even hinted at the odd double life I was currently living. In the last few months my life had been changed irrevocably in so many ways; my powers themselves and all that they entailed, actually that mostly summed up the changes in my life. And yet every day I went to school and pretended I was normal, that I couldn’t recall every word someone had said to me in the past three months with perfect clarity, that I couldn’t do every math and programming problem in my head in the time it took to read them out loud. I was struck by the thought that I was holding myself back, almost limiting myself by attempting to keep up my normal life, but then what choice did I have if I wanted to keep my dad safe, if I wanted to avoid suddenly taking on all the world’s problems and all the moral and ethical traps that lay down that road?. From what Nono had told me I now had the knowledge of a ten thousand year old empire in my head, metaphorically speaking, granted they’d regressed a bit but still it was a heady thought. Heady enough that I started hyperventilating, which got me a couple of strange looks until I got my breathing under control again. Technically I guess I had only been mimicking hyperventilation, given that I didn’t think I actually breathed anymore, but it wasn’t a conscious decision or anything.

Thoughts of what I was going to do occupied my mind until I got to school, then through the crush of students struggling to get to lockers and make it to class on time, and even through my morning classes. Even if I couldn’t entirely cast off the now somewhat phony role of high school student I could at least start pushing myself privately. That thought only highlighted the fact that I had no real idea of where to start on this project either, beyond speed reading through math, physics, and chemistry textbooks. Of course those would cost money, which I didn’t have, or require revealing some of my knowledge to a much wider pool of people, not something I was particularly eager to do. For the moment my best resource was the school library, and the city’s public libraries. Given that I was already at school I figured I ought to at least check out that one first.

During lunch I headed for the library, reasoning that since I was a robot now I probably didn’t need to eat and that it had the added benefit of being an unlikely location for Emma or her cronies to visit en mass. Winslow’s library wasn’t very impressive, only being a little larger than two classrooms put together, but it was better than nothing while I got started. Even if the library’s size wasn’t anything to write home about that didn’t mean I knew where to find any of what I was looking for, which meant I needed the help of the librarian, Mrs. Stenson. She was a thin, severe looking woman in her early thirties with her dark hair cut short to just below her ears, and one of the few faculty around Winslow who actually seemed to give a shit and be competent at her job.

I made my way up to the front desk and waited a moment or two for her to finish up doing something with a stack of books and one of those wheeled metal bookcases before she turned and faced me.

“How may I help you, young lady?” From her appearance I always expected her voice to be high
pitched and squeaky, but it was just normal.

“Um, I was wondering if the library had any copies of the physics textbook?” She raised one of her eyebrows at me questioningly. “Uh, it’s just that I was thinking of maybe taking it next semester and I wanted to get a head start…”

My voice trailed off at the end, but after a moment of silence she raised her arm and pointed to the near corner, to the right of the door I had just come in through.

“All textbooks are over there, do you need the name or… “ I nodded and she glanced off to one side, snatched a post-it note and scribbled hastily on it before handing it to me.

I thanked her, took the little yellow note from her hand and moved to where she had pointed, where all along the wall were bookcases a little above waist height with several tables positioned right next to them. Finding the right book took a little bit, mostly because I wasn’t actually paying much attention to how close I was to finding the one I was looking for and instead I got a little lost in just looking at all the textbooks the school apparently offered classes for.

Judging by the covers of some of the books it became apparent it wasn’t just current books that the library kept, judging by how old some of them looked. Eventually I did find it though, and then sat down at the nearest open seat. There were only about fifteen people in the entire library and most of them were seated farther away where they weren’t in the direct line of sight for the librarians. Of those fifteen people only two were sophomores, neither of whom were likely to say or do anything to me, while the rest were either juniors or seniors.

I opened the book and started reading. Like with almost every other subject, I understood everything I read as soon as I finished reading it without having to actually practice or test myself. Of course what I was working through right now was the most basic level of material and not likely to set off any revelations on the subject of my powers, but I’d done some testing when I first noticed my improved learning ability and whatever was actually going on in my brain it didn’t let me skip actually learning the material as such. All my power seemed to do was shortcut the part where someone else would have to memorize and practice to teach their brain how to think through a problem. So now, once the rules for something were explained to me, my brain basically just ‘rewired itself’ I guess to take into account the new stuff.

Maybe this was why Nono was being uncharacteristically quiet? Not about this material specifically, but rather the process of learning for myself? I mean I’d kind of already figured out that the point was for me to figure out a lot of this stuff on my own, but what if instead of being a choice she was making this was the only way I could learn it safely? Maybe something about how this whole weird me being inside a practically magic robot body thing worked meant that I had to do a lot of the initial work for myself, even as my new body made some of that work trivially easy. If that was the case then I definitely needed to buckle down and get the basics down so I could move on to more complex and potentially more helpful material.

About halfway through the text something funny began to happen. Whenever I focused on a particular problem or idea, I could visualise a precise actual model of the behavior. It was like seeing double, similar to the way I could take in the entire city while still paying attention to whatever was going on in front of me. Nothing overlaid or obscured my regular vision, instead it was like opening an entirely new set of eyes I’d never known I’d had but that still felt completely natural to have. Like one of those computer models they show in science shows to explain something, except rendered in much higher detail and with, I suspected, more accuracy than anything produced by any non-Tinker computer. An interesting development, but I couldn’t think of any way in which it would useful off the top of my head.
A ringing brought me out of my thoughts, it was the bell signalling lunch was over so I quickly put the book back in its place on the shelf and followed the others on their way out of the library. Nothing I’d actually learned today seemed of much immediate use to me, but it was at least the first step in what seemed to me to be the right direction.

I had Mr. Gladly next and I definitely wasn’t looking forward to watching him suck up to the ‘cool’ kids for the next hour, enough so that I wished I’d actually checked out the textbook so maybe I could have kept working on it through class. Actually I was turning around to go back quickly and check out the book when I bounced off someone.

That was when I noticed that I’d apparently been surrounded by Emma, Madison, Sophia, and four other girls. They weren’t crowding me, quite, but they were close enough that there wasn’t enough space between them to easily slip through and past occurrences had taught me it wouldn’t be smart to give them an excuse to get their hands on me. One again they talked about my like I wasn’t even then, throwing idiotic and contradictory insults; all of it had long since stopped bothering me of course, but still that didn’t mean I wanted to stand here for the next five minutes and listen to it all.

I wished I was somewhere else, that I’d paid more attention and managed to avoid this altogether, or that I could just make them disappear. Not actually disappear of course, but so I couldn’t see or hear them and didn’t have to interact with them at all. I wished it so hard that it actually started happening, only in the worst way possible. One minute I was staring past them, my eyes unfocused, trying to just ignore them completely and then the next I was seeing through them literally. Except that I wasn’t seeing completely through them, I was instead looking at their insides.

I watched Madisons heart and lungs pump in their smooth steady rhythms, Sophia’s muscles tense and relax twitchily like she wanted to pounce, I saw what was left of Emma’s lunch; little mushy bits of apple, dissolving bites of peanut butter and jelly slurry, all slowly turning into a single sloshing mixture. I saw Jessica’s eyes swiveling in the sockets of her skull, attached to the suspended lump of grey matter by tendrils of nerves, and April’s sinuses filled with thick greenish mucus that slowly dripped down the back of her throat.

“God, look at her! Is she about to hurl?!” Someone shrieked, a gleeful laughter hidden by the words.

“Oh my God, she is!” Another voice answered. “Do you think it’s morning sickness? Did the freak get knocked up?”

“Ewwww! What desperate loser would fuck that?!”

“Well Hebert, did you pay some forty year old pedo to take your cherry?” Emma’s voice, cutting through the chatter of the others like a knife.

I threw up all over two people’s shoes.

“OH MY GOD! YOU FREAK!”

“It stinks!”

“Ewwwwww!”

I closed my eyes and turned back around pushing past the two girls behind me, neither of whom even resisted, and ran for the bathroom. My eyelids blocked even my souped up eyesight but I
somehow managed my way to the nearest restroom mostly by memory, after all I’d used more than a few of them as hiding places before and here I was back to old habits. After a few minutes of simply sitting knees to my face on top of the toilet with my eyes closed I slowly pried them open, fearful of discovering I had suddenly gotten stuck in x-ray mode. Thankfully only the regular, not-people’s-insides world greeted me.

Several minutes later I extracted myself from the locked stall, exited the bathroom after checking no one was around and walked quickly towards the nurses office. I already knew I wasn’t sick, given my new body I didn’t even think I could get sick much less the other thing they’d mentioned, but I really wasn’t looking forward to sitting in class while the others made snide comments in not quite whispers specifically so I could hear.

First the nurse was skeptical, probably thinking I was just some kid trying to get out of a test or something, but once I explained what had happened and suggested it must be something I’d eaten she became attentive. My little embarrassment must have already reached her through the rumour mill, and she was obviously of the opinion that I was pregnant. Given that two girls had gotten pregnant last year, it wasn’t totally surprising she believed it but even ignoring my unique circumstances I was one of the least likely people to end up in the family way at this school. She didn’t come right out and say it but once I’d calmed down enough that I was comfortable going back to class and was on my way out she started shoving pamphlets on me. She made it sound like it was some precautionary measure by repeating that vague platitude about how “a young girl should know her body,” but there was the pregnancy one sitting right on top. By the time I got out of there the next class was starting anyways.

For the next two hours I had to endure the hurried whispers of most of the classmates and the occasional comment from one of the girls either in Emma’s circle of friends or looking to get in. I did my best to tune it out as much as I could, but I can’t deny it got to me a little, to have all these people whispering about me not so subtly. Thankfully, it got better the closer school got to ending as most people lost interest in me and moved on to the stuff that actually matter, like who’d hooked up with who, which teacher was being a complete asshole today, or where they were going after school.

Before I left I went back to the library, checked out the physics book, plus a chemistry book, and ran to catch my bus. At dinner I considered telling Dad about my day, but then I wondered what exactly I could tell him was the actual reason for my throwing up and since I didn’t really feel like lying I just kept my mouth shut.

I went to bed feeling thoroughly miserable, small and alone as I lay in the silence and the darkness of my room. Something seemed to touch my back and then I felt the weight of another body settling in front of me; two arms wrapped around me, and bright pink hair mixed with my own in front of my face as Nono pulled me close. I heard the deep thrum thrum thrum of our heart, and began I crying silently into her embrace.
On Tuesday I decided to skip class. The thought of walking into those halls and having people look at me the same way they had been for the last two years and especially of facing Emma and the others after yesterday was just too much. Besides, what was I actually getting out of school? Not an education; I’d learned more in half an hour of reading on my own than I had in the last three months of school. I had no friends to speak of, a kid who sat with me at lunch and barely said three words the entire time didn’t count, so it wasn’t like I was socializing. The only reason I still went was because it would be suspicious not to, but Winslow was the type of school where a kid could not show up for a day and most teachers wouldn’t even notice.

I considered my choices as I got up, wondering how I could make the most use of this time as I dried my hair, and decided that the downtown library branch would probably be better, it was just all around larger compared to the one nearer the docks. So that morning I left at the regular time; taking a left a block from home, walked two blocks to another bus stop where I waited for a bus downtown. Moments later I found myself seated on a hard plastic chair as the bus trundled along, besides myself there were only a few other people on board, mostly older people making their way to jobs but there were a couple of other kids my age, neither of whom I recognized from school.

In my backpack I had both the books I check out yesterday, after all it would probably be a good idea to finish those before I moved on to anything more advanced. Given the speed I’d proceeded at the day before it wouldn’t eat up much time anyways, maybe another half and hour for the rest of the physics text and then an hour to finish chemistry, but after that I’d need new material.

As the bus stopped and an elderly couple got on it occurred to me that my comprehension speed was a little frightening, now that I thought about it. If I kept going at this rate I could be caught up with modern science it what, a few months, maybe a year and after that what did my learning speed imply about what I could do with that knowledge? It wasn’t normal, I was sure, which didn’t exactly surprise me but even geniuses didn’t learn this fast.

How could I explain any of this without revealing basically every one of my most terrifying secrets? I couldn’t think of a way, which meant that I would have to keep quiet on everything I learned or that I would have to swear everyone I told to absolute secrecy, and worse that I would have to trust them to keep their word. The only alternative would be not to use whatever insights I gleaned, which might mean letting something life-saving go undiscovered until someone else happened to have the same breakthrough, condemning who knows how many people to additional suffering. I wanted even considering what else I might stumble on with less direct life-saving applications.

I was pulled out of my reverie by the realization that my stop was approaching, so I signaled that I wanted to get off at the next stop and waited by the closed doors until they opened and I exited onto the sidewalk opposite from the library. About six years ago there’d been a short economic upswing, and the new Brockton Municipal Library had been one of the projects funded at the time. I knew about it mostly because the ferries that were Dad’s perennial project had not been, the plans still held up by politics until things went back to usual a couple years later, though Mom had been a consultant on the library project. If there had been reasons explained for any of it I was too young to care at the time, but at least I could imagine it as Mom still helping me in some way as I watched my reflection from across the street in the glass front supported by still new-looking red brick walls.

Once traffic had cleared I dashed across the street and up the stairs. I angled my way towards the
desk as I entered and waited behind a tall lanky old guy with a thousand questions and a college aged girl carrying three books in her hands and tapping her foot impatiently. Unfortunately no one else was manning the desk, even though there were at least two other people sitting at desks in the back that I could see. Whatever it was that they did it wasn’t answer questions apparently, but thankfully a moment or two later someone else came to the desk and beckoned the girl in front of me forward, and then a moment later it was my turn. The librarian who’d come rushing up was maybe in his mid thirties, olive toned skin lined but not wrinkled, with closely shorn hair that curled tightly to his skull.

“Where do you keep the science textbooks?” As I asked his face contorted in a moment of confusion.

“Towards the back and to the right. Are you looking for something specific, maybe we can look it up?” His voice carried an accent that I’d never heard before, though considering I wasn’t exactly worldly that wasn’t too surprising.

“Uh, no, I’m, uh just browsing.” Yeah, that’s not suspicious at all Taylor.

“Well, it is a large section, let me show you where it is.” There was no one else in line, so I followed as he walked to the other end of the desk.

There he lifted up the gate to let himself out and after closing it behind him started walking towards the shelves of books. Soon we were walking between shelves of books nearly half again as tall as I was. Once every few rows of shelves there was a wider open space where a couple of long tables sat with chairs arranged around them, at which I saw a few people reading books or working in notebooks. Beyond the shelves there were doors numbered in increasing order as I walked, which appeared to lead into study rooms of some sort.

“Young girl like you, should be in school, no?” He asked the question with the hint of a smile, almost conspiratorially, he had clearly guessed I was skipping. Though I had to wonder what kind of kid he thought would skip school to come to a library. Even though he was right I thought it would be better not to confirm his suspicions, in case I had to come back and repeat this event some other day. I needed to give him something that would make my appearance here sensible, uninteresting, and would explain why I wasn’t sure what I was looking for beyond “science textbook.”

“Uh, no? I mean, I’m home schooled, but, uh, my dad is kind of reaching the end of his rope with what he knows so we’re trying some self-directed study.” How I came up with the lie I wasn’t sure, because I’d never been all that great at it before. My mom always used to be able to tell right off the bat whenever I was lying but maybe that was just because she was Mom.

“Ah! Excellent, education is important. Here we are,” we stopped about five rows of shelves from the back wall. “All the shelves from here to the wall are textbooks. Are you sure you do not want help?”

I smiled at him, trying to show any relief that he’d bought the lie and said, “No thanks, I’m sort of browsing right now.”

“I smiled at him, trying to show any relief that he’d bought the lie and said, “No thanks, I’m sort of browsing right now.”

“Very well, if you do want help, do not hesitate to ask for Alim,” he said, pointing to himself.

I waited until he’d disappeared from view and then start looking around. At the wall there were a couple of little cubicle like desks with chairs at them, and just one row of shelves back there was one of those gaps with the tables. When I moved on to more advanced material I might want to be able to have multiple books open at once, in case I needed to look up something I didn’t understand
in another book in order to grasp something so I chose the larger but more open tables. There wasn’t anyone else in this area of the library so I wasn’t really concerned about getting any strange looks yet. I sat down took out the physics book from yesterday and began reading.

As I’d predicted I was done in a little more than twenty minutes, at which point I pulled out the chemistry book and started reading that. As with the physics material yesterday, except this time I got three-fourths of the way through the book before it started happening, I could even run mental models of the material I read. Sort of.

Nothing was obviously wrong, but sometimes when I tried stuff I got the feeling that the results I was getting were ever so slightly off; all the results matched with what I was supposed to find so I couldn’t quite pin down what was bothering me. It took a few more minutes for the reason to become clear, what was tweaking me was the fact that my models were overly simplistic; by which I meant that I was building them solely off of what was in the books I was reading and considering that these were were introductory high school level texts they glossed over what I was sure were a lot of complications. They lacked granularity, and so came off as very fuzzy to my perception. Frankly there wasn’t a lot to be done about it except keep going, learn more, and thereby hopefully solve the problem.

Minutes after this revelation I was done with the chemistry text, so I went hunting for new books on the shelves and after twenty more minutes or so came back to the table with a stack of five new books; four more sequentially advanced physics and chemistry books, and a biology text that had caught my eye. Apparently in the time I’d been gone someone had joined me, an older woman now sat at the opposite table facing away from me so I decided to ignore her and set down my books. I began with the physics books, just as I had yesterday, and soon I was barrelling through the first at much the same pace as I had the previous one. Soon enough though I began to run into mathematical expressions and vocabulary which did not fully make sense to me; the vocabulary problem was simply enough solved by quick searches on my phone but the math issue was less easily fixed. I hadn’t brought my own math textbook, so I couldn’t use that as a jumping off point and instead had to hunt down a suitable stand-in. That took a while, because I’d gone ahead and grabbed every math textbook from where I knew I was all the way to Calculus, in the hopes that that would carry me as far as I needed to go. Once again I sat down and set to reading, soon enough I had three books in front of me; a math book, a physics book, and one of the chemistry books. Periodically I switched between physics and chemistry just to create some sort of variety, and whenever I got stuck in either of those I would pour through the math book until I wasn’t.

Before I knew it, it was three hours later and I was distinctly beginning to feel, not boredom exactly but something dangerously close to it. I’d blasted through the first of both the physics and chemistry texts, was well into the second of both, and had gone through I wasn’t sure exactly how many math books. I was confident I was still firmly in the realm of high school material in all the areas, but just as confidently I was sure I was well beyond any of my peers at Winslow and had probably jumped at least a year ahead of the curve.

In the last four and a half hours I had sped through at least two years worth of high school level physics and chemistry, without a teacher while simultaneously jumping forward at least a year in math. There was still a long way to go before I reached the level I needed in order to actually start figuring out some stuff and just beginning to realize how very clumsy the way I was going about it actually was. There had to be some better, more efficient way of getting all this knowledge besides plopping my ass down and reading every last word of a textbook, I knew there had to be but I had no idea what it was. Frankly I was starting to think that if I spent another minute reading anything I would snap, so I stuffed the two school books into my backpack and left everything else where it was because I would just be back in a little while to pick up where I’d left off.
First I simply walked around the ground floor for a few minutes, occasionally glancing into the little side rooms to find people working, either by themselves or in groups. Eventually I decided to see what the rest of the building was like, or at least some of it, not that I expected the other floors to be substantially different. The second floor was essentially the same as the first, with a few more tables and rooms off to the sides so I was moving on in just a few minutes. On the third floor I noticed two things almost immediately; one was that the library was connected to the building to its left by a skybridge, which was a little odd because I was pretty sure the library was just one building, and the second was that this floor had some different rooms. At first glance some of the rooms here appeared to be mini-sound studios or at least what I thought one would look like. The walls of each of them were covered in that spiky looking foam, and a variety of equipment of some kind sat against one wall.

“Taylor?” A voice asked from behind me.

I turned from where I was looking in on one of the empty rooms to see Sparky standing with a large rectangular case under one arm, a messenger bag slung over his shoulder, and a smaller box in his other hand. He had a surprised expression, one which I suspected I very much matched, after all this was one of the last places I ever expected to see him. Maybe that wasn’t fair to him, I probably had as good a chance to see him here as anyone else from school.

“Uh, Sparky, uh, hey,” Oh god, what should I say? “What, uh, what are you doing here?”

“Free sound studios for the college students, my sister reserves the space for me. You?” Shit, what do I tell him?

“Studying. Well, not really,” lying time again. “Not for school at least. It’s hard to explain.”

“You skipped school to study?” he asked.

“I guess? When you say it like that it sounds really stupid, but I wanted a break from, you know… stuff.” He nodded at that, and then a moment of silence stretched between us.

“I’ve only got the room for a couple hours, so… I better get to it.” He tilted his head at the door to indicate which room he meant.

“Right, yeah. I’ve got…” man, lying about this stuff was a lot harder when the person actually knew something about me. “You know, studying to get back to.”

I started moving past him and Sparky moved towards the door with a key I hadn’t noticed before in his hand. He was already turning the knob when he hesitated and turned towards me again.

“Do you want to hear some of my stuff? I’ve shown it to some people online, but you know the sort of feedback you get on the internet and I’d like to hear what someone else thinks.”

I searched his face for some hint of pity, if he was just asking because he’d heard about yesterday and felt bad I didn’t want to spend any more time with him but he just looked like he was genuinely asking the question. Right now I wasn’t really feeling up spending hours on end reading dry textbooks anyways so I figured, what the hell.

“Sure.” I said, and his face broke into a slight smile while he opened the door. I followed him into the room and waited for the few minutes it took him to start the computer inside the room and get the files from a little thumb drive he had in his bag.

“It’s not much, it took me months of just throwing stuff at the wall until I found a sound I actually liked, but I swear I’ve been here every other day working.” He laughed slightly at his last
statement and then pressed play on the first file.

That sound turned out to be a jazzy trumpet solo, probably what was in the case as well now that I thought about it. It was nice, though I didn’t love it, but it wasn’t like I was any sort of music expert so for all I knew he was a genius. Sparky had two more tracks and even though each was very different in tone, they each still seemed somehow to be more him the more I listened to them. Clearly this was something he’d poured his heart and soul into, and it showed.

“They’re good. I mean I, uh, don’t know shit about music but I liked them all. Five years from now I’ll probably be buying your CD’s and telling people I went to high school with you.” He laughed at that and smiled.

“Maybe, I have a long way to go though.” He paused, like he was remembering something and started minimized the current window on the computer, and was online in seconds looking for something. “Actually, I want you to listen to something. When I read what you prepared for the report in Mr. Gladly’s class I thought you might appreciate this, but I kept forgetting to mention her to you. That last piece was actually a cover-slash-accompaniment for this.”

He kept glancing back and forth between me and the computer while I kept most of my attention on him and wondered idly what he was going to have me listen to. He clicked on something and then a second later there was a soft, slow sound filling the room through the computer speakers.

A voice came through, softly at first but building as it went on while a sense of sadness swelled as well. The lyrics described the life of a woman; stuck in a small town and tied to a partner going nowhere fast, she dreamed of being important and of doing great things, then some sort of opportunity and the song became more uplifting. The song still carried a sense of melancholy, but tinged with happier feelings as well, it clearly matched the song that Sparky had been talking about. As the music ended I realised my eyes were watering and I had an unbidden smile on my face, glancing at Sparky revealed he had similarly been affected.

“She’s a parahuman. Something in her voice makes her songs really powerful emotionally,” he paused as if remembering something, and the smile was wiped from his face. “She got railroaded though, made one mistake and they’re sending her to the fucking Birdcage! Can you believe that?” The passion in his voice surprised me a little, especially directed in this woman’s defense. Despite how big the Protectorate was and how the media focused on the personal dramas of capes, people still freaked out a lot. Online at least people were always crying out how this or that villain needed to be sent to the Birdcage, hell, Uber and L33t frequently bore the brunt of those calls when you talked about Brockton Bay villains which was weird because if any of the local criminals deserved someplace as bad as that it was The Empire’s psychopaths. Every few months you would hear about this or that example they had made out of whoever had broken ranks or just been the wrong skin color in the wrong neighborhood. And they had plans too, everyone knew it, for ‘when’ they controlled BB to move on and create a white utopia in the rest of the country. Compared to them, Uber ad L33t were practically harmless annoyances.

Sparky began to explain the intricacies of the case, and that was how I learned about Canary and came to agree with him that she had indeed been railroaded for no better reason than fear; of her power and the utterly irrational and nonsensical apparent similarity with the Simurgh. It was not clear whether she had already been moved to the Birdcage or was due shortly to be moved, because originally she and Lung had been scheduled to be moved together but then Lung had been freed.

Then he began to show me other parahuman musicians, there being apparently a lot more than I’d ever known about. A drummed near what used to be Seattle who had apparently grown two more sets of arms, and a guitarist who could act as his own amplifier. It was fascinating to find out about
these capes who weren’t actually capes, who didn’t fight or steal but instead used their new powers to do something almost normal. We started searching around for other non-fighting capes in the news, and found out that there were surprisingly few or that they kept a very low profile. A financial planner in LA advertised himself as a parahuman, but then we found news articles saying he was a fraud, then there was the architect from Ontario who could draw perfect plans by hand to machine precision. Beyond those though we found nothing more than brief news articles which mentioned people but never by full name and never in much detail. It was disappointing.

Something in my pocket vibrated, distracting me from what Sparky was saying; I pulled out my phone and noticed that Amy was calling me. Oh crap, we were going shopping today!

“Just a moment,” I said to Sparky, and then answer the call. “Hey…”

“Hey, are you at your house? Or should I pick you up from school? Have you had lunch yet, we could grab something to eat before we go shopping?” Amy didn’t even give me the time to respond between her questions, she seemed nervous.

“Uh, actually, I’m downtown right now at the library,” With everything else I’d been dealing with I had completely forgotten about shopping with her today. “But I, um, forgot my money at home so I need to stop by and pick it up before we-”

“Don’t worry about it!” She practically shouted, sounding almost cheerily relieved. “This is all my treat, after all you’re doing me this favor. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

She hung up before I could make any sort of response, so I couldn’t argue the point. What should I say to Sparky?

“Uh, I completely forgot I agreed to meet with a, uh… friend today. She’s going to be here in a few minutes so I’ve, uh, gotta go.” I was already halfway to the door. “I like your music! I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

He nodded, I shot him a brief smile, and then I was out the door. It took me a minute or two in order to reorient myself towards the stairs, and then I was off rushing down the stairs at a fast walking pace. There seemed to be a lot more people in the library now than when I’d arrived, which made sense with classes letting out for both high school students and the college kids.

Once I was outside in front of the building I wondered why the hell I’d been in such a rush anyways, she had said she’d be here in fifteen minutes which meant I probably could have waited to leave instead of running off the first second. Oh god, I’d been so rude to Sparky. I’d acted like I couldn’t wait to get out of there, what did he think of me now?

Could I run back up there, say sorry for rushing off and then rush off again before Amy got here? No, that would be even weirder, better to just wait until tomorrow and apologize in person at school. Any further thoughts on the matter were interrupted by Amy’s arrival in an aging, though well maintained, gray colored car. She unlocked the passenger side door and I slid in, resting my backpack between my legs on the floor and gripping the top handle nervously.

“Hi.” Amy said.

“Hey.” I responded and then we sat in silence for a second before Amy pulled the car out into traffic.

We drove on in that same silence for several minutes, I occupied myself by surreptitiously surveying her car. It was clean and everything looked like it was in working order even if they car
itself looked like it was maybe ten or fifteen years old. Amy’s own backpack lay on the floor of
the seat behind her, indicating she’d just gotten out of school herself; which, duh, we were both in
high school after all though I knew sometimes AP classes went on after regular dismissal time.

After a few more minutes of silence Amy broke the awkwardness.

“Did you have lunch? We can get something to eat first if you want.” She glanced at me a couple
of times.

“No, thanks.” I answered.

We lapsed back into silence. I wanted to break it myself, but I wasn’t sure what would be a safe
topic; her sister and her powers both seemed to be somewhat of a sore subjects with her and more
than likely to be depressing. School was something I wanted to stay away from, asking about it
would almost certainly lead to a reciprocation from her, which would lead into my skipping today
which might lead into the reason and that wasn’t something I really wanted to get into. I just didn’t
know enough about her to ask about hobbies or anything like that, so I resigned myself to the idea
that we would drive on in silence.

As we approached closer and closer to the boardwalk I felt guiltier and guiltier for forgetting my
money at home. I didn’t want to take advantage of her, because even if she’d asked me to come as
a favor it wasn’t like I was getting nothing out of this. Unfortunately without her cooperation I
couldn’t really get back home to grab my money without inviting unwanted attention, so I would
have to live with it for now and repay her some other time. I would do it though, that much I made
a silent promise to myself on.

We parked on the street about a block from the boardwalk itself, facing toward the water. A clear
sky and bright sun shone down on us; it was warm for a Spring day but not overly hot so walking
wasn’t uncomfortable. Neither of us really said anything r until we were on the boardwalk itself.

“The store’s down this way,” Amy said, pointing off to the right.

There wasn’t exactly a crowd out today, seeing as it was a Tuesday, but with the warm weather
more people than normal were out and it would only get busier until the late afternoon when it
would start trickling down again. The real busy season was in Summer, when more tourists from
surrounding towns made quick day trips into Brockton Bay. There were a number of restaurants,
cafes, clothing stores, and a variety of other stores along the boardwalk so it did a good deal of
business when the weather was good.

We passed an arcade, where I saw a couple of faces I vaguely recognized from school, so I picked
up the pace for a moment until we were a shop past it. If Amy noticed she made no comment.

Finally, a few minutes later Amy turned towards a store a few minutes later and we walked in past
mannequins decked in pretty floral, pastel, or jean dresses or in tiny short shorts and topped with
large brimmed summer hats. None of the display stuff seemed like it would be right for me - too
much exposed skin in all the places where I had nothing to show off. In other words they required
cleavage.

As we entered a sales woman made her way towards us, a smile plastered on her pristine face.

“Hello, how can I help you today?” she asked.

“Just browsing for now,” Amy answered, already moving past her with a confidence and ease that
certainly made it seem like she knew what she was doing. I shot the woman a smile and followed.
Amy was already browsing a rack of dresses, as I approached she turned momentarily to look back at me. “Anything catch your eye?”

I shook my head in answer and she sighed.

“Well, start browsing.”

While I examined this or that dress, I tried to remember every little bit of advice Emma had ever spouted off on our shopping trips but they were all so long ago and I hadn’t really paid much attention to them at the time so nothing actually came to mind. How could I have known at the time that I might eventually need all those tidbits and wouldn’t have access to their source, that my best friend would abandon me as she had? Besides, they were all probably horribly out of date anyway. Instead I had to rely on my own eye and fashion sense, two somethings which I wasn’t at all confident in.

Every few minutes Amy would come by with a suggestion or two and if we both liked them well enough we put them into a “maybe” pile. First was a peach cotton dress, I liked the color because it reminded me of my mother for some reason. Second was a white floral print thing that had a pattern which looked like it had come off of the curtains of some rich person’s house where the couch legs were carved like lion paws. Last we decided on an egg-shell cotton dress which, according to Amy, showed off my legs. Personally I didn’t think I had anything in particular to show off with my legs, but once again I probably wasn’t the best judge of that.

Then I started trying them on. We ended up hanging on to only the second and last dress, even though the first was maybe my favorite Amy had been iffy on it from the start and I decided to trust her on the subject. Now we had to make a decision.

“Hang on, let me take a second look at something.” Amy turned and disappeared back into the racks of clothes.

I looked down at the two dresses in front of me. Each was more expensive that I’d counted on, though I knew they were nowhere near as expensive as they could be, but still it was more money that I’d expected to spend today and that once again made me feel guilty that Amy was paying for it. I had the distinct feeling that she wouldn’t accept money from me if I tried to give it to her when we dropped me off or later, so that meant I would have to find some other way to repay her. What that could be I wasn’t sure, because I was fairly sure her family was better off than me and Dad and besides I had no idea what it was that she would be interested in anyways. Well, I would just have to figure it out.

A familiar voice caught my attention and I instinctively turned towards where it was coming from near the entrance and then froze. Emma and Sophia were standing right there, heads ducked in a conspiratorial whisper over some article of clothing. Immediately I dropped the dresses on the closest rack, ducked my own head and stepped behind the rack of clothes to shield myself from their sight. Luckily they didn’t seem to have noticed me yet.

Shit, shit. I didn’t want to drag Amy into my problems with Emma and her cronies, so we needed to get out of here right now without them seeing us, which meant getting to Amy as fast as I could before she brought any attention to us. I kept to the outside edge of the store, making sure to always keep something large and obstructive in between me and the other girls until I found Amy.

I grabbed her arm and whispered urgently, “We need to go. Now.”

“What?” she asked, voice way too loud.
“An… old friend of mine just walked in,” I explained, as I pulled her away from the clothes she’d been browsing and towards the entrance of the store.

Keeping the both of us hidden was a bit of a chore, because Amy didn’t really understand what was going on and didn’t even know who we were avoiding. Still I managed it, though the last moments were a little harrowing seeing as the two of them were still near the entrance itself. I had to wait until Sophia pulled Emma away from the entrance to look at something to push Amy before me out of the store and then rush out myself before either of them turned back. In that moment I really hated the little chime that went off whenever someone went in or out of the door.

Amy was waiting, a confused look on her face, when I came out. I walked past her, grabbing her hand as I went and dragged her along, periodically glancing back to make sure neither of them had followed.

Once we were a few stores down I relaxed, let go of Amy’s hand and noticed the strange look she was giving me. Then I noticed that I was breathing heavily; stupid brain, I didn’t even need to breath anymore and it still started hyperventilating when I panicked.

“Sorry.” I said quietly.

Amy seemed to shrug it off and then started walking. I followed after, not really paying attention to where we were going until I found myself sitting in a cushioned chair on the outdoor patio of a small cafe. In just a few moments Amy returned with two bottles of some soda I didn’t recognize and I took one when she handed it to me and then she sat down opposite me.

“So…” Amy said, searching for something to say.

“We used to be friends. Since first grade, she used to spend holidays with my family sometimes, not the big ones of course but things like Memorial Day. When my mom died she was the one who I went to when Dad fell apart; I lived, ate, and cried myself to sleep for a week at her house.” I wasn’t entirely sure why I was telling her all of this, only that it was coming out like a flood and I didn’t know how to stop it, or even if I wanted to.

“Just when I was starting to feel like myself again, one summer after I came back from camp she turned into a bitch. We didn’t talk for six months. You know what the first thing she said to me after that was? ‘Get out of my way freak.’ Ever since she seems to have made it her mission to make my life miserable. And, she did this to me… she didn’t mean to, but she made me… what I am.” I gave Amy a meaningful look at that.

Amy didn’t appear to be jumping up and running away, which was probably a positive sign, but beyond that I didn’t know how she was taking this, or what else there was for me to say. I’d laid it out for her to judge, I could go into more details but what good would that do? She had the facts as they were, she knew now how screwed up I really was and exactly why I shouldn’t be the person she turned to when she had problems.

I turned away from her, staring out the sun hanging low in the sky and the people walking past us up and down the boardwalk. I took a sip of my soda, watched a tall black kid with a cast on his leg lecture furiously at a much younger girl two stores down and then turned my head to catch a young girl blow out a candle on a cupcake a couple tables away. Silence reigned between the two of us.
“Sometimes I want to scream at the patients; yell at them for not taking better care of themselves, or for getting into a dangerous situation. Other times I want to watch a doctor or a surgeon struggle to save someone’s life just so I can rub it in their faces. Or, or… I think about making it all worse sometimes; screwing up the nerves on a toddler’s right side so he can’t use that arm, making a grandmother with a broken hip feel like her skin is on fire…” Amy trailed off, looking away from me and out at the people walking by in ones and twos past us.

“I’ve never done anything, I always take a deep breath and fix them up in the end but the point is that sometimes I hate the hospitals, hate the patients, hate the doctors, the nurses, and even the idea of over touching another person,” she continued in the same soft whisper she’d been using since she started talking.

“In some ways it’s worse coming home because all I see is Carol’s suspicious eyes, watching me accusingly like she can see all the thoughts I have, or Mark’s dull gaze that seems to look everywhere but at me,” Amy paused again and then she looked back to me. “I’m not saying I have it worse or anything, I mean I don’t really think you can compare this shit. What I mean, what I’m trying to say, is that these past couple of weeks? I’ve barely felt like that at all. Even with the small stuff I’ve told you I’ve felt better, just knowing you were there.”

“So, thanks. And, uh, I guess you can talk to me too, I mean you already sort of did but like in the future too when other stuff comes up you can call me if you need to. Not that you need to, I don’t want you to feel, like, obligated to spill your guts to me.” She let out a frustrated huff of air. “Look, what I’m trying to say is that I think we’re friends now and I’m here if you need me, ok?”

I was left a little stunned by the entire speech she’d just sort of made. Hearing everything she’d said I almost felt guilty; sure she’d said she wasn’t trying to tell me she had it worse, but my first instinct was that my problems weren’t as important in comparison. That wasn’t true though, that was just the bullshit Emma and the others had heaped on me these last few years; all those time they’d told me I was useless, that no one cared what happened to me, every time that someone at school had looked the other way, or a teacher had as good as said my word was worthless against theirs, it all had its effect on me. No matter how much you tell yourself things like that aren’t true, if you hear it enough it starts to feel like it is. So, I had my shit and she had hers. We were both screwed up in different ways but maybe we could help each other a little. It felt good to have someone in my corner again, someone who was making the choice to be on my side.

I smiled at Amy and suddenly the ridiculousness of it all sort of hit me; this was probably the weirdest way I’d ever made a friend. I started laughing, not loudly, but the sort of laugh that bursts out in snorts and quiet giggles.

“Uh, what?” Her confused expression didn’t make it any easier to stop laughing.

“Sorry, sorry! It’s not funny,” I started, finally taking a couple deep breaths to calm myself. “But this has to have been the most roundabout, backwards, weirdest ways to start a friendship in the history of, well, ever probably.”

Amy smiled after a moment and laughed too.
The rest of the afternoon was a lot less interesting; we finished our drinks, my conscience needling me again when Amy paid, and then we left. We walked the boardwalk for maybe half an hour, talking about anything and everything that wasn’t remotely serious. If it weren’t for my new perfect recall I would say it was the sort of conversation that just doesn’t stick in your head. As the sun had dropped lower in the sky and a light breeze blew in over the bay the afternoon got a little cooler and so we started heading back towards the where Amy’s car was parked.

Inevitably this brought us closer towards the store I’d so suddenly pulled us out of, a little over an hour after we’d left, and I hesitate as she steered us towards it once more.

Looking back across where she had gripped my forearm, Amy told me, “Don’t worry, she has to be gone by now. Besides I know exactly what you should wear.”

Inside there was no sign of either Emma or Sophia, which was a huge relief to me. Amy went straight to the rack I’d found her and started sorting through the dressed hanging there. I hadn’t really paid attention to what was here before, too busy trying to keep my nemeses from noticing us, but after a moment or two she seemed to find the dress she’d been looking for and pulled it out.

"See, it's the peach color you liked, but cut more like the eggshell one that looked so nice on you," she explained, holding it up before me.

We'd already found the right sizes before, but Amy still insisted I should try it on first, and since she was buying I didn't quite have the will to protest.

She nodded approvingly after having me do a twirl. "See, it'll be great," she said. I wasn't so sure, but decided to just go with it - it really was a nice color, at least. The sales lady had an even more artificial smile than the first time as she rang us up, but I suppose I'd made extra work for her abandoning the outfits I'd been looking for at instead of rehanging them when I left so quickly.

Thankfully it wasn’t one of the more expensive dresses available so I didn’t feel too bad. Still I reaffirmed my silent promise to myself to make it up to her at some point. So we left the store with the new dress in hand and returned to Amy’s car.

On the ride home neither of us said much except to comment on things we saw, or a particularly bad driver, or how nice of a day it had been. Just little things to fill a somewhat awkward silence.

We pulled up in front of my house at 5:47:36 PM.

I pulled my backpack out of the car after me and then opened the passenger side back door and grabbed the bag with the new dress in it, then as I shoulder my pack I turned back toward Amy.

“Um, thanks. I had a good time,” I said lamely.

“Me too,” she answered, and then we stared at each other for a moment, both of us seemingly searching for the right thing to say.

“Did you, I mean, do you want to come in?” I asked. “Stay for dinner? Or just a snack? If you have to get home I understand, I just feel a little bad about you paying for everything.”

Amy hesitated, and glanced at the clock before she answered. In the moment it had seemed the right thing to do, and I’d been a little proud of myself even, after all what better time to start paying her back than right now? Even if just a little bit.

“Uh, sure. Just let me make a quick call, you know to let Carol know,” she was already pulling out her phone to make the call.
“Of course! Do, uh whatever you need to. I’ll just, um put these things inside, so come in whenever you’re done.”

I jogged inside, dropped my pack and the bag just inside the door and went looking for Dad. He was seated at his little desk in the living room, the TV on with the volume down low, working on some paperwork.

“Kiddo! How was the shopping trip?” He asked, smiling broadly as he looked up.

“Fine, uh, good actually. Um, I invited Amy for dinner, is that alright?” I felt a bit stupid asking, after all I’d already basically promised she could.

My dad just raised his eyebrows and answered after a moment.

“Yeah, of course that’s fine. Should be plenty of lasagna for three, have to make a bigger salad though, but the more the merrier!” The smile that he’d had when I came had only gotten more pronounced.

Dinner was good. Of the two of us Dad was the better cook, though I usually cooked because he was busy with work stuff a lot of the time, but whenever he had the chance he liked to do it. Never anything super fancy, but still very good. We talked about safe subjects, the sort of stuff that usually comes up whenever a parent has to talk to a kid that isn’t theirs. So, mostly school.

It was a little strange to watch my dad sitting at our dinner table talking with my newly declared friend; asking about what she was doing in school, her plans for college, what she wanted to do with their life. It started to get a little uncomfortable, though nowhere near as bad as when she’d shown up out of the blue, so I moved the conversation off of Amy’s life plans and onto the party Thursday. Dad sort of grilled Amy on what time the party would end, and what sort of party this really was. That caused a bit of an awkward moment but he just asked me if I was sure that I wanted to go. When I told him that yes I did, he just sort of shrugged and we moved on.

The topic shifted after that and my dad sort of took over the conversation, telling us stories about his college days or his childhood. I’d heard all of them before over the years but it was probably the first time since Mom had died that he told any of the ones which involved her. Oddly enough even as it made me miss her more I felt good. Hearing my dad talk about her, as he struggled to keep his laughter from making the story incomprehensible, felt like progress in a way.

Amy stayed about an hour and a half, including dinner, before deciding that she needed to get home. I walked her out to say goodbye.

"Thanks again, for... everything. I mean it, we'll have to do something again, my treat to make up for you paying today," I told her, the easy atmosphere from dinner helping me to speak without tripping all over myself.

"Well, okay... I mean, today was no trouble and you're the one saving me from having to deal with a blind date, but if you want to, then it sounds like fun," Amy replied, standing beside the car but facing me.

I didn’t really have any ideas so I just nodded, and shuffled my feet a little as she leaned against the fender. We stared at each other and the awkwardness seemed to come back in full force.

“I should, uh, probably get going,” she said eventually. "I don't want Vicky to worry, or Carol to think... well, it's getting late. Uh, bye?"

“Right, bye.”I said, lamely. “See you Thursday.”
“I’ll pick you up here then? Seven o’clock?” she asked as she walked around the car and began getting in the drivers side.

“Yeah I’ll be, uh waiting.” I confirmed, and then she was gone.

*

All of Wednesday passed without any events of real note. I went back to school; I didn’t really want to but if I didn’t I strongly suspected it would become some sort of habit, and that would cause a whole mess of trouble. Going back also gave me the chance to both return the books I’d borrowed from the school library and talk to Sparky again. I apologized for running out so suddenly on him the day before, but he didn’t actually seem to have been much bothered by my behavior.

Once school let out I went back to the downtown library and picked up more or less where I’d stopped the other day, though I didn’t get nearly as much done because I had so much less time. I came home with four heavy textbooks, managing to sneak them past Dad while he was distracted by the TV so that he wouldn’t start asking awkward questions I wasn’t ready to answer yet.

I finished all four that night.

My pace was beginning to worry me a bit, not because I thought anything was wrong, but because I didn’t want to have to drag huge, heavy textbooks back and forth every day. Sooner or later someone would notice and then I would have to explain how I was going through them all so fast. I knew that the library had some books available as electronic copies, but I wasn’t sure how many of the books I needed would be among those. At first I thought there wasn’t much point in considering it because I didn’t have a laptop but I remembered that my new phone could actually probably serve for my purposes. Besides it still presented the same issue just potentially delayed slightly.

Honestly, it seemed like what I really needed to do was buy the books. Unfortunately textbooks like what I was starting to look at were expensive and I didn’t exactly have that much spare cash lying around.

In the morning on Thursday I asked Dad if he knew any way to get textbooks cheap.

“Well, when I was going to school we used to sell our books once we were done with them. You could end up with a nice chunk of pocket change if you were smart, why?” He asked, a curious expression coming over his face.

“I’ve been, um, thinking about college and stuff. I want to try and take some AP classes next year, maybe get a leg up on, like, applications and stuff. But it probably doesn’t matter, I don’t exactly have a lot of spare cash lying around.” I told him.

Dad got a somewhat embarrassed look on his face, like a kid who been caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to.

“Uhm, I’ll be right back,” he said before disappearing upstairs for a moment or two, when he came back down he had and envelope in his hand. “You remember when we went to the bank. Of course
you do, anyways I went back by myself a few days later and I took care of what I wanted to do that
day and… well, here.”

I took the envelope from his hand as he passed it to me and looked inside. There were two bank
cards, plus a flimsy little plastic card with two account numbers written on it, and a form letter
from the bank.

“Now, most of the money is in the savings account and I don’t want you to use any of that unless
it’s a real emergency but I put about two thousand of it in the checking account. If this is really
something you want to do, well, it’s your money,” he continued. “I’ve been trying to give it to you
since but I kept forgetting. I think maybe I was afraid that once you had your own money you
would disappear.”

He laughed weakly at the end as I continued to stare at the contents of the envelope for another
minute. Then as I really processed what he’d said I launched myself out of the chair I’d been sitting
in and hugged him tightly.

“I promise I won’t disappear, ever.”

He hugged me back, his thin arms wrapped around my shoulders tightly for a moment until he said,
“If you don’t leave soon you’ll be late.”

I did a quick check of the time and then rushed to disentangle myself from him.

Everything except for a single notebook got dumped out of my backpack, since with my practically
photographic memory I didn’t really need the textbooks anyways and I had a feeling I would need
as much space as possible in my pack. Moments later I was out the door and running towards my
bus stop, envelope full of bank stuff shoveled hastily into one of the compartments of my backpack.

School was once again very unexciting. I paid little to no attention to any of my classes and during
lunch I went up to the library and spent my time using the computers there to figure out what I
should buy. Just like the day before once school was out I was on the bus to the city library, but
this time I did little more than return the old books, borrow new ones and then leave. I knew it
would be several hours more until I even had to think about getting ready for the party but I also
wanted to get in some study before then. It took me about half an hour and three separate used
book stores to find all the texts I was looking for and prices that weren’t ridiculous, but then it was
back home on another bus, my backpack jammed mostly with books from the library and with a
bag in my hand with the couple that hadn’t fit.

I went straight to my room immediately when I got home and started working. When six rolled
around I wasn’t even finished with the books from the library, but I knew that I needed to start
getting ready because Amy was supposed to show up some time around seven so that we could
arrive by seven thirty when we were supposed to meet the rest of her family. Emma probably
would have been horrified at only giving myself half and hour, back when this was the sort of thing
she’d help me with, but the truth was that brushing my hair would take half that long and the dress
was already laid out with everything else.

I was sitting on the couch in the living room watching some TV with Dad when my phone buzzed
at 6:58:07 and I saw the message from Amy, it said simply “here.”

The drive in her car was once again a little awkward. Despite the, sort of connection we’d had on
Tuesday, neither of us really seemed to know how to go forward. Eventually the familiar, and
frankly ugly in my opinion, shape of the Forsberg Gallery came into view just a couple of blocks
away. We had to drive around a few more minutes as Amy searched for a parking spot, but then we
were out of the car and walking towards where we were supposed to meet her family.

I could already see them standing all together, out of costume but having clearly coordinated their clothes so you could tell they were related at a glance. Now that I thought about it, there had been something familiar about Amy’s dress, and looking at the rest of her family it was clear that it was meant to bring to mind her actual cape costume. I was going to stand out like a sore thumb with them as a backdrop.

As we approached Amy pulled ahead a little, and I could practically see her body hum with the sudden tension.

“Carol, Mark, Vicky, this is Taylor. Taylor meet half of New Wave,” she said it with a smile but her voice was tight.

“Hi,” I couldn’t think of anything better to say.

“It is wonderful to meet you Taylor, but we ought to get going. Come along.” Carol Dallon, aka Brandish, said briskly.

The man to her right was obviously Mark Dallon, better known as Flashbang, and he simply smiled though it didn’t reach his eyes before he turned away to follow his wife. Victoria drew close to Amy as we began moving and whispered something in her ear which caused Amy to shake her head suddenly. She whispered something back which seemed to end the hurried conversation and Victoria merely gave me a long search look before turning away.

We walked the rest of the half block to the entrance to the Gallery in silence, where a pair of uniformed PRT officers opened the doors for us while four more watched from vehicles parked right in front of the entrance. Then there was a somewhat crowded elevator ride up to the top floor of the gallery, and we were at the party.

As we entered I could already spot at least three members of the local Protectorate team: Armsmaster, Miss Militia, and Dauntless, all of whom were of course in their costumes. Almost the entirety of the Wards were also in attendance, minus Aegis. Practically every minor and major celebrity in the general area of Brockton Bay was in attendance in fact, or at least so it seemed. The crowd was made up of the rich, the well known, and the important. I began to feel distinctly out of place.

Almost as if on cue to make it worse, out of the corner of my eye I spotted a glimpse of red hair. I turned my head and locked eyes with Emma, standing with her entire family.

“Shit,” I said.

Chapter End Notes

3.6 is what I consider the start of the best portion of this fic. It has some of the bits that have existed the longest as well as being written when I think I was most engaged with the story.
I turned away an instant after making eye contact with Emma. Fuck me, I should have known she was going to be here. It wasn’t as obvious because Emma, for some god forsaken reason, had chosen to attend Winslow when her family could have afforded to send her to one of the other schools, but the Barneses were rich. Not “mansion and a yacht” rich but Mr. Barnes was a successful divorce attorney, and that meant Emma always had the latest, well... everything. Maybe Emma wanted to be a big fish in a small pond at Winslow instead of a small fish somewhere else.

Whatever the real reason, Emma had chosen to go to Winslow. Now I was trapped at a party full of people I didn’t know, feeling distinctly out of place with my former best friend turned tormenter standing maybe thirty feet away. I wanted nothing more than to turn right around and just walk home right that minute.

Fuck that! Running away would the same as admitting that all those things she had said about me over the last few years were true, I realized. If I hadn’t stopped going to school I wasn’t about to let her scare me off from someplace I’d actually been invited to. If anything I belonged here more than she did anyways, after all I was a cape myself while she was just here because of her daddy’s money. Of course no one besides Amy actually knew that I had powers, but I knew.

“Taylor?” I looked up at the sound of Amy’s voice and found her giving my hands a curious look. I glanced down and found that my hands had clenched, I relaxed them.

I wasn’t going to let Emma ruin this for me, I was going to meet a bunch of the locals capes tonight and she would just have to live with my presence or she could leave. With that thought I turned slightly towards Amy again.

“Sorry,” I started to say, keeping my voice low so the rest of her family couldn’t hear, though I didn’t think any of them were the eavesdropping types. “You remember the, uh, friend I told you about? She’s here,” I explained. “But shes not important. I’m here to meet capes... Uh, and keep you company!” I added quickly.

Amy chuckled a little at that and then shrugged as if in acceptance of my explanation. Just a moment later her mom and dad led us to the table, where Victoria promptly disappeared; presumably to spend the rest of the evening with her newly current boyfriend.

“Carol!” A familiar voice called out at almost the exact moment we sat down. “Mark! How are you two?”

Of course Amy’s family and Emma’s family knew each other. Even though I was determined not to let Emma’s presence ruin the night for me, that still didn’t mean I wanted to spend it sitting across from her.

“Oh but where is Victoria? Emma was looking forward to saying hello, “ he said, apparently not having noticed me yet though the same could definitely not be said for his daughter.

“Oh, she wanted to spend the night with her boyfriend. The two of them ought to be around here somewhere,” Mark Dallon answered, glancing about as if they might suddenly walk into his line of sight.
“Well, young love, what can you do? Amelia you’re looking- Taylor?” Mr. Barnes seemed momentarily stunned as if I had only just materialized and not been sitting there the entire time. “Well, isn’t this a pleasant surprise! Is your father around, I’ve been meaning to get in touch with him.”

“No-” I started.

“Taylor is a friend of Amy’s.” Carol said at practically the same moment, though she looked a little sheepish for talking over me. “You two know one another?”

“Yes, I’ve known her father for years! Emma and Taylor are fast friends, though I suppose we haven’t seen Taylor much over the last few years. You know how friendships change in high school though, perhaps we may start to see more of her again after tonight. Wouldn’t it be nice for you girls to reconnect, maybe invite Amelia along, hmm?” He asked, the stupid smile plastered over his face made all the more aggravating because it was completely genuine in its cluelessness.

Emma simply stared blankly at me, while I made a noncommittal grunt. Mr. Barnes was already moving on to some other conversation, anyway, which I decided to tune out. Amy, Emma and I spent a few tense moments of silence simply staring at one another while the adults talked before I had enough.

“Excuse me, I need to use the restroom.” I didn’t take my eyes off of the other girl while I got up.

“Er, I’ll show you.” Amy said quickly as she followed me out of her own seat.

I kept a hard pace for a second or two until we were away from the table, then I slowed and let Amy guide us to the bathrooms. Thankfully the bathroom was empty when I burst in. I didn’t say anything, just stood in front of the mirror and looked at myself trying not to think of how unbearably miserable this evening was going to be now. What the hell had I ever done to Emma that she wanted to make it her mission in life to ruin everything good in mine, that was what I wanted to know. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Amy’s reflection fidget.

“His practice is in the same building as Carol’s. They’re not part of the same law firm or anything, but it’s some weird lawyer setup-thing, I don’t really know how it works. We see them sometimes at events like this, but me and Victoria have never really liked Emma.” She rambled nervously, like she was trying to defend herself or her family from an accusation I hadn’t even made.

“You didn’t even know me a month ago, I don’t blame you,” I said into the mirror. “I just didn’t expect to see her here. I just need a moment.”

Seeing her appear like that had been shocking, especially since I’d been feeling so upbeat about the night. Just her presence had brought all sorts of bad associated memories up but I was starting to think that the night itself couldn’t really go that much worse with her here. With her dad sitting right there I didn’t think there was too much she could do to me without breaking the good girl facade she had going on so I was probably safe for at least tonight. Undoubtedly she would devise some new misery to inflict on me for tomorrow, but that wasn’t exactly out of the ordinary. I wasn’t about to be scared because of what she might do, not now.

I took a deep breath, stood up straighter and turned back to Amy.

“Okay, let’s go back,” I said, turning towards the bathroom entrance.

She stepped forward and put a hand on my shoulder before I’d taken more than two steps. “Are you sure? We don’t have to, if you know, you don’t want to. We can do something else if this is
going to be too, er, awkward for you.”

I shook my head. “No, skipping out now would be worse I think, besides I don’t want to give her the satisfaction.”

As we neared the table I saw Emma catch sight of us. Our eyes met again and she smiled that same smile I’d seen before whenever she’d decided to be particularly vicious or discovered some new “weakness” to exploit. So long as she waited until tomorrow, I was just about beyond caring right this second.

Thankfully, Emma didn’t actually do or say anything during the dinner portion of the party, at least not directly to me, and I did my level best to ignore her entirely. Conversation around the table was somewhat limited; the Barneses’ and Dallons’ typical conversation topics apparently having been exhausted in the first few minutes, what followed was twenty one minutes of mostly awkward silence interspersed with the occasional attempt to jump start conversation by one of the adults, frequently by inquiring of one the unrelated teenagers on their current school work. This worked about as well as it always does, which is that it got answers that were barely more than affirmations that yes in fact we went to school and were in classes. At which point conversation across the table would once again die.

Finally the Mayor rose from his chair at the large table where all the really important guests were seated, and launched into a speech about triumphs over adversity, a return to the glorious heyday of Brockton Bay, and all the other stuff you expect to hear from politicians. I did my best to ignore all of this too. The end of the Mayor’s speech signaled two things, or rather it signaled one thing which prompted the second, that was that servers began to bring out carts stacked with deserts and people started to get up from their tables and mingle.

“Come on, I’ll introduce you,” Amy said, as she turned to me and simultaneously began getting up out of her chair.

Glad for the excuse to leave the table, I followed her eagerly. She angled us towards a table back towards the Mayor’s where I could see several of the Wards, though a few were missing. Only Shadow Stalker, Kid Win and Vista remained at this point.

Amy looked around but the other Wards were either occupied in conversation with someone else or nowhere to be found. “Listen, most of them are pretty normal but Shadow Stalker is… well, a bit difficult to deal with sometimes.” She said.

As we approached the table Vista visibly perked up. “Oh thank god, people,” the younger Ward said, glancing significantly at Shadow Stalker on the last word.

When she noticed me standing next to Amy her face went red. Apparently not everything was as rosy in the Wards as the Protectorate liked to make out to the media and if her reaction was anything to go by they weren’t supposed to make any waves by airing the dirty laundry in public. I caught Vista’s eye and made a zipping motion across my mouth, she seemed to sag in relief.

Vista herself was maybe twelve or thirteen years old, probably one of the youngest capes ever and certainly the youngest in Brockton Bay. She wore a green and teal costume that covered her entire body and had a decorative skirt, with a green tinged visor over her eyes that obscured most of the details of her face. Her power had to do with the manipulation of physical dimensions according to the wiki, though I had the sense that the wiki was a little circumspect in its descriptions of Protectorate capes powers and probably more so for Wards. I was actually intensely interested in seeing Vista’s power in action, because I suspected there were similarities between some of my own abilities and hers.
Seated just to her right, Kid Win was probably a year or two older than his younger teammate. His costume was the iconic sort of tinker get up, like something out of those future space soldier video games they imported from Aleph, gold tinted with red accents though it was slightly changed from the most recent pictures on his PHO page. A tinker like him would probably be the best sort of person to go to about my... condition, if I wanted the sort of answers that would probably scar me for life.

Across the table Shadow Stalker was a figure all in black, a cloak somewhat awkwardly cast over the back of the chair and her entire face was obscured by a mask, when every other Ward had their mouths uncovered, in the shape of an imposingly stern woman's face. She might have been my age, or she might have been older, or possibly even younger. Frankly, I just couldn't tell with the way her mask covered her entire face, though even sitting down I could tell she would be slightly shorter than I was. The chairs to her immediate left and right were turned slightly away, as if their former occupants had been ignoring her. I was starting to get the feeling that Amy had undersold the potential issues with Shadow Stalker, though maybe the fact that she didn't know I was a cape myself would head off any unpleasantness in my presence.

“Vista, Shadow Stalker, Kid Win, this is Taylor. She was at the bank, so she wanted to say thank you,” Amy lied, though it was a reasonable enough excuse to introduce me to them. Shadow Stalker tensed at the mention of the incident at the bank.

“Yeah, I mean I didn’t see any of the actual fighting so I don’t think I was ever in any actual danger,” I said before quickly adding, “Until the end anyways. Er, anyways I wanted to say thank you.”

“Oh, well-” Vista started to reply, but Shadow Stalker interrupted her suddenly.

“Taylor, right? I saw your name in the report. You saved our dear Panacea here from the big bad Tattletale, yeah? Remarkably stupid move on your part.” She sounded at once both approving and disapproving my actions, I had no idea what to make of her comment but I was absolutely getting what Amy had warned me about before.

“Er, yeah, though she didn’t even fire so I don’t think you could really describe it as me saving her,” I told her. The black clad heroine simply shrugged, having apparently said everything she cared to on the subject or in the conversation.

“I was about to say: you’re welcome. Of course, we were only doing our job,” Vista said after a moment had passed.

“Well, thanks anyways,” I repeated.

I hadn’t gone into the conversation to thank them for what they’d done, but even if it wouldn’t have really mattered for me personally, I was finding it important anyways. A lot of the media coverage of cape activity on the nightly news tended to focus on the damages caused by this or that fight; oh sure there were the occasional “feel good” stories but for the most part the damage done was what got the attention. Most people still had pretty good feelings about capes in general, but I doubted they got to hear much thanks in person. That went double for the Wards, given the careful media-interaction control the Protectorate performed with them.

“So, how do you know Panacea?” Kid Win asked trying to break the somewhat awkward silence which had ensued.

“Er, we actually met at the bank during the, uh, robbery,” I told them, deciding that the truth was easier than trying to come up with some lie. “She tracked me down to thank and we, uh, discovered
“we had a lot in common.”

Amy jumped in saying, “Besides the parahuman thing, obviously!”

“Yeah, right, uh besides being parahuman,” I confirmed, wondering what had Amy so jumpy on that front. Maybe it was the comment about her having “tracked me down?” Residual guilt? Or maybe it was the reminder of our first meeting and how badly it had gone? I didn’t know, but if it was any of that, well I hadn’t ever exactly told her I had forgiven her for that stuff so it was maybe sort of my fault she was so jumpy. One more thing for me to resolve to fix I guess.

“So, Taylor, which is your family, rich or important?” Shadow Stalker asked suddenly, having apparently gained some momentary interest in the conversation.

“You can’t ask someone that, Shadow Stalker!” Vista admonished her.

“What? It’s not an insult. She wouldn’t be here unless one of her parents was actually worth something.” There were some nasty implications in the way that she said it that I didn’t like, but Amy had warned me she was difficult to deal with so I guess it was just how she normally was.

“I guess neither, really? Amy invited me. I came with her and her family.” I told her, once again going for honesty.

“Oh.” Shadow Stalker responded, as if she’d just figured something out in a way that reminded me strangely of Tattletale. “Well, I’m bored with all of you now, I’m leaving.”

“Oh, we’re not supposed to leave for at least another hour, and you’re alrea-” Kid Win started.

“I’m not leaving, I’m just leaving the table. God, Kid Whiny, get a clue,” she interrupted, before turning away and really leaving.

“Bitch.” Vista said under her breath, though not enough that I couldn’t hear. “Sorry about her, she, uh, doesn’t like these events.”

As excuses went it was pretty thin, but I didn’t particularly want to get anyone in trouble even if the youngest Ward’s last comment seemed to be spot on to me.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told her. “Anyways I guess we should let you guys go, you know, talk to other people.”

“Nah, we’re the youngest capes here. Practically no one ever wants to talk to us except to get their picture taken,” Kid Win said, a broad smile appearing on his face. “Honestly, you’re probably the best company we’ve had at one of these.”

“Er, okay,” I said, then Amy and I took a seat across the from the two Wards.

It was a little awkward at first because none of us had a good idea of what to actually talk about or how to get the conversation started. The things that I was most interested in discussing were the most awkward, because was asking about their powers, finding out how they worked in the hope that maybe it would help me understand my own. In the back of my mind I also thought there was a possibility that it might give me answers about the questions that had been raised by what Nono had shown me a few days ago.

We started off talking a little about school, but the fact was that neither of the Wards could really say much because of the risk of exposing their identities. That topic quickly died out because neither Amy nor I were particularly inclined to actually talk about school either, and it wasn’t that
interesting anyways. Eventually the topic got onto their powers after all, though they made me swear not to talk about it with anyone else.

“If I see any of this on PHO I’ll get Browbeat to squash you!” Vista threatened with a wag of her finger and a smile that told me she was joking, though I had no doubt that the PRT probably would pay me a visit. “He’ll do it too, he’s a sucker for a cute face like mine.”

“I swear,” I told her with a laugh, raising my right hand in a somewhat mocking salute. Even if she had been joking, my words seemed to relieve her.

It turned out that her power was actually the ability to manipulate space rather than spacial dimensions as it had said on her online wiki article, which might have seemed like a distinction without a difference at first but was in reality a very significant difference. For one it had a lot more applications, or maybe just very different applications, as well as implying a number of very interesting things. Even with my limited progress in physics so far, I knew that typically distortions in space were caused by things with a lot of mass and Vista hadn’t said anything that implied she was directly manipulating mass in any way. So the questions was, how did she distort space? I didn’t actually ask, both because she probably wouldn’t know and because it would probably be a little too revealing.

Vista also told us that she couldn’t actually use her in areas where living things were, or at least not as easily. Almost as soon as she said this I doubted it was strictly true, because another thing that my recent studying had taught me was that there was life almost literally everywhere, though most of it was bacterial. What she really meant was that organisms of certain complexity interefered with her ability, but that made almost literally no sense except as an application of the Manton Limit I always heard about. But then, that also meant that something was making a decision as to what qualified as a living creature whenever she used her power. This was a scary enough though on its own, but then I wondered whether it would consider me a living creature.

I shook that thought out of my head.

Once Vista started talking about the new techniques or maneuvers she was testing out with her power, which it turned out I could also model much like I had physics and chemistry problems just off of her verbal descriptions, Kid Win apparently got fed up.

“Ok, that’s enough about you, let’s talk about me!” He said it with such obvious dramatics that we all had to laugh, even though it was clear he really did want the attention.

It was actually a nice feeling, to have people, not exactly desperate for but definitely very interested in my attention. Especially because so far as they knew I was just a normal human being with absolutely no special powers or influence, they clearly didn’t get to talk about this stuff much. That was actually kind of depressing.

Kid Win’s description of his power was actually kind of vague, which made sense in a way because even though Tinkers were always really interesting they didn't seem to so much get a power as just knowledge. Maybe if you really bought into the whole “knowledge is power” platitude it would make sense, still he seemed even less sure of how to describe his power than I might have guessed was normal for a tinker.

He eventually copped to this himself.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love what I do,” he began, “but it’s just that sometimes it’s so frustrating. I’ll be working on something for days and then all of a sudden I just can’t think about it anymore, and I don’t mean that it gets more difficult to work on. No, I mean that I suddenly can’t even
imagine what was a working, vivid, picture in my head just seconds before, and working on
for hours.”

He started to make a motion like he wanted to run his hand through his hair, before he caught
himself and gave a quiet little laugh because his suit covered his head completely.

“My hero is, well Hero,” he admitted. “What Tinker’s isn’t? He had so many awesome gadgets for
every situation. He was always prepared for whatever came at him. I try to be like him, but I can
barely finish ten percent of what I start, and it becomes so aggravating sometimes looking at a pile
of unfinished projects.”

I had a thought.

“Maybe that’s your problem?” I hurried to continue before he misunderstood me. “I mean, Tinkers
all have your own speciality right? Sort of like, a… theme to your power. It just seems like you
need to figure that out, which I’m sure is easier said than done but maybe just think about all the
projects you finished and what connects them and go from there.”

A moment of silence followed, in which Kid Win just seemed to stare at me, though he might be
surfing the web inside his helmet for all I knew. Then suddenly he smacked his forehead, or where
his forehead would be, with a clunk of metal gauntlet on metal helmet.

“I’m an idiot! A moron! I shouldn’t even be allowed to call myself a Tinker! Hahaha!” He was up
out of his chair at this point, pacing behind his chair. Then he stopped suddenly and almost
mechanically started walking at a brisk pace away from the table, Vista suddenly looked panicked.

“Kid!” she called out, which stopped him in his tracks. He seemed to come out of the trance he’d
gotten into and laughed again.

“What’s all the excitement now?” a voice said my side of the table. I turned to find Clockblocker
standing there with his mouth set in a bemused and perplexed expression.

“This beautiful, brilliant, amazing, genius has just fixed everything!” Kid Win declared. “Well, not
everything. There’s still so much work to do, but I have so many new ideas to try and it’s all thanks
to you!”

The last he said pointing to me.

“Er, okay,” I started, not really comfortable with how much credit he was giving me, after all I
hadn’t said anything that wasn’t common knowledge or common sense. “All I said was to basically
throw stuff at the wall and see what sticks to figure out his Tinker speciality.”

Kid Win wasn’t even listening to me anymore, instead he was playing with some sort of display
that had sprouted out of his forearm.

“Don’t bother, when he gets a good idea there’s nothing to it but let him run his course,”
Clockblocker assured me. “Besides, if you even helped a little bit it’s actually really huge. I’m the
one, the only, the effervescent Clockblocker by the way!”

I shook his extended hand, though it was a bit awkward from my sitting position.

“Taylor, I came with Amy, er, Panacea.” I told him, motioning with my head to my left where Amy
was seated.

“Another lovely lady is always welcome,” he responded, a little creepily. Suddenly he reminded
me of Greg.

I checked the time. 9:03:15.

“Er, Amy, do we need to get back to your family?” I asked.

It wasn’t entirely Clockblocker’s fault that I suddenly wanted to leave, though his appearing almost out of nowhere hadn’t exactly helped. I was kind of worried that being away from Amy’s family for the whole night would get her in some kind of trouble. Amy glanced at me and then pulled her phone out of her purse, presumably to check the time.

“Yeah, probably,” she finally answered.

“Well, it was certainly nice to meet you all,” I said, waving to all of them as we got out of our chairs. A chorus of “You too’s” followed in us as we started moving back towards our table.

The going proved very slow, because with everyone out of their chairs and mingling the unoccupied floor space had dropped dramatically. We had to move towards the outside of the room, where there was a larger corridor of space between the tables and the wall.

“Sorry about Clockblocker, he’s nice and harmless but I know he can be a bit much,” Amy said, as we squeezed past a knot of businessmen talking over one another.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m just a bit out of practice with that much social interaction.” I said. “I’m sure he’s fine, I just need a little bre-”

“Taylor, Amelia.” Amy tensed at the use of her full name.

Of course. Who else would show up while I hadn’t been paying attention, but fucking Emma.

“Emma.” I deadpanned.

“This is cute,” she said in a sickly sweet voice that said it was anything but. I had literally no idea what exact she was talking about, but half the time her insults didn’t make sense anyways. “Did you two meet when Taylor went psycho?”

I decided that if I responded like she hadn’t just said something horrible and pretended like it was a normal question she might eventually get frustrated enough and just give up for tonight. Yeah Taylor, because that has worked so well in the past.

“No, we just met a few weeks ago,” I told her.

“Awww, does she know how completely pathetic you are?” Emma asked snidely.

“What the hell is your problem?” Amy asked before I could respond, her expression contorted in confusion at the vitriol Emma was spewing.

“I don’t have a problem. I’m just peachy,” she sneered. “You’re the one dragging around the deadweight where she doesn’t belong. You should get her out of here before people notice and your family becomes even more irrelevant.”

A feeling of dread totally unrelated to Emma’s presence settled into my stomach. Something was wrong.

“Wow, you are seriously one seriously fucked up bitch,” Amy said to Emma, her confusion quickly turning to anger.
I tuned out both of them, and carefully began surveying the room to figure out what had set off all the metaphorical alarm bells that were currently ringing in my head. My height was good for more than just getting things off high shelves here, but I pushed that unimportant thought away. At first everything looked just as it had a moment ago, with knots of people chatting amiably at tables, between them or in corners while servers moved about the room with drinks and after dinner appetizers. Then I saw it.

Every Protectorate cape had suddenly gone stock still all across the room, while people continued to blithely talk to them. Something big was happening.

I was just about to drag Amy away from Emma so we could figure out exactly what was going on, when the loudest sound I had ever heard stopped every conversation right in its tracks. You could have heard a pin drop, if it hadn't been for the overwhelming shrieking cry of the siren.

Then just as suddenly there was only one word being said in the hall at all, though it was being screamed by any number of people at the tops of their lungs.

*Endbringer*.

Chapter End Notes

Even though this is, like I said, the start of what I think is probably the best part of this fic there are bits of this section that I very much don't like; a bit of the Shadow Stalker stuff, and the entire Kid Win exchange.
My vision expanded. I was no longer looking at the inside of the banquet hall the party had been held in, but at the city and its surrounding countryside. In the buildings and on the roads the lights of human activity twinkled much the same as they always did, except the pattern was shifting before my eyes as people on the streets in their cars began rushing towards the nearest Endbringer shelter, or out of the city entirely. In some places traffic came to a halt completely; sometimes because of an accident and sometimes just because people were abandoning their vehicles to get into the shelters. The organized activity of a semi-bustling city was turning into chaos but I had no more time to consider it.

I stretched my senses as far as I could, desperate for any sign of the oncoming threat. As a coastal city the first most obvious fear was Leviathan, all the Endbringers could bring BB to its knees just as easily but the waterborne threat was and always had been at the forefront of the city’s fears. Out in the bay and beyond though there was as yet no sign of it, which probably didn’t mean anything given the speeds it was reported of being able to reach.

Even as I scanned the water I was turning my attention just as much towards the sky. While Leviathan might have been the most obvious threat the Simurgh was probably the one most feared by everyone. The other two brought only death, but the Simurgh was more insidious. All the same I felt more confident in my ability to spot a threat from above than from the other two directions. Luckily tonight had been clear of all but a few wispy clouds, and even more luckily the sky seemed to remain clear of of anything except the distant specks of those satellites the Endbringer had not been interested in annihilating.

My ability to see Behemoth coming was severely limited. I could peer through dirt and rock, but that didn’t seem like it would be a particularly efficient way of searching out the Endbringer. There was too much of a chance for me to miss something with a merely visual scan, but I knew that the dynakinet Endbringer’s movements were typically accompanied by seismic activity from the sheer amount of earth it displaced through its actions. If I could see seismic activity I would have a good chance of knowing if it was coming. Almost as soon as I finished the thought I felt Nono’s presence beside me in my mind, and then I felt something unfurl and then slip into place.

I heard/saw the earth moving, tectonic plates brushing up against each other in their eons long journeys, the rushing heartbeat of deep magma and the playful swirls as it slowly consumed the remnants of some ancient plate far beneath my feet. Brockton Bay was calm, nothing except the insignificant tremors transmitted by far away activity and the tiny shifts from residual stress of the ancient collisions and folding which created the east coast’s mountains, so I cast outwards a little farther, and a little farther, and a little farther still, searching for the threat. After a moment, when I found nothing except a minor disturbance to the northeast I disengaged from that sense and found myself once again standing amongst the panicking rabble of Brockton’s rich and famous.

Nothing. But if there was nothing, then what had the heroes heard? Was this simply a malfunction, or a mistake on someone’s part? In a way it almost didn’t matter if an Endbringer was on the way or not, because people thought one was and just the panic could be damaging enough if it wasn’t handled properly, but that was for the PRT and the Protectorate to worry about. I really did need to know if an Endbringer were coming.

Nono was floating above the crowd off to my right. With Amy and Emma right next to me I couldn’t speak out loud, so I just sort of, thought at her and hoped she understood what I needed her to do. Almost instantly, I was rewarded with a flood of information.
Someone had developed software for tracking and predicting the Endbringer movements. Quick digging revealed it was Armsmaster on the initial development with input from Dragon to really bring it to life, but the crucial fact was that it had started sending out alerts approximately twenty minutes ago that Leviathan had begun moving in the direction of the east coast of North America. Fifteen minutes after the first warning had gone out, the list of potential targets had been narrowed from virtually every city on the east coast down to a handful as it was culled using the past data mapped onto the Endbringer’s current trajectory, and thirty three seconds ago the program had further refined the list of targets down to one: Brockton Bay. At that point either Armsmaster or Dragon had triggered an alert to the Protectorate and the official Endbringer warning had gone out.

The software observed all three Endbringers, though Behemoth required the most complex algorithms in order to determines its position, and before me the program was spread out like a vivisected creature. It was a chimera, crafted from the bodies of two separate entities and made to work in unison. It did its job superbly given its limitations, but I could see how to make it glorious. With time and the right resources I could make this piece of software something which could even lay bare the very purpose of the Endbringers, but unfortunately at this moment time and resources were two things I sorely lacked. I had what I needed, however: a time frame.

1 hour, 3 minutes, 54 seconds until Leviathan made landfall on the shores of Brockton Bay.

Barely moments had passed since the siren had first started blaring; the heroes inside the hall were only just beginning to get the first people out of the building and on their way to the nearest shelter. I wondered how many of the people here would never get to a shelter, or would get to a shelter only to find it full to capacity and then have to scramble to the next and the next. Even though this was the most warning anyone had ever gotten by far, it still wouldn’t be enough to prevent the enormous death toll that was to be exacted from my city.

My city, my home; the place where I’d lived my entire life, where my mother had lived and died, was about to become just another name on a long list of cities practically wiped off the map in a long war against an enemy which even in defeat seemed to triumph. I felt a sudden crushing hopelessness at the realization that we, the world that is, probably were losing by inches against the Endbringers. Every cape or factory or city lost to an attack was one less the next time around and they never seemed to show any signs of damage, while at every turn we could only keep to their schedule. Heroes, villains, all of us.

“No, remember what you are, Taylor,” Nono said firmly. “Remember who you are.”

She was right. I’d named myself a hero; well what was more fucking heroic than fighting a hopeless battle against an implacable foe to save countless lives? This was my chance to make a difference, to make my mother proud and prove Emma wrong all in an instant.

I opened my eyes to see Emma standing frozen in shock, her skin pale as ice and her entire body rigid. I couldn’t see my tormentor anymore, the girl I’d hated almost to the point of physical violence, or even my former best friend. Instead all I saw was a lost, scared little girl, with no idea of how to face the enormity of the danger coming down on us all. Someone both too emotionally and physically fragile to handle what was happening, just another person to protect.

“Amy,” I said as I turned to her, and saw her mind beginning to move into the now familiar mind set of Panacea. “Don’t ask me how I know, but there’s time - not much, but enough. Take Emma,
find her family and get them moving to a shelter, then find your family and figure out where you need to go.”

I couldn’t forget what Emma had done to me, or even forgive, but I couldn’t be the sort of person who just left her standing there... but at the same time, I certainly didn’t want to be around her anymore. Plus Amy, as Panacea, wouldn’t be as much use on the front lines and would in fact be incredibly important hidden away somewhere where she could patch people up. That meant she, with all the resources her family had, could afford to be a little slower in getting to wherever it was the person in charge was.

Meanwhile, I needed to scrounge up some sort of costume. I had actually considered stashing it in Amy’s car, but with the number of capes attending the party I figured my presence would have been redundant. That was a decision I was now regretting, and I also needed to reach the person in charge and find out where they needed me.

Amy nodded and pushed Emma into a stilted, unconscious sort of motion. I took a couple of steps away before I turned back, and caught Amy turning back herself.

“Taylor, good luck,” she said, before I could even open my mouth.

I nodded before responding, “Same to you.”

To make my way through the crowd I had to push between a number of guests, which earned me a few exceptionally dirty looks but also gave me the opportunity to snatch a long white scarf from off the shoulder of a man loudly and shamelessly proclaiming his importance as an aide to the Mayor as if it would somehow transport him to the head of the crowd.

After just a few feet it got to the point that the only way for me to go forward at more than a slow crawl would be to push hard enough that I suspected I would start a panic. Not something I wanted to do, but at the same time I needed to get out of here as quickly as possible, which meant I needed another option. As uniformed PRT officers started to take charge of guiding everyone out of the hall I noticed the capes breaking off and moving back inside, so I guessed they had to have their own exit. Some of them could fly, and undoubtedly some of those could carry others, but that couldn’t account for everyone. I pushed my way back out of the crowd, ignoring the renewed series of dirty looks I received.

Once I was free of the crush of people I looked around to find where the capes had gone and saw several clustered around one of the balconies, doors flung open as something approached in the distance. Some sort of transport that they were unlikely to allow me to board, in case that invited others to start demand they be let on too. Asking any of the New Wave members to give me a lift presented the same problem, so it was looking like I would have to wait in the crowd for-

Wait, why did I need anyone to fly me? Sure it would make things easier, because they could also presumably just take me straight to where I needed to go, but I was freaking invulnerable. All I needed to do was jump off a balcony, not crush someone to death on the way down, and make sure no one saw my face. I had the scarf I’d nabbed for the last and I would just be careful to take care of the second as I fell. Thankfully, there were several balconies around the hall, one of which was at almost the opposite end from where the other capes were congregating.

As I dashed over I wrapped the scarf around my face, leaving enough of a gap so I could see and making a quick knot to stop it from slipping too much. I all but crashed through the door, slamming it closed behind me. As I looked over the ledge and spotted a smaller building almost directly opposite I took a deep breath, stepped back until my spine was against the glass of the door, and then got a running start and leapt. I sailed for a second or two before I began dropping
precipitously. The wind snatched at my dress, stretching it tightly against my body while pulling insistently at the ends of the scarf wrapped around my head.


I landed with an audible crunch and a scattering of debris from the tarred gravel roof, but no significant damage to the building. As I turned back towards the Forsberg Gallery, the aircraft which had been coming to pick up the heroes swung around the corner and began cutting a path right over me. It was a sharp nosed craft with a bulbous body and turbines set in the wings, and looked like it had come straight from the future without stopping to get a coat of paint. When it buzzed past overhead I did a one hundred eighty degree turn and started running after it, thankful that I had chosen to wear flats tonight instead of heels as I could only just manage to walk in those there was no way I could have run in them.

The end of the roof forced me to jump down onto the street below. I landed in motion, in front of an older couple from the party who were running together, but I ignored their startled squawks and kept my eye on the jump-jet as well as I could. It was already picking up significant speed and pulling ahead, so I threw all caution to the wind and began to run all out. A discarded dark blue hoodie lay on the sidewalk just ahead of me, I scooped it up as I passed and managed to get it on one arm at a time. Once I had it zipped up I opened the clutch purse I’d been holding onto for dear life and dropped everything in it but the phone on the ground behind me. In a second I was dialing Dad, who picked up immediately.

“Dad-” I began saying.

“Taylor-” he said at the same moment.

“Get to a shelter Dad, as soon as you can,” I told him.

“Already on my way. Are you… you’re going to fight aren’t you?” he asked, his voice choked. “Of course you are, you’re your mother’s daughter after all. Just, be safe okay? I love you and I’m proud of you, kiddo.”

This was why I was fighting, for Dad and for all the other dads out there plus the mothers and the sons and the daughters. To make sure they all survived tonight.

“I love you too Dad,” I whispered. “I’ll come back, I promise.”

The phone went into the pocket of my acquired sweatshirt once I’d hung up, and it slapped against my stomach as I ran after the still disappearing aircraft. Even my top speed, which at close to seventy kilometers per hour put even the fastest sprinter on record to shame, was still well below what it could attain. My progress as I entered the true center of the city and began moving towards the waterfront in the wake of my quarry was unimpeded; as the traffic situation had grown increasingly congested people had abandoned their vehicles to proceed on foot. Now I dodged between cooling cars or over the top of them when some were too closely packed together.

I had lost sight of the jump-jet moments before, but with my second sight I watched it alight gently on top of the local PRT headquarters. I had almost been afraid they would head for the Protectorate base in the bay, but with Leviathan incoming it was almost certainly more of a liability out on the water. Seven figures climbed out of the belly of the plane and walked briskly towards a door being held open by a man in a PRT uniform, while the machine itself turned and rose again into the air as soon as the last person had exited. Down below in the courtyard a single, massive four-legged machine with the unmistakable feel of Dragon’s creations stood.
When I reached the building myself in just a couple of minutes, because of my current “costume” I suspected that I would have to convince whoever was there that I was an actual honest to god cape and not someone who would just get in the way and then get killed. Man, I really needed money to get myself a proper costume so that I started looking the part of a hero, this thrift store look wouldn’t cut it after this I was guessing.

Fortune was apparently on my side as Glory Girl dropped to the ground in front of the entrance just before I reached it, Shielder and Laserdream dropping in behind her. With her here I had someone who could vouch for my identity, if she recognized me.

“Glory Girl!” I called out as I approached.

She looked towards me, her face a grim determined mask mirrored by her cousins, she said, “T-… Princess?”

What? She knew my identity? Then I looked down at how I was dressed. Of course she did, I was still wearing the dress from the party. Of course she could have even the first time I’d given away a clue seeing as I’d talked to her both in costume and as my civilian self though that only earlier tonight but it wouldn’t have even taken that. I’d used Amy to guilt her family into action against Lung, so it wasn’t so far fetched that she would put the pieces together with Amy’s sudden new friend and come to all the right conclusions.

We stared at each for a moment before I broke the silence, asking, “Don’t tell anyone, please.”

“New Wave doesn’t out other capes, just ourselves,” she responded wryly.

I almost sagged in relief.

Laserdream and shielder both looked at each other with befuddled looks on their faces.

“Uh, what?” That came from Shielder.

“Nothing,” Glory Girl responded, and then motioned towards the building as rain began to fall from the sky. “Let’s get inside with the others, I don’t want to miss anything important.”

Laserdream shrugged at a questioning look from her brother and then we all followed her inside. I was just reaching the door when a thunderous crack drew my attention to the parking lot, where a crowd of capes had appeared. There at their head was Alexandria in all her imposing glory; the big guns were arriving. I held the door for a moment until the first one the new arrivals could take it and then went into the lobby, trying my best not to consider too closely that I was about to be fighting alongside one of my childhood heroes. Another softer crack came a moment later, muffled by the walls between me and the parking lot.

Inside, the scene that greeted me was daunting to say the least. The local Protectorate capes were here in full force with the Wards in tow, plus of course New Wave, but there were also a number of villains in attendance. All but three of the Empire 88’s capes were standing off in one corner, while two of the four Undersiders sat within arm’s reach of the Travelers. In fact the only major local forces, at least in terms of number of capes, missing were the Merchants, Faultline’s crew, and the Azn Bad Boys. Through the windows at the far end of the lobby I could see a serious storm rapidly brewing over the bay, while the rain quickly seemed to be taking a turn for torrential.

Someone bumped into me in the hustle and bustle of the crowd and a large, dusky gray hand
connected to the shirtless physique of a metal skinned boy who could best be described as herculean steadied me. He mumbled an apology and shot me a slight smile before rejoining the group he had come in with. In a matter of minutes the number of capes in Brockton Bay had probably nearly tripled, with the sudden influx of out of towners. There were dozens of capes that I recognized, some by name and some only by appearance, but I still felt like the outsider. It was made all the worse because I was acutely aware that if I talked to any of the local capes, I risked them recognizing me from the party.

Discarding my nervousness I approached a group of younger capes, Wards from one of the other cities I suspected; LA, New York or Chicago maybe, and introduced myself.

“Princess,” I said, holding my hand out to the metallic boy who’d bumped into me.

He hesitated for a moment before extending his own hand, and I felt a curious tingle. “Weld, Boston Wards.”


When he pulled his hand away there was an ever so slight tug but it was over so fast I wasn’t sure it had happened until I saw him hesitate again and glance down at his own hand, before he seemed to dismiss it and turn partially towards his teammates.

“This is Hunch,” he said, motioning to a hunchbacked boy in a green and black costume. “Our precognitive, and don’t let him tell you different.”

“‘Lo,” said the boy in question with a jaunty wave of his hand.

“Skillshot is the one with the bow,” he continued, pointing to an older girl in leathers with green accents and curving patterns in gold who only grunted and gave me a nod in recognition. “And finally here are Smash ‘n Grab. Not their real names, but I’ve given up trying instill proper discipline in them.”

The two kids in question grinned. I don’t think I could have found two more physically different people if I’d tried; the boy was tall, pale skinned, and blonde haired judging by the wisps of hair that peeked out of his helmet, while the girl was short, almost squat, but broad in a way that spoke of muscle and not fat, whose skin was closer to the color of coal. She wore a deep purple armored body suit crisscrossed with red lines, while the boy wore a blue suit with a stylized fist on his chest and shoulders. We were prevented from further conversation by Legend clearing his throat at the front of the room.

“We owe Armsmaster and Dragon thanks for the early warning. Thanks to them we’ve had more time than ever before to prepare, time enough to gather all of you here and brief you somewhat instead of jumping right into the fray as we arrive. Hopefully, with this advantage, some teamwork, and maybe a little luck, we can make today one of the better days.” Legend’s voice carried authority as he spoke, there wasn’t a single side conversation going on even among the villains. Maybe that was just the seriousness of the circumstances though.

31 minutes 7 seconds.

“We owe Armsmaster and Dragon thanks for the early warning. Thanks to them we’ve had more time than ever before to prepare, time enough to gather all of you here and brief you somewhat instead of jumping right into the fray as we arrive. Hopefully, with this advantage, some teamwork, and maybe a little luck, we can make today one of the better days.” Legend’s voice carried authority as he spoke, there wasn’t a single side conversation going on even among the villains. Maybe that was just the seriousness of the circumstances though.

31 minutes 7 seconds.

“But even a good day doesn’t mean we won’t take losses. Past experience tells us a ‘good day’ would still mean that a fourth out of everyone in this room will likely be dead by tomorrow morning. I’m telling you all this because you deserve to know, because too frequently too many good men and women go into these fights not knowing the odds.” He paused, considering his next
words. “More than any information on his actual capabilities or organizing formations and battle plans, what I want you all to take away from this is the warning not to underestimate Leviathan. Being cautious and alert might make the difference between life and death for all of you, heroes and villains.”

Then he began explaining the particular dangers of the Endbringer, pointing out on a picture displayed behind him from one of the many videos of previous attacks floating around, emphasizing the claws that tipped each limb and the importance of keeping a clear sense of where its tail was. Then he began explaining Leviathan’s water echo, how it allowed the creature to move with astounding speed and how its manipulation of the water on the battlefield was as dangerous as any physical part of it.

“I spoke of Leviathan as a hydrokinetic on a personal level, but the primary danger is actually his hydrokinesis on the macro level. There are perhaps no better examples of this danger than the days on which he won.”

A different set of images replaced Leviathan, this time a map, an old one. “Newfoundland. May ninth, two-thousand five. Half a million people dead. The Canadian island, just... gone after the land supporting it cracked under the immense pressures he exerted on it from beneath the water level.”

Another, even older image, replaced the map. “Kyushu,” Legend started saying, before he trailed off with a stunned expression. The pause seemed to stretch for seconds and people began looking about for the reason for his sudden stillness. The rising murmur which had been growing since the Protectorate’s leader paused simply vanished into an eerie silence broken only by the pounding of the rain outside.

I turned around to search out the cause and found myself facing Lung, his bare, tattooed torso glistening with water from the rain. Behind him stood Oni Lee on his right and Bakuda to his left, the Tinker looking distinctly unhappy to be here. Lung walked straight towards me, and the crowd parted to give him space.

“Do not die,” he said simply. “I require a rematch.”

He held my gaze for a moment, then scowled at the surrounding cape and walked back to stand behind the crowd, his two lackeys followed.

“As I was saying-” Legend began, attempting to recapture everyone’s attention only to once again pause except that this time Armsmaster was turning towards him while Alexandria marched in from off to the side to join them. Then Eidolon was in the mix along with Chevalier and Myrrdin. Something had clearly happened, maybe Leviathan had changed course, or Scion was on his way? Legend took a moment to signal one of the out of town Wards before diving back into the conversation. The Wards then began handing out loops of stretchy material with a glossy black surface and two buttons, as one of her team mates showed the first hero how to put it on the information seemed to spread contagiously.

I thought of Nono and there she was, a worried expression etched onto her face. “The Simurgh has broken orbit and is falling, fast towards China,” she told me. “Somewhere in the Sichuan province, the Qionglai mountains I think. Estimated to arrive in 26 minutes.”

I had no doubt she was right as she said it, but two Endbringer attacks at the same time? They had never even attacked the same place twice, though no one expected that to last, much less simultaneously at two locations.
“What are they saying,” I muttered, looking at the cluster of the Protectorate’s top capes. Nonon turned to look at them too, and suddenly I could hear them as clear as if I was standing between them.

“...if they would just ask.” There was Legend, loud and clear in my ear, almost as if he were standing right by it.

“You know the C.U.I. won’t,” Alexandria responded, “and a unilateral decision on our part would only lead to us having to watch our back while we fought her.”

“The Simurgh is not our concern at this time. If the Yangban will not request our assistance we must focus all our attention on this location. After this battle we may consider what this means for the future.” Armスマスター’s voice cut through the argument and a chorus of agreements followed.

A Ward I didn’t know handed me an armband, which I took mechanically but didn’t put on. Legend turned back towards the crowd and the others disperse back towards their previous positions.

“Sorry for the interruption, it is nothing to be concerned about. You will all be briefed after the fight.” Clearly he didn’t want to cause a panic by revealing that the Simurgh was also currently attacking and I agree with him. “Many of you maybe be aware that Brockton Bay is what is know as a soft target, which for those of you unaware simply means that because of the aquifer beneath the city time is a critical factor as the longer he has the greater the damage. For this reason it is imperative that we drive off Leviathan as quickly as possible so that we do not lose this city too. To that end, our first priority is to keep him in sight at all times and to restrict his movements as much as possible. Our second priority will be to find ways to hurt him; if you cannot or your attacks are deflected concentrate on helping those who can hurt him. Now, I’ll let Armスマスター explain what the Wards have been handing out for the past few minutes.

17 minutes 0 seconds.

“The armbands that many of you now have on are Dragon’s design,” the local Protectorate leader began. “The screen at the top notes your own position as well as Leviathan’s last reported location on a grid. Make use of this. Next you will notice two buttons; the one on the left lets you send a message to everyone else wearing an armband; all such messages are filtered by priority. If it is imperative that you get a message out immediately, simply speak the words “Hard Override” before your message. Abusing this feature will lose you the ability to send any messages at all.”

While Armスマスター explained the armband I slid it over my hand and up my arm until it fit snugly just below my shoulder, there was a prickling sensation for a second or two after I got it in place. I focused my attention back onto the Tinker up front.


“The second button sends out a ping, in case of emergency if you are in immediate danger or hurt. Use it only for emergencies, if it is not an emergency simply hold down both buttons and speak your request and the armbands will prioritize your needs relative to all current requests. In the event you are badly injured or rendered unconscious the Armband will automatically ping your location.”

Legend took center stage again, and raised one hand to get everyone’s attention. “Any capes who have faced an Endbringer before, step forward!”
A significant portion of the crowd stepped forward into the space between the main assembly and
where Legend stood.

“Follow Protectorate orders first! But pay attention to those that stand before you, they have
valuable experience. In the absence of official instruction listen to them! No, we will be splitting
into-” Legend paused, again.

This time the others reacted immediately, and were converging on him barely a second later. The
rest of the room stood in stunned silence, unsure what to do or say in the face of another
interruption. I had no idea what they thought was going on, but there was a sinking feeling in the
pit of my own stomach that I turned to Nono to confirm.

“Seismic activity near Montreal. Behemoth is on the move, less than thirteen minutes for arrival.”
Her voice was grim, so different from her usual boisterous personality, but then today had gone
from merely very bad to absolutely earth shatteringly catastrophic, and the fight had even started
yet.

Alexandria broke from the huddled cluster of the top Protectorate heroes. “Strider! Go to the
parking lot, in two minutes go to Montreal! LA Protectorate and Wards, you’re with him!” She
paused and surveyed the room while a huge group of capes filed out of the room, many looking
stupefied by the turn of events. “Anyone else who feels their powers would be more effective
against Behemoth, go now!”

There was perhaps two heartbeats of stunned silence, in which no one did or said anything except
listen to the rain continue to pound down outside. Then capes all over the room began to turn and
rush out the doors into the storm, to face perhaps the most lethal of the Endbringers. Maybe half of
all the ones that had originally come were simply gone, and then so was Eidolon. The rest of us
simply stood, rooted in place by the enormity of what was happening and the magnitude of the
task in front of us.

“We are splitting into groups based on capabilities! If you can take a hit from Leviathan and get
back up, or create expendable combatants, follow Alexandria!” Legend shouted, drawing
everyone’s attention back to the moment and picking up where he’d left off. That was me.

I tuned out the rest of the assignments and made my way over to the iconic heroine. The group was
growing, the only cape I knew was Lung; he grinned at me and I noticed he didn’t have an
armband. Likely it wouldn’t stay on him when he transformed, and besides he would likely be
getting big enough to be a landmark all on his own. That was when I noticed the prompt on
my own armband for a name. I spoke into it, “Princess.”

Network Mapped. Creating Secondary Access Rights, Designated User: Hebert, Taylor, Sole Local
Imperial Terran Naval Authority Designate.

Then I confirmed that, yes that was my name and when I looked up Alexandria was standing in
front, looking at me. Not me specifically, but at all of us in her group.

“We have two jobs today. Keep that monster out away from the more vulnerable targets and hit
him as hard as you can, as often as you can.” It was a strange sensation to be standing there in front
of this woman, who had always been someone I idolized. “Who here has mobility powers?”

A man cape dressed in a white costume with dark blue accents and a woman with wings attached to
her arms, neither of whom I recognized, raised their hands. “All right, you two are with me. We’ll
go in first and hit him hard. The rest of you; if you can create expendable assets stay back with the
long range group or as close to them as you can, and send your creations in, otherwise if you can
take a hit and hit back but have to rely on your own power to move stand between us,” she said, pointing to herself and the other two capes who’d indicated they had mobility powers, “and the more vulnerable groups. If Leviathan breaks past us, it’s your job to intercept him and hold him in place until the others are safe. Does everyone know what to do?”

A chorus of nods and yeses came from all around.

2 minutes 43 seconds.
The storm outside was renewed in its ferocity, suddenly and every one of the reinforced bullet resistant windows shuddered so violently I was almost afraid they would shake themselves loose. Everyone took this as a signal that it was time to end the briefing. Within seconds every single cape in the lobby was in motion, following our armbands directions. While most capes received instruction on where positions needed to be filled, those with Mover powers were directed to groups or individuals who needed rapid transport to reach theirs. With only a little over an hour since the alert it was impressive how much planning had apparently been done, though now it occurred to me that if I were in charge of the Protectorate, I would maintain a number of such plans just in case the opportunity to implement one against an Endbringer surfaced.

Even so, those plans couldn’t have been very detailed; more a collection of general strategies, general position information based on broad categories of powers and capabilities than any real battle plans. Even making use of pre-determined would require collecting and organizing data on as many parahumans as possible all across the world, and then being able to draw on that information on the fly, in order to slot individual capes where they were needed. That was where Dragon had to come in with her armbands. Besides her now almost iconic suits, complex smart software systems were what the Tinker was known for best - but that also hinted at a deep problem for chances of defeating the threat, long term. All large scale strategies involving parahumans were flawed, deeply, because they had to rely on individuals with unique powers who could be killed or incapacitated and then their power could no longer be used.

Out beyond the bay a bulge of seawater grew by the second, while water almost flowed in the streets already from the torrential downpour of rain being dumped on the city. The entire scene was almost biblical, and I wondered briefly if perhaps the Endbringers were in fact something out of more ancient times, more akin to forces of nature than living things. I dismissed the thought, even if it were true it didn’t change our responsibility as capes. Besides, it was a simpler explanation that whoever or whatever had created the Endbringers had designed them to prey on exactly those fears.

As I ran, my feet and the feet of those running around me sent sprays of water shooting up around our knees. We had gone perhaps a couple of blocks when my armband indicated I should stop, while others continued on or broke off down the street just as they had been. Lung stayed with me, and I wondered for a moment what other people thought was going on after he’d singled me out earlier. On the buildings surrounding our position I could see the silhouettes of more capes arriving, some being dropped off by flyers or teleporters.

Through my enhanced senses I could see a formation beginning to take shape, a rough crescent centered on where Leviathan was predicted to make landfall. The Endbringer hadn’t deviated from its path in the last fifteen minutes so it seemed that the plan would at least succeed in its initial stage, but it wouldn’t come together fast enough. Maybe ten percent of the crescent was filled out, while the initial signs of the tidal wave which would arrive well before the creature itself were already clearly discernible and the software I was tapped into was estimating no more than seventy percent would be in place before it arrived.

How many capes would survive the impact of the water? Not enough, but then it was becoming clear there probably hadn’t been enough even at the start, and what would the loss of even more do to all the neat little plans? The real problem was that numbers only did so much good, more bodies only helped to a point against the Endbringers before becoming simply more casualties. What we needed was greater numbers of certain kinds of powers. Instead what we had was an essentially
random assortment of powers based on whoever had decided to, or been able to, show up to this particular fight. Today would not be a good day.

“Let others worry over the city,” Lung growled from beside me as he stared out at the water, scales already working their way up through his skin. “Concern yourself only with survival, girl. When that beast wades back beneath the waves to wherever it broods, when this is all over we shall make the ruins of this miserable city our arena and see who is the master after all.”

“Shut up,” I snapped. I wanted nothing more than to refute his fatalistic prediction of the future of the city, to tell the man who stood beside me that I would never give him his rematch much less in the ruins of Brockton Bay, but I couldn’t see how he was wrong. As things stood the city would fall, there simply wasn’t enough firepower available unless someone had been hiding their full strength.

Of course, I was doing exactly that in a way, except that it wasn’t by choice.

“Nono,” I whispered carefully, to ensure that Lung didn’t overhear. “I’m need more firepower… like, right now.”

Before she could respond, a voice came from the armband. “Tidal wave approaching, proceed to this location,” it said, indicating a space only a little bit farther down the road where several other capes were gathering. “Forcefield support in twenty seconds.” I glanced at Lung, who’d closed his eyes and seemed to be meditating, I swear I saw him grow ever so slightly before my eyes.

“Tidal wave!” I screamed at him as I turned to run towards the group.

I could see various capes moving about on the roofs above us and in the air, presumably capes with powers which allowed them to create forcefields. The distant figure of Shielder from New Wave angled towards us, dropping low to pick up speed, but I could already see the wave approaching out on the bay. He would only barely make it in time to protect our group.

As I ran, Nono appeared besides me. “Nono is working as fast as she can,” she said, her voice apologetic. “Twenty more minutes! Nono can get you a little more power! Nono is sorry, but anymore and Nono risks killing you!”

“I don’t care, just save this city!” I whispered harshly back at her, but Nono didn’t respond.

Frustrated, I let out a growl at her silence. My life had never been bad enough that I’d actually considered suicide, but if that was the price to pay to destroy Leviathan, to save this city and all the lives those who would suffer today, well... I counted that a cheap bargain, after all it was her body too and she could take up the fight afterward! Unfortunately, it wasn’t one I could make on my own, so the situation would stay as it was until she changed it.

Lung and I finally reached the group of capes, none of whom I recognized, and we all gathered together as tightly as we could even though I could already feel heat coming off of the villain like an old campfire. Water was rushing up the street in a solid wall, crashing into buildings, sweeping up abandoned cars and shattering wooden light posts in its path. Shielder dropped into our formation just an instant before the water struck, and a pale blue bubble snapped into being around us. A cascade of water washed over us, settling around my ankles but rising no higher. It was like being underwater in some post-apocalyptic city from a movie, with pieces of debris rushing by as the wave surged and broke over our heads. A splinter of wood larger than my arm slammed into the bubble and bounced off, then a couple of tires, and countless shards of glass before the water began to flow in the opposite direction. The same debris, or at least similar wreckage crashed into
the rear of the bubble and stuck, crushed against its surface by the strength of the current as the water level dropped rapidly. In just a moment the water had largely retreated, leaving a garbage strewn street before us with miniature rivers of runoff from the pouring rain leading to an immense puddle of standing water where the paving in the road dipped.


Shielder dropped his forcefield and let the debris pinned against it fall, then we got our first glimpse of Leviathan. From our position in the left hand arc of the crescent it was in profile, somewhat obscured by the falling rain, just over nine meters tall from head to toe in its upright position. The Endbringer’s proportions were all wrong, limbs too long, torso too broad and short, and a tail longer than its main body combined with the way that it moved made it seem almost constantly on the verge of falling over. More water poured down the surfaces of its body as it moved, head slashing left, right, up, down, and all over. It had an odd arrangement of eyes, one of the right and three on the left set into slits in the skin.

I focused on the monster before us, trying to discern a weak point or vulnerability in the supposedly super strong exterior. My eyes adjusted subtly, some mechanism within switching on and causing my vision to swim for a second before settling to normal. Except it wasn’t normal, though I couldn’t explain exactly how it was different what I saw told me that whatever Leviathan was composed of was far from normal material. Its outer layer was a sort of composite which mimicked many of the properties of aircraft aluminum but remained flexible enough at room temperatures that it could move without real issue. Beyond that outer layer I couldn’t make out anything about the actual composition of the Endbringer’s body, besides basic information about the density of the material which increased steadily the further “in” it went while retaining the flexibility. It went a lot higher than it should.

“Material density approaches unsustainable levels,” Nono’s voice whispered in my ear, tight and worried. “Space folding in use to prevent layered topology from collapsing, outer layer materials display similar properties to those that compose Stellar Propagating Life Forms.”

I stared at her, not quite understanding what she was saying at first.

“Profile and physical characteristics do not match with those of Stellar Propagating Life Forms,” she added in what seemed to be relief. “Not Space Monsters then, Nono is glad.”

Once again Nono was gone without really giving me the chance to properly respond, though this time at least I sort of understood the reference to “Space Monsters.” From what she’d shown me days ago I remember that these Space Monsters had been the threat she was built to fight against, and some part of their life cycle involved spending time inside a star. They also tended to show up in the millions at least, and had seemed bent on humanity’s total destruction so, yeah, I could agree that that was good. The Endbringers were plenty bad enough, there was simply no way the world could have dealt with a threat on that scale. I switched to my larger view and focused on where the main congregation of capes was, facing off directly opposite Leviathan.

A great spray of water went up all along the twisted remains of the boardwalk as more surging waves crashed into where once Brockton Bay’s high end shopping district had been. With the spraying water, the torrential rain, and the low level of light it would have normally been difficult to make out details from this distance but, well… my powers were kind of bullshit so I could clearly see the Alexandria squaring off against Leviathan. Each stood silent and still for a moment, as if waiting for some signal and then just as suddenly as everything else had been happening today they were each careening towards each other. Alexandria struck first, her blow almost seeming to
lift the Endbringer off its feet for a brief instant before the water echo which trailed it caught up
and forced the capes following her wake to break off.

The heroine herself was thrown back, though Alexandria simply charged back in; slipping
underneath the swing of Leviathan’s scythe like claws to spear up into its exposed neck, throwing it
off balance. Due to the short range it wasn’t enough to put the monster totally down, so the other
two flying capes from before darted in and landed their own blows, the man opened his mouth let
loose a series of sonic booms which resounded off the Endbringer’s flesh while the winged woman
simply slammed into it. Leviathan’s tail lashed out as she rebounded off and sent her careening into
a nearby building even as the Endbringer fell backwards to the pavement, one arm whipping out to
catch Alexandria and drag her down.

“The Iron Falcon down, CD-7,” The armband announced.

All manner of laser blasts, projectiles, and whatever else was available pounded away at it in an
attempt to get it to release the heroine before Legend swooped in and unleashed a large beam
which left part of Leviathan glowing with heat. In dark of the night the momentary light show had
been all the more impressive, though it was clear that it hadn’t had much effect. Small pockmarks
dotted the Leviathan’s outer layer but so far no major damage seemed to have been done, and then
the Endbringer decided to really respond. The fury of the impacting waves redoubled again,
sending more spray shooting into the sky and washing the first two blocks in from the old
boardwalk with water, and the overflowing storm drains, sewers and water mains suddenly burst
with immense pressure. Manhole covers, rain grates, chunks of pavement and shards of shattered
metal pipes were flung into the air, striking some of the unlucky defenders and turning them into
so much human wreckage when their powers did not give them the durability to survive, and
sending everyone else for cover.

Huge geysers of water cut off the line of sight to Leviathan, while also flooding the streets almost
immediately and making it more difficult for the capes nearby to get about. The Endbringer itself
used the chaos to right itself and charge away from the area down an intersection. Alexandria shot
out of the water, wavered drunkenly in the air and then collided with the side of a building before
slumping down weakly to the soaked ground as Legend flew over to check on her.

Immediately Purity, Lady Photon and Laserdream were there confronting the beast and hammering
away at it with another brilliant display that lit up the night. Leviathan was staggered but
unfortunately the attack did nothing to stop its afterimage. All three Blasters were only saved by
Narwhal’s timely intervention, as the Guild heroine placed a faceted, crystalline forcefield between
them and the onrushing water and gave them enough time to dart away before the water crashed
around the edges. She simultaneously dropped a dozen more just like the first, like huge spinning
sawblades. The forcefields glittered like twinkling stars and bit deep into the Leviathan’s flesh
where they struck joints or more flexible parts of its limbs but glanced off harder areas. All but
two of those disappeared into nothingness, though one neatly bisected a car and another opened up
a huge rent in a nearby building before they could be dispelled. The two she hadn’t done away with
shifted to crowd Leviathan and hamper its movement.

Purity swooped back in and unleashed a crushing beam of light on the Endbringer, once again
sending it stumbling for a few seconds before it managed to compensate, but by then Dragon’s suit
and Miss Militia had joined the fray. Each of the women positioned themselves on opposite sides
from Leviathan at slight angles so that their attacks wouldn’t risk hitting each other, then they
began firing. Dragon unleashed a barrage of missiles while Miss Militia stood and waited for
another woman kneeling beside her. It took me a second to recognize her as Bakuda, because she
was thoroughly drenched and her costume was covered in filth.
Bakuda was rummaging in a stuffed duffel bag, sometimes tossing aside bombs ranging from smaller than my fist to larger than my head, until finally she seemed to find what she was looking for and began to make some sort of modification or correction to the piece of hardware. Meanwhile Miss Militia took a couple of the discarded midsized tinker devices, loaded them into her oddly proportioned weapon, and fired them off one after the other. The first exploded into acid which fell sizzling onto Leviathan’s flesh, and seemed to have little effect as it swung much of its bulk out of the way in its efforts to dodge Dragon’s swarming missiles. Next there was an explosion of a curious white goop mixed in with long fuzzy fibers mixed in which hardened in a shiny cake on the Endbringer’s limbs before simply cracking and falling off. The last Tinker bomb which Miss Militia fired fell lazily through the air until it was right in front of Leviathan, where it simply stopped and unleashed white hot flame right into its face for two seconds before promptly sparking and crashing to the pavement below.

This seemed to signal some change in tactics, because Dragon ceased her missile salvos, planted her suit’s feet wide apart and began to extend a long barrel while Miss Militia changed her weapon into a rocket launcher and started up her own barrage. After a few seconds the transformation seemed complete and the roles switched back, Brockton Bay’s second in command ceased her firing while the world famous Tinker started up again. Dragon shot four times in quick succession and each round of what appeared to be her railgun struck true with a deafening boom that shook the windows all around the city. After that she appeared to either need time to recharge the weapon or be out of rounds for it, but Bakuda was already handing the device she’d been working on off to Miss Militia, who quickly retransformed her weapon and fired the ordinance at Leviathan. The customized bomb impacted on its shoulder and made a visible shockwave that produced no light but turned a large chunk of the outer layer black. After a second the black chunk simply crumbled away and the Tinker began to laugh.

“Tidal wave incoming, fifteen seconds,” announced my armband.

As Lady Photon and Laserdream grabbed Miss Militia and Bakuda to evacuate them from the four story building they were currently occupying, the tinker continued that piercing maniacal laugh, like something out of a bad movie. Narhwal perched atop one of her crystalline shards of shield while Purity support it from the bottom and carried them both away. Dragon tried to jet up and away from Leviathan but just before she was out of reach the Endbringer lunged forward with that same surprising speed it had before and swiped her out of the air, its claws catching on a plate of armor and tearing it straight off while sending her slamming back into the street. Dragon recovered and shot into the sky on a powerful jet turbine and I was so absorbed by the whole proceedings that I barely noticed Shielder dropping in again to erect his cerulean shield.

This wave was even taller than the one before, which didn’t strike me as a good sign at all. While the water swept in and out of the city, Leviathan slipped beneath the surf and disappeared from the armband plot. When the water had mostly receded again and Shielder dropped his bubble, I found the Endbringer just a couple blocks from where he had been in an area where there were no capes currently to spot it, heading straight for a group of Tinkers working on some sort of device. I dutifully used the armband to spread the word of Leviathan’s location but just as I was gratified to see its icon appear on the map a dozen more popped up as well. A quick look across the city explained it; people were spotting the water echo the creature created and which it could apparently sustain at longer distances than anyone had ever suspected. It didn’t truly look like the Endbringer itself but they had always been tied directly with the immediate presence of its creator and that change was now biting us all in our collective asses. How could I pass the message that all the others besides the one I’d indicated were decoys and have it believed?

Maybe I didn’t need to pass the message at all. It occurred to me that Nono had only a little while ago accessed the software which had tracked Leviathan to Brockton Bay and presumably also done the same to figure what had been happening during the briefing, so why couldn’t she do the same now? Actually, if Nono could do it there wasn’t any good reason I could think of that I couldn’t do it myself. I grinned at that thought.

If I could access whatever software fed into all the armbands I could feed them all the information I had directly. Instead of relying on the individual capes to manually report on Leviathan’s position or their own conditions I could bypass all of that and produce a far superior system. What was more, if I could do that then I wouldn’t need to keep my position as an observer, seeing as I could warn whoever was in danger long before the Leviathan actually materialized to threaten them. I could start striking at the monster myself! I was really beginning to like this plan, so I started running at the same time as I devoted a portion of my attention to accessing and modifying the armband to suit my needs.

Shouts followed me, most of alarm from those less durable behind was protecting but I could also make out Lung’s deep rumbling voice; distorted as an effect of his ongoing transformation. His pounding foot steps followed but quickly faded as even his considerable strength couldn’t make his scaled form keep up with me. I knew that I was breaking up the carefully laid defense plan, but it was already very much dissolving before my eyes as the Endbringer’s afterimages sowed chaos wherever they struck.

Water sprayed up around my knees every time my feet splashed through one of the now numerous miniature lakes dotting the waterlogged urban landscape I had to make my way through. What could I do to link with the armband? I would need some way to transmit data, but I didn’t know what kinds of signals the device could send and receive or how to go about making the transmissions anyway. Then I remember that prickling sensation I’d felt when I’d first put the armband on. It was probably a longshot, but it wasn’t like I had a lot of other options, considering the limited timeframe I had to work with at the moment and Nono’s preoccupation with doing whatever it was that she needed to do to get me more power. Almost as if responding to my needs the sensation surged back, like little needles which just barely sunk into my skin and stretched it as they pulled away. Without hesitation I latched onto the feeling and suddenly I felt a whole new world opening up before me.

There was a web, which shifted and contorted but all the while retained its structure. Strands vibrated when data was transmitted, first just one but then the motion was carried along until it had spread to every point in the web. I could see the frayed and dangling connections where armbands had disconnected due to destruction, in some cases the capes that they had been linked to remained alive while in far too many more they lay dead or dying. That web was only the outer layer though, beneath it great cognitive engines churned through the same data I was seeing work its way across the network.

Even as I recognized the efficiency and elegance these algorithms represented, to my eyes they were crude, lumbering devices with none of the smooth blended power of the structures I had seen in my mindscape just days ago. I longed to do nothing more than wipe them all away and replace them from scratch, but to do so would have sent the entire system into chaos for far too long, so I was confined to simply implementing the most basic patch jobs to bring it up to the required level in order to handle the new load. A method replaced here or there with a creation of my own, new connections, and entirely new functions to expand the utility existing portions of the software. Soon, as my modifications raced to propagate themselves across the network it became more difficult to recognize the original architecture underneath the sheen of my additions, despite the minimal changes I had limited myself to.
When everything else was done, I had to connect the armband system with my own enhanced senses so that it could automatically receive the information it needed. Doing so was odd, because I wasn’t entirely sure how to actually go about it at first but by reaching out with my enhanced senses for the tingling feeling I’d first used I was able to form a connection between the two and suddenly there was a steady flow of information. I waited a moment or two, simply watching as the entire systems changed to accommodate the new flow of information; strands shuddering in place and nodes beginning to shift as capes responded to the new information.

Out in the real world my own armband’s display had changed; now instead of the number of reported locations for Leviathan there had been there was only a single icon indicating the Endbringer’s location while new icons now indicated the location of its various water echoes all over the city. The process of making the changes had taken only a couple of minutes in total and brought me a few blocks closer to Leviathan’s position, but that still meant there were four more blocks between us and it was quickly closing in on the position of the Tinker device being set up nearby. Whatever it was, it was large enough that I didn’t think it could be moved easily without disassembly.

Capes here and there were moving towards the group working on the machine, some of them closer than me. I knew I couldn’t get there before Leviathan arrived, but hopefully those on their way could keep it occupied and off of the group of Tinkers for long enough until I could get there and hopefully draw the Endbringer away. My feet pounded against the pavement faster and faster as I pushed against my limits trying to eke out just a little more speed.

I ducked down an alley at the same time as half of the Brockton Bay Wards showed up to confront the Endbringer. Something curious happened to the street in front of Leviathan as it became suddenly much longer under the influence of Vista’s power, meanwhile Shadow Stalker and an out of town cape with a crossbow I’d seen her talking to at the briefing began firing at the monster before them. I knew Shadow Stalker’s power let her bolts become intangible briefly, similar to how she herself did for a time but apparently the other cape’s power, whatever it was, had a much longer duration because though each of their shots seemed to go right through the outer layer, Shadow Stalkers all ended up half buried while the other Ward’s disappeared completely. While they and Vista distracted Leviathan Kid Win began to assemble something that resembled the top of one of those round castle towers in midair. The Endbringer’s attention seemed to settle on Shadow Stalker as it struggled across the unnatural distance Vista was creating, and took a swipe with its claw at the black clad cape. She hopped back as Leviathan’s claw sliced through the air toward her before turning into a burst of thick black smoke a moment before collision. As the claw whipped through the air it scattered the thick black smoke, sending swirling eddies in the wake of its passing and carrying a bit of it along for a couple of meters before it slid through the gaps between the claws.

The out of town Ward used the opportunity to grab something out of a pouch on her hip, a bolt with a long thin silver cord attached, and notched it on her crossbow. Just as Leviathan was beginning to round on her, its arm swinging up high, she let the bolt loose and it and the silver cord attached passed right through the Endbringer’s hand. For a moment it seemed as if she’d simply miscalculated the timing or something as the bolt slipped into the ground below, but then the string suddenly went taut, arresting the progress of Leviathan’s arm and throwing it off balance again. It only lasted a moment though, before the Endbringer yanked hard and a chunk of of the street broke free but that pause had been enough for Kid Win to finish assembling his turret. A barrage of energy blasts rained down on the monster’s face, forcing it back a step or two.

I cut through an alleyway and burst onto the scene just as a metal pipe thrust up through the street and aimed at the turret, a stream of water shooting out of it less than a second later and forcing Kid Win off his perch. The now riderless floating turret was knocked into a building by the jet of
water, crushing some of its components and sending it spinning to the street while its rider fell less
than a meter before activating some sort of harness which boyoud him up. Kid Win whipped out
two pistols from somewhere on his suit and renewed his assault on the Endbringer.

Leviathan began stalking forward again, only to be stymied once more by Vista expanding the
space before it. In response there was a deafening crack as another storm drain burst near her and
water shot out and knocked her over. There wasn’t enough force to take her out of the fight but it
was apparently enough to bowl her over and break her concentration so that the Endbringer could
move more freely. Aegis flew in to pull the youngest Ward out of the way as Leviathan’s tail
whipped around and slammed into where she had been just seconds ago. Time for me to make my
move.

I charged in, closing the distance between me and it quickly enough that its attention was drawn to
me. Leviathan shot forward rapidly, but jerked just as quickly to a stop well short of me and let its
water echo continue on. I let it wash harmlessly over me as I increased my apparent weight so that
the force of the impact didn’t force me back. Once the initial crush of water was past I reversed the
change and launched myself out, putting myself within two meters of Leviathan and needing less
than a second to close the rest of the distance between between us. I was forced to duck underneath
the answering swipe, which passed just over my head and actually opened up a long gash in the
pavement behind me.

Springing back onto my right foot I swung out with my left at the Endbringer’s own left leg.

My leg moved.

When it hit the lower portion of Leviathan’s shin there was a deafening crack and splinters of
whatever its outer layer was made of flew off, a few bouncing off of me. Everything seemed to
freeze, a snapshot in my mind, and I knew that I’d hit hard enough that the leg would be forced out
of position and wouldn’t be able to support the mass of the Endbringer correctly. Sure enough, as I
rode the recoil of the kick, turning back to my left to move out from under Leviathan, its leg moved
awkwardly to the side enough that it then lost its balance and began slipping on the water slick
asphalt of the street. Without that leg to support its mass the creature tipped forward and began
falling face forward and was forced to catch itself by flinging out its right arm, dragging it through
the facade of a building. Debris rained down on me as I got clear.

Making a split second decision I scrambled several feet up that same facade before launching
myself off and onto Leviathan’s outstretched arm. Dashing across it before the monster beneath me
could throw me off I dropped to a kneel and skidded to a halt just before its head, to give myself a
better shot at the eyes. My footing slipped a little as the Endbringer levered its body upright again
but I managed to grab hold of a laceration left by one of Dragon’s railgun rounds with my off hand
and started slamming my fist into the material surrounding the upper eye. Cracks were spreading,
but I was concentrating so much on doing damage that I didn’t have time to react to the spear of
water which slammed into my side and lifted me into the air.

I crashed into an overturned car six meters away, bending the metal underneath me and causing a
wheel to pop off. Again Leviathan began advancing on the building where Vista and Aegis had
landed, throwing its body and afterimage into the side of the building which shook violently,
threatening collapse. I heaved myself out of the wreckage of the vehicle and grabbed the wheel
which had come unattached, hefting it easily to test the weight before I sent it soaring. My
improvised projectile struck Leviathan in the side of the neck, momentarily catching its attention
but not forcing it to come after me. I tore off another wheel and flung it just the same and then
began to pick up whatever pieces of loose debris I could get my hands, flinging them at the
Endbringer’s head. None of my missiles seemed to do any real damage, but they evidently irritated
the creature enough that it decided I was a more pressing issue than the other two capes.

The Endbringer was on me again in a second, crossing the distance with phenomenal speed and letting its watery afterimage do the work of momentarily sweeping me off my feet. I managed to catch myself before the water carried me very far, then tucked into a ball and rolled out of the water. Leviathan’s right arm came sweeping down, clearly aiming for me but I uncurled and sprung over the sweep of its claw, flipped once and used its forearm to launch myself over the other arm as well, as it moved towards me. My feet only briefly touched the top of the outstretched claws before I launched myself ever higher, now I was a few meters above even Leviathan’s head. I took aim and began to Mo -

The first arm shot up and swatted me out of the sky before I could repeat the attack that had worked twice on Lung. I bounced off the pavement on my face once, rebounded and tumble midair until I was right side up and slid on my ass to a rest near the car I’d struck before. Leviathan was on top of me before I could recover, and I observed distractedly that there was a patch of material missing near the eye where I’d hit it, then it struck me like a sledgehammer with first the left arm and then the right.

The first hit shattered the pavement beneath me, and when it pulled its fist away water rushed in over me until I was totally submerged. The second hit forced the water out of the shallow crater I was in for a brief moment before it rushed back in to fill the new pothole. Absently I realized that there was no pain even as Leviathan struck again, and again, and again before I was saved, though saved wasn’t really accurate, by the arrival of a new group of capes. Armsmaster was leading a group consisting of Kaiser, Manpower, and Hookwolf though to say he was leading them was probably overly generous. Kaiser and Hookwolf, seemed to each do whatever the hell they wanted to, while Manpower seemed be somewhat responding to whatever cues Armsmaster was throwing out. Still, I was grateful for the reprieve as it was becoming clear to me that I just didn’t have the maneuverability or power to do enough damage in order to turn the fight against Leviathan. I really needed Nono to finish whatever it was that she was doing.

Hookwolf got cocky, didn’t pay enough attention to the tail, and was sent flying by it. The Empire cape slammed into the side of a building head first and then slumped onto the ground, apparently unconscious and likely out of the fight. Armsmaster dodged a swing of Leviathan’s arm, dancing out of the way and swinging his halberd to open up a gash along the upper arm while Kaiser made a forest of blades spring up around the Endbringer’s feet and Manpower took a hit from its tail on his shield.

“Hookwolf deceased, BC-3,” came the armband’s voice distantly.

Leviathan crushed Kaiser’s swords under its feet contemptuously and spun its body around, creating a cyclone of water that picked up both Kaiser and Manpower in its whirl but missed Armsmaster as he dodged backwards. The two capes were entangled with one another for several moments as the water spun about the Endbringer, until it peeled away in a sheet and sent it and them crashing into the side of the building. Much of the water continued over the lip of the roof, catching Shadow Stalker as she tried to get in position to take another shot at Leviathan and sending her over the edge to crash to the ground in a debris strewn alley.


I couldn’t do anything for Manpower, Kaiser, or Hookwolf without drawing its attention away from Armsmaster which I didn’t want to do because his weapon was having more of an effect that almost anything so far. What was more I worried that if I went for any of them I might draw
Leviathan’s attention to them and put them in greater danger, at the moment I was fervently wishing for some sort of teleportation power. Shadow Stalker, in contrast, was much nearer and Armsmaster was between her and the Endbringer, which would likely mean that any movement would only serve to distract it and might in fact provide an opening for him to strike. Still, I wanted to be cautious in case Leviathan did come after me so that I could avoid putting her in any further danger, so I moved to the building’s facade and began slinking along the edge of it.

Armsmaster darted in as the rushing water flowed away from the Endbringer, sidestepped its attempt to crush him with one hand, then swung his blade at its neck and slashed maybe a quarter of the way through. I almost expected the Endbringer to bellow in rage and pain as black ichor like blood began oozing out of the wound, but seeing as it had no mouth no sound issue forth and the only noise which accompanied the scene was the hiss of rain, the distant pounding of the surf, and sounds of battle.

Though I kept an eye on the fight I continued steadily towards the fallen heroine, who continued to remain entirely motionless. A fact which did not seem encouraging for her chances, yet I kept moving towards her to either confirm she needed attention or that she was dead; it seemed the least I could do. As I neared I noticed that her mask and hood had been ripped off. No, the hood was just bunched under her head, but the mask was nowhere to be seen. Shadow Stalker was a girl about my age, with dark skin and a faintly familiar cast to her features. As I approached to less than a meter I realized she had a very familiar face indeed.

The local Protectorate leader dodged backwards underneath a swipe of Leviathan’s tail and lopped off a short chunk, less than a meter in length, near the end. But then the tail whipped back around just as a watery copy of it came from the other side and he was caught in between them as they collided, creating a thunderous clap. The impact apparently stunned Armsmaster, because he did almost nothing to avoid Leviathan’s hand as it snatched him up and only began to struggle once it had him held aloft. Leviathan’s other hand yanked Armsmaster’s halberd violently out of his hand, probably dislocating the hero’s shoulder, and flung it away. Whether by intent or simple chance the blade found its mark in the Tinker device which had at some point been completed and looked to be powering up. It evidently struck something vital because the device began to give off a loud whine before emitting a sound like a huge explosion going off underground. A distant rumble answered a moment later. Leviathan ignored all of this and began to crush Armsmaster. The Tinker’s famously tough armor seemed to offer little resistance, though the Endbringer just as promptly released him. He dropped to the ground like a sack of freshly butchered meat, and the water where he lay began to become tinged red.

The roaring-hiss of the rain was all of a sudden overcome by the staccato hiss of rain being flash boiled mixed with a bellowing animalistic cry as Lung finally caught up with the fight, his form distorted beyond anything I’d seen before by his transformation. Heat and steam poured off his body in roiling waves as he crashed passed me in the alley, but I only barely noticed any of this with a corner of my mind.

Sophia. Sophia Hess was Shadow Stalker, a Ward. I was almost surprised, but then why shouldn’t she be a Ward? No one had ever said the world was fair, that heroes had to be good people. I stepped closer and saw her mask just behind her, hanging on by a single frayed strap.

I bent over to pick it up and as I held it in my hand I studied it.

The mask was purely Sophia. It wasn’t the sternness of justice that was etched on the face of the mask but the scowl of a disapproving task master; it was a sternness that promised violence.

At the moment that seemed to be all the world promised anyone: violence, and death, and
Another cape entered the alley from the opposite end, a figure I vaguely recognized as Chevalier, who led the Protectorate in Philadelphia. Other capes were arriving too, from several directions; Protectorate, the gangs, New Wave, and numerous out of towners. Too little, too late. If they had arrived moments earlier when Armsmaster was still fighting, they might have saved him and turned the fight back on the Endbringer, but now they could only hope to occupy Leviathan long enough for Scion to arrive. That was, if he hadn’t show up at one of the other two attacks already.

Chevalier said something to me, but I wasn’t paying attention. How many vicious bullies like Sophia had he covered up, I wondered? Was that why no one had ever taken my word over theirs, because the Protectorate considered Sophia Hess the parahuman more valuable than some apparently normal girl at her school? No, that was pure conspiracy theorizing, my circumstances could all be explained through plain incompetence so it did no good to go looking for some self-serving narrative simply to make myself feel better.

After all, the world never promised to be fair.

A great crash echoed off the battered buildings around me, loud enough that I could feel and followed by a wave of steam and heat, that brought me back to the moment. I was alone again, still holding the mask when I began to feel… more.

“Taylor,” Nono’s voice right in my ear. “Nono has given you as much as she can, for now.”


Okay, so the world wasn’t fair and one of my tormentors was nominally a “good guy.” What did that mean for me? Nothing. After all nothing about the world had actually changed in the last few seconds, just what I knew of it and what I could do about it. First things first, save the city.


“Finally,” I grinned at Nono as she floated to my right. “How do you feel about kicking some ass?”

Counter-Gravity Field Motors Integrated. Systems Check… Pass.

Nono answered my grin with one of her own, bright and kind and everything the world was not.

Before I went I put Sophia’s mask back on her face, turning her into Shadow Stalker again, because somehow it just didn’t seem right to leave her lying there unmasked. Somehow it seemed like it would have been a violation of her in some way. Then I turned back to fight to find practically every remaining cape watching Lung face off against a battered but, as far as I could tell, unimpeded Leviathan in silence, forced to hang back lest they be caught in flames that poured off Lung or the billows of scalding-hot steam that accompanied it. The both of them had the appearance of something out of the mists of prehistory, though Lung was smaller by at least a third at this point. But, as I watched them fight, I realized I could predict Lung’s moves even as he made them, for all his inhuman form he still fought like a man. Like the man I fought for hours in fact, learning his patterns and rhythms the hard way. Not perfectly, perhaps, but enough that fear of our getting in each others way wouldn’t hold me back anymore than the heat would.

Power surged through my body and as I looked out over the tense scene I felt suddenly as if the entire world was at my fingertips. I flexed something and found myself beginning to float upwards,
then a single thought arrested my motion and another brought me down again without ever once
altering my apparent physical characteristics. On its own the base speed of my flight seemed little
better than walking, but I knew I could use one of my other abilities to far exceed that speed.
Though, the idea of walking on thin air momentarily conjured a ridiculous picture in my mind.

On the power of a thought I rose again and pushed myself out of the alleyway. Some voices called
out, either in surprise or warning, as I broke the invisible line no one had dared to cross and stared
at the hulking figure of Leviathan, still for a moment and struggling to dislodge Lung as he pulled
the Endbringer’s considerable mass low to worry at the gash Armsmaster had left in its neck. It was
indeed injured, though not seriously so, but the wounds evinced no sign or even a slight hint of
actual organs of any kind beneath their surface, only continuing to ooze a steady flow of ichor.
Time to see what kind of damage I can do now.

_Cogitative Propulsion System Engaged._

“This is my city!” I screamed.

My entire body _shot_ forward, as Lung released his grip and leapt away to a rooftop to dodge a
swipe of a claw, head ducked and shoulder pushed forward to take the brunt of the impact. I
slammed into Leviathan’s chest, its feet dragging through the standing water below. An instant
before impact with the building behind us I reversed my motion and let the Endbringer continue
under its own momentum. Lung roared something unintelligible, though approving, and launched a
jet a flame at the Endbringer as I jinked out of the way.

Without pausing to catch its breath, likely because it didn’t actually breath, Leviathan surged out of
the imprint it had made on the four story building, water pouring off its body in great sheets and
feet not even touching the ground beneath the water as it dashed. As it neared it did a neat about
face, whipping its tail and its watery afterimage through the wall of flames in my direction.
Dodging was a trivial matter of darting above out of the range of both the echo and the tail.
Meanwhile it began forcing water from the surroundings to rush into the area in huge surging
rapids.

“Is that the best you can do?” I shouted.

The water level began rising in an area roughly two square blocks, creating an odd bulge. I
dropped, aiming for the Endbringer’s head with my fist but had to shoot back up a little to dodge its
flicking tail. Water continue to stream in, dousing what fires had managed to catch despite the rain
and forcing the few capes who remained on the ground to be evacuated by Movers. Leviathan kept
lashing its tail at Lung and sending spears of water up at me, forcing both of us to maneuver or risk
letting the monster gain the initiative too much. The water was high enough now that it was higher
than the Endbringer itself and it was difficult to see through the amount of dirt and debris clogging
the water.

“Come and get me, you stupid piece of shit!”

A great geyser of water shot up, blasting the entire street along with me and sending up great cloud
of steam where it hit Lung. Using the momentary chaos to obscure its movements Leviathan shot
out of the water, feet scrambling for purchase on the nearest building. I neatly avoided the arm it
shot out to grab me, but a flick of the Endbringer’s tail sent a gout of water straight into my back,
forcing me back into range where it could grab me with its opposite hand.

I sensed, more than felt the pressure Leviathan began exerting in its attempt to crush me like it had
Armsmaster, ignoring my unlikely teammate as he charged in once again, clamping at the base of
its tail as he tore at its back. Certainly the force it used would have killed all except the most
durable capes and even they would have felt it. To me it barely registered though unfortunately it had trapped my arms as well so I couldn’t get the leverage to free myself. Well, who said I needed to free myself?

Leviathan was dragged right out of Lungs grip and trailed along as I shot straight up. We were more than three kilometers in the air before it released its grip on me, twisting its body about to orient head first towards the cushion of water below. I wasn’t about to let it get back into the city so easily though, it had already long overstayed its welcome. My body dropped like a stone as I let myself start falling and then began to move down, quickly catching up to the Endbringer. Latching onto the end of its tail with both hands quickly covered then in the thick, black ichor that poured out of the wound Armsmaster had created as I quite literally dug in.

I headed for the former Boardwalk district and curved my flight path up. Laden with uncounted tons of monster I wasn’t able to keep its claws from trailing in the water, sending up long sprays, and ripping up chunks of the round as they scraped against the pavement beneath. I made a quick adjustment, shifting up just slightly to dislodge them and then seconds later I dropped low again, turning perpendicular to my original path at the last second, slamming Leviathan through the twisted and ruined boardwalk. As the wood was splintering under the impact I let go of the tail and watched the Endbringer tumble end over end a couple of times before getting its bearing and scrambling upright in the shallow water.

Before it could fully recover I was on it again. I shot forward until I was inside its reach, my eyes locked on to the patch of material on its shoulder already blown away earlier in the fight by Miss Militia, Bakuda, and Dragon. I wrapped my arm around its left bicep, holding it out and slammed my fist into the area of exposed material.

**Physical Canceler Engaged. Molecular Decohesion Field Active.**

“Come wreck my city, huh?” I screamed as my fist connected and a flash of heat and light blasted a chunk of material into shards, creating a shockwave that shook every still standing window in the city.

“See what you get!” I screamed again, with another strike and another flash followed by more debris.

Another strike, another brilliant flash. Leviathan tried to pry me off with the claws of its other arm, tried to lash my head with its tail, but I ignored it.

Strike, flash. Strike, flash. **Strike, flash.**

The sudden release sent the Endbringer stumbling back and left me floating in midair with one of its arms tucked against my side. I was kind of stunned by the fact that I’d just fucking amputated an Endbringer’s limb so I stared blankly at it, wondering what it was thinking while it stared back at me. There was the sound of heavy objects falling, shattering glass, and crushed metal.

Gaining height to locate the source of the sudden destruction what greeted my eyes was a chunk of the city about a block in size slipping beneath a growing pool of roiling water. I’d failed and my city would pay the price.

Other capes were beginning to react, moving away from the growing sinkhole as the edges simply fell into the water. Fortunately there was only one shelter nearby and it was already in the process of being evacuated; it wouldn’t be quick enough to save everyone, but they would be able to save most at least. I turned back to Leviathan and found the Endbringer in full retreat, trailing a thin
sheen of blackish film through the water in its wake. I considered pursuing, running it down and finishing the monster once and for all but I had no idea how long that would take and there were two more Endbringer attacks to deal with.

Warp Systems Online. Expanding Tannhäuser Gate. Destination: 45°25'17.5074" -75°41'49.8942"

Lung appeared through a cloud of roiling steam and as he approached the nearest planks of the boardwalk burst into flames, for a moment our eyes met. A spattering of other capes followed after him, making sure to give him a wide berth. My skirt pulled out towards the water as a sudden gust of wind caught it.

I had work to do, and so I disappeared from Brockton Bay’s skyline just as Leviathan slipped beneath the waves out just beyond the bay with a last flick of its tail that sent a spattering of black ichor flying into the air.
His feet ached, Chevalier thought as he lowered himself into the office chair farthest from the door.

It was a stupid thing to think about, he knew, but it was the first thought that popped into his head when he sat down. Over the past twelve hours water had also seeped into his armor as he’d waded through thigh high water; first during the fight and then in the hours that followed as they performed search and rescue operations. Even with the extra warning the city had gotten it simply wasn’t possible to evacuate the sheer mass of people involved in the time available, not entirely at least. Efforts were now winding down, which is why it was possible for him to sit down now at all. Though they would continue into the days and weeks that came as cape their presence was starting to become more hindrance than help. The truth was that very few heroes were actually ever trained to perform these sorts of operations correctly, those jobs typically being handed off to the unpowered PRT officers, which had always struck him as a failing in the system.

Even fewer villains stayed around for very long after the battle, after all, the Truce was a thin protection with no clear definition of how long it extended once the battle and immediate aftermath was over. So, it was nearing the point where the parahuman volunteers would need to leave, in fact a great many had already left; those that remained either called Brockton Bay home, were in positions of authority such that their continued presence was a significant and important boost for morale, or came from cities large enough that their absence would not be cause for concern. He fell into the second category, and if he’d had Mover powers he would have found himself splitting time between here and Ottawa much like Eidolon, Alexandria and Legend were. Selfishly he was glad he didn’t have to, just as he was glad none of the attacks had been on Philadelphia.

Three Endbringer attacks, all at once! It was still an earth shattering thought, still caused him to space out when he tried to consider what the change meant. Would they have to deal with three attacks every time now? Would more groups of Endbringers show up on the same old schedule or was this a one off event caused by whatever inscrutable plan the Endbringers were following? Puzzling out the pattern behind Endbringer attacks was a fruitless exercise, he knew, dozens of Thinkers had run headlong into the task over the years and come away, sometimes broken and sometimes merely defeated. Still, given the circumstances he didn’t think there was anyone who would or could blame him for having the thoughts.

No one was saying much of anything about the situation of Ottawa, mostly because no one really had any information, and only Protectorate team leaders and Guild members like Dragon and Narwhal knew at all about the attack in China at all, but there were already rumblings about the future of Brockton Bay. From overheard conversations he knew that the city had been in something of a fairly major economic slump, or possibly nosedive, for the last several years but opinions on what the disaster meant for the city as whole were divided. On the one hand Leviathan’s attack meant that the city was safe, at least going by past behavior. Frankly, Chevalier didn’t think basing anything on the Endbringer’s past behavior was a smart bet at this moment.

That safety, if it could be capitalized on, could turn a crumbling city into one of the few ports around the world which might actually see a growth in traffic. Unfortunately such growth would require outside investment, and given the damage done to the city’s infrastructure it was questionable if the damage could be repaired to the level required to be attractive to that investment in less than a year. There were sure to be new issue to arise in the meantime as well.

In truth the damage wasn’t all that bad, at last relative to the level of destruction Endbringers were
capable of. After all, the city was still standing with many of its major structures intact, though with the fairly major addition of a new lake in the northern section of the city. Strangely enough the lake wasn’t entirely Leviathan’s doing either, apparently due to the early warning a Tinker named Geo Logic from Arizona had been able to attend with a device in tow which had been meant to counteract the worst of the Endbringer’s effects. Instead, just as it had been powering up it had been struck by Armsmaster’s halberd when Leviathan had thrown it, which had unfortunately set off a chain reaction which had momentarily amplified and sped up the process. The lake was only predicted to grow to eight city blocks but the surrounding area would remain unstable for some time after that, and would therefore impact the ability to work on crucial services that ran through any of the affected areas.

The door opened suddenly, admitting the local PRT Director Emily Piggot and following behind her was Hannah, or rather Miss Militia.

“... ‘ve taken your concerns into consideration, Miss Militia. But my decision stands, Shadow Stalker stays put for the time being.” Shadow Stalker? One of the Wards if he remembered right, but why was Hannah advocating moving them? Had something happened… no, it was clearly an internal matter, and he shouldn’t undermine her authority as the acting leader for the local team. Getting involved could only end badly, best to put it out of his mind. Unless she came to him for advice it simply wasn’t his place to interfere.

Both of the women seemed to notice him at the same time, though if either were concerned at what he might have overheard they didn’t show it at all. Piggot nodded in his direction and asked in a brisk formal tone, “Do you know when we expect to begin?”

“A few minutes maybe; once the others get here. Dragon is leading the briefing so I imagine as soon as she arrives,” he answered.

“I am already here, Chevalier,” Dragon’s voice said, from the new monitor that had been attached to the wall, startling him. “I apologize for not greeting your earlier. You seemed absorbed in your own thoughts and I did not want to disturb you.”

“Yes, well, thank you,” he said, turning to look at Hannah. She looked to be feeling the weight of her position as Acting Protectorate Leader of Brockton Bay, and given the circumstances that wasn’t surprising.

Though her position was for the moment simply “Acting,” even before the attack there had been persistent rumors that she had been tapped to replace Armsmaster in his position. Whether those rumors had held any truth in the first place, they might now be irrelevant as the man in question was lying comatose in one of the temporary field hospitals that had been set up. It was a testimony to his ability as a Tinker that his suit had kept him alive long enough for him to be brought to Panacea, who had stabilized him, but it still wasn’t clear whether Armsmaster would ever wake up, or whether his mind would be intact if he did. Certainly he would not be the same in body; though New Wave’s healer had been able to stabilize him she could not grow new limbs from nothing.

Hannah sat down next to him, her hand briefly finding his and giving it a squeeze before settling on the table.

“Dragon, do you have an ETA on the others?” Piggot asked from her position at the head of the table. It was perhaps a bit presumptuous given the Triumvirate themselves would be attending, but then it was her city and her building they were in.

“Alexandria, Legend, and Myrrdin should all be arriving in a few moments. Eidolon is still in Ottawa, though with his abilities I’m sure he will be on time,” the Tinker’s voice answered from
the wall, and the Director nodded.

Chevalier glanced at the monitor and watched as landscape images played across its screen. Just a few hours ago that would not have been possible, as the entire building had lacked power. Now with a number of generators operating to power crucial systems the choice had been made to have the meeting in Brockton Bay. Ironically the deciding factors were those same ones which made the city’s fate so uncertain: its isolation plus the damage done to it in the attack, in particular to its broadcast and transmission systems, meant that there was little chance of the meeting itself or any of the information discussed being leaked. It wouldn’t be possible to keep what they were going to discuss secret for long, but it was best they understood what they were dealing with and to have answers ready before others started demanding them.

A moment later the door once again opened, and two thirds of the Triumvirate walked through with Myrrdin following them. Each of the capes showed the signs of fatigue and exertion in their stances and on their costumes, though it was more subtle on Alexandria as her helmet hid both. They each took the nearest seats opposite of himself and Hannah.

“I am inform-” Dragons voice began from the speakers again, before being interrupted by a soft *whump* sound which deposited Eidolon just inside the doorway. “Right, well, now that we are all present, shall I begin?”

Everyone nodded, and then there was a pause as Eidolon took the nearest seat after briefly leaning down to whisper something to both Alexandria and Legend.

“At approximately 8:48PM last night, deep sea sensors detected movement at Leviathan’s suspected location which indicated an initial target projection somewhere on the entire east coast of the Americas.” The picture on the monitor had shifted to a world map showing the initial path of the Endbringer with a dotted red line and overlaying the danger areas with a yellow highlight. “These initial predictions were a result of an ongoing project between myself and Armsmaster. Within the first twenty minutes the range of targets had been narrowed to just Brockton Bay, at which point the local alerts were sent out and volunteer requests were dispatched.”

As Dragon had gone on, one half of the screen the map had zeroed in on where Brockton Bay was located while on the other half an image showed the continued progress of Leviathan and an accelerated clock kept time in the corner.

“Thirty seconds later one of my secure servers was pinged through the PRT network pipeline and every single instance of the software was accessed,” Both images were replaced as Dragon went on, this time with a map of Canada showing a glowing red dot in Vancouver which was presumably the server in question. “At this juncture it is crucial for all of you to understand that I was not hacked, at no point were any of my networks or systems accessed except through legitimate channels and by, as far as my software could tell, totally legitimate users.”

“What are you saying then? That someone has hacked the PRT?” Director Piggots voice was hard and very unhappy. Even though she was at least sixty pounds overweight she struck Chevalier as the sort of women who it was not smart to cross.

“Yes,” Dragon stated, seemingly oblivious. “This is, in and of itself, not surprising. Most computer systems have any number of weaknesses due to the simple fact that they have human users who forget or reuse passwords, take laptops home sometimes to catch up when they’ve fallen behind, connect to unsecured networks, or commit any number of other minor mistakes. Were this the issue, the solution would be clear, unfortunately your hacker did not use any of those weaknesses and instead they simply added themselves as a new user with unrestricted access. More than a week ago.”
A silence followed until the Tinker again began speaking.

“Whoever did this, and we’ll get to that in a moment I promise, is as good a manipulator of code as I am. Possibly better. This is all tangential though, the point is that this person was in the system and had access to all the same information the second we did at that point, which means that when we detected the Simurgh on the move at 9:47 they were aware as well, and the same is of course true for Behemoth’s movements as well.”

“Before we move on, can you explain why there was so much less warning for the other two Endbringer attacks than for Leviathan?” Again, Director Piggot asked.

“Certainly, Director, I can. Primarily the issue is that we never envisioned a multiple attack scenario, obviously an oversight but one I believe I can assume you all understand, and so though the system continued to monitor the other two most of its resources were devoted to keeping track of Leviathan. The only reason the alarms triggered at all is because it was simply more efficient when designing the program to keep all the tracking subroutines plugged into the alert system constantly. Are there any other question that need to be answered now?” Dragon asked. No one piped up with any further questions and in fact everyone else sitting around the conference table was looking very attentive.

“Very well,” she continued as the image switched to an overhead still image of Brockton Bay as it had been before the attack. “16 minutes into the fight every single armband still in operation at the point experienced a sudden alteration which resulted in greater network connectivity and an unknown source of combat data. I am still trying to analyse all the changes made to my work, but as of this moment the modifications indicate the work of an unknown Tinker or Thinker and I believe this is connected to the previous intrusion into the PRT system.”

She paused a moment and continued on, “Now, the next series of events I had to reconstruct partially from my own suit logs, and partially from the few recording devices which observed them, none of which were mine due to laws governing the flight of unmanned drones over American cities which I have repeatedly lobbied to have modified. At roughly the 22 minute mark of the fight a local Brockton Bay cape by the name Princess, entered the fray for a second time after having previously engaged the Endringer to little effect. It is notable that she took no apparent damage from this first encounter, even if she did not seem to harm him at the time.”

This time the image on screen switched to a paused video, which given the quality it had to be from Dragon’s suit. It immediately began to play, though without sound. Leviathan and a slightly smaller Lung were battling it out in the water filled street for a beat or two before a streak appeared from off screen and slammed into Leviathan, driving him straight into the building behind him. The Endbringer and his attacker, who had resolved itself into a teenage girl wearing the single most low-budget costume Chevalier had ever seen, engaged each other for several seconds. Leviathan seemed to get the upper hand, quite literally, when he grabbed the girl, but then the two of them simply disappeared from view. A moment the camera tracked up, away from the crowd of stunned capes, and just barely caught sight of the now distant combatants before they disappeared again. “Ranging calculations put them at approximately three kilometers’ altitude at that instant,” Dragon noted.

A series of still images followed, grainy and discolored, probably from commercially available security cameras. Each showed little more than indistinct blurs, but a series of marks on the inset map of the city tracked the combatants on their way to the former Brockton Bay Boardwalk. Then another paused video appeared on the screen, though this time the angle was from offshore and Leviathan and Princess were facing one another.
“This last video is from one of my seashore drones. Classified as Search and Rescue and governed by totally different regulations from the flyover type, but that’s not relevant at the moment.” Dragon explained before the video started up. On screen Princess darted in close, grabbed one of Leviathan’s arms, and started wailing on the Endbringer. Each hit punctuated by a bright flash of light and the image briefly shaking a moment later as the shockwave reached the drone. After just a few strikes the entire arm came off, sending the Endbringer sprawling. As Princess rose into the air, probably in response to the sinkhole appearing, given the falling buildings and rising plumes of dust in the background, Leviathan dove into the water and left, the ripple of his wake indicating an astounding speed. The video continued until Princess, still holding onto the severed arm, disappeared in a swirl of light.

There was a moment of silence in the room before Eidolon spoke, “Two questions before you continue Dragon; first, do we have any information on this ‘Princess’? I haven’t had the time to search the Protectorate files.”

“I believe Miss Militia is probably the best able to answer, seeing as she co-authored the original report on her,” Dragon answered.

Everyone turns towards Hannah, on Chevalier’s right.

“Princess first appeared April 11th, after an apparent altercation between her and Lung in which she emerged the victor,” she began, as if summarizing her report directly. Given her eidetic memory that was probably exactly what she was doing. “At the time Armsmaster extended her an invitation to the Wards, which she rebuffed, and she was given tentative classifications as a Brute 6 or 7 with potentially some sort of Striker ability given the damage she had done to Lung.”

“We’re looking at updating her to a Brute 9 or 10 at least, and definitely giving weight to the Striker classification, though the number for that is at the moment very much up in the air,” Piggot interrupted.

“After that reports were somewhat frequent but irregular; one altercation with the Merchants and two more with Lung, plus aiding in Search and Rescue after the bombings. Possible connection to New Wave, since she was seen speaking to Glory Girl several times,” Miss Militia finished.

“All right, I suppose that brings me to my next question,” Eidolon said, turning towards him. “Chevalier, did you see anything useful in her ‘shadow’ during the battle?”

The question brought him back to the moment when he first saw her, standing in the alley way, staring down at a sprawled cape near her age. He remembered wondering whether they were friends and asking her whether the Ward was okay, and when she hadn’t responded he’d used his own armband to report the casualty and moved on - there hadn’t been time to worry over it. Looking back he didn’t remember seeing anything about her, but by itself that wouldn’t be surprising because sometimes the shadows were simply very difficult to discern.

He remembered watching Lung and Leviathan fight like mad, and then hearing some of the other gathered capes cry out suddenly. He’d turned to look and saw her. It had been like glancing at a patch of earth and seeing the entire planet all at once, except with something shaped vaguely like a human being. Her foot should have crushed the entire city, but instead the world simply moved to accommodate the new presence and continued on as normal. She disappeared into the clouds until most of her form was not on the Earth at all, but could have been a planet all herself.

She was a titanic figure, with flesh of metal and stone that appeared as if hewed from a solid mountain. Armor adorned her form; not ornate fanciful stuff but solid, gleaming slabs of what might have been steel or iron that conformed to her figure. Marked in ways that spoke of battles
fought, wars waged, and the passage of time the armor remained unbroken. The face was largely unremarkable in terms of beauty; her eyes were shut, but in the center of the forehead an immense lens tracked the form of Leviathan with a steady, mechanical coldness. Glowing red hair fanned out behind her head as if to catch the light of all the stars in between its strands. Other lenses of various size dotted her immense form, each focused on separate points, objects, or people. One homed in on him, an immense mechanical iris constricting around his reflection and for a moment he felt small but then the feeling passed and the great machine eye was moving past him.

More lenses dotted her arms, and besides the two attached to her body many more floated unattached; so many she looked like one of those Indian gods, the ones with blue skin, animals heads, and sometimes dozens of arms. Each moved flawlessly in and around each other in a mesmerizing dance as each brought its lenses to bear on the surroundings.

Between the giantess’ feet he’d caught a glimpse of Princess herself, and though they were almost nothing alike physically somehow they each carried themselves similarly. In the space between them there was the shimmer of something else, which might have been a web, a piece of cracked glass, or a shimmering crystal. Princess had moved a moment later and everything had dissolved in incoherency.

Finally, he answered. “You know nothing I see is ever that clear. I think it might be best not to share in case it creates false expectations which might draw us into making bad assumptions.”

“All right,” Eidolon said, appearing to accept that answer. “I suppose I’m probably in the best position to speak on what happened next.”

When no one raised any objections Eidolon continued, “As you know Behemoth was initially projected to appear in the Montreal area, but he actually emerged a little more than halfway between there and Ottawa. This required several minutes of frantic repositioning as capes moved from the first city to the other, which meant that in some ways the battle was even more hurried than usual. All the details will be in my written report but aren’t necessary right now, so I’ll skip right to when Princess arrived.”

“Behemoth had been in the city limits for maybe a minute or two,” he said, “when there was something which very much looked and sounded like a large pane of glass breaking in the air above the center of the city, and she shot out of it. No one actually saw the effect close, but it’s not there anymore. Princess came in swinging Leviathan’s arm like a bat, hit Behemoth right in the head and I think for a moment he was just as surprised as the rest of us. He responded after a second with a blast of his lightning but nothing happened; I mean it hit her, but she just took it without even reacting and swung the arm again. After a few hits with it there were long strips of Behemoth’s skin that had been torn away but he didn’t actually seem to care anymore than they ever do.”

Eidolon stared off into space for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts.

“She dropped Leviathan’s arm after that. Behemoth didn’t seem to mind the damage she was doing at first, just kept right on wading through the city as Princess repeatedly slammed into him; creating those explosions like she did with Leviathan, and leaving a crater with each impact until he started to look a bit like Swiss cheese. Princess never said a word to anyone there directly, so we have no way of knowing, but I believe she was having some difficulty with precision at first because she didn’t concentrate on any one point. Occasionally Behemoth would take a swat at her or send another blast of one or another type of energy her way but she always darted out of the way just in time. I don’t know what Behemoth was after but whatever it was, he either got it or decided
it wasn’t worth it after about seven minutes, because he suddenly angled out of the city. She didn’t let up and started to focus on his head, in fact she had almost half of it caved in when he started glowing. It was over before we could even really react to that; the explosion just sort of hung there in midair, on the verge of consuming the city until it just sort of disappeared into her. Behemoth was out of the city by then and already starting to dig back into the earth. She took one look at him and I swear for a moment I thought she was going to go after him and drag him kicking and screaming back but then she just… disappeared, with a similar light show to what we saw on the video in Brockton Bay,” Eidolon finished.

“We have the least information on her last confrontation with the Endbringers, all we have are a few images from a satellite briefly in range,” Dragon explained as she took the lead again, and the image on the screen switched to an aerial view of countryside which had to be in China. “The C.U.I. has, of course, refused to even acknowledge there was an attack in their territory.”

The display changed again, this time zoomed in until it was visibly pixelated on a mountain range where pieces of what appeared to have once been a buried facility were scattered across the ground and a large, fuzzy white figure was turned away from it and rising towards the camera. “Given the evidence it is likely this was some sort of Yangban facility, though what exactly it was for we have few clues on.

The next image was of the Simurgh, mid cartwheel, as a streak appeared to have shot through one of her wings which could be seen falling to the earth. “This is the only clear image of the fight itself,” Dragon continued and then the image switched again, this time showing empty landscape except for the fallen wing and disturbed earth from the impact. “Fragmentary radar readings from Australia suggest they entered orbit after that point, where the satellite could not get a view.”

One last image appeared on the screen, this time from an apparently earth based point of view. It seemed to be nothing but the stars at first until Chevalier noticed that some of those stars were oddly bright and clustered very close together, sure enough a red circle appeared around the cluster to highlight them. “One last image was taken by a ground observatory in the Hawaiian islands several minutes later, after this there are no further reports or evidence of Princess at this moment. There are now a number of questions we have to ask. Most critically, is this the new pattern for the Endbringers? If so how do we respond? And, where is Princess?”

As Chevalier looked around the table, no one had any answers.
Petals of flexible composite material unfolded and allowed me to float free into the star studded vacuum of the Edgeworth-Kuiper belt. Momentum carried me forward until I was well away from the extended flaps of the womb-ship which had sheltered me for the past week, where I spun about to face the direction I had emerged from. For the first time I could see it as something more than a bulbous nanomachine growth on the icy surface of the small Kuiper belt object. It had grown to a hundred and fifty meters from end to end with an approximate fifty meter diameter at its thickest sections, with a shape resembling a stretched and twisted football studded with odd globular protrusions. The womb-ship hadn’t yet reached the size specified by its schematics, but it wouldn’t be much longer and it had been “feature complete” as they say for a while now; able to sustain its own growth from internal energy-to-matter conversions along with a small trickle of the Pararagon-class drones. Thinking about the progress the mothership has made I can’t help but think about the events that lead me to be out here in the void of space surrounded by the sub-sapient drones of a defense system for the solar system from an alternate dimension that I was currently in the process of bringing forth.

I remembered disappearing from the sky above Brockton Bay, travelling briefly through subspace in a blinding whirl of not-colors, and then emerging into the surprisingly cool night air above Ottawa. Piecing together what happened is actually relatively easy, I can replay every moment of the battle with almost perfectly clarity from almost any angle within the range of my enhanced sense but it constantly feels like I’m watching someone playing a video of someone else. My actual memories of everything are more like staccato snapshots of the events, so I watch myself dive through the air with Leviathan’s arm clutched in one hand and I see myself strike Behemoth with it’s counterpart’s limb several times. The only thing I can clearly recall is the feeling of overwhelming fury though by then it was muted somehow, different from the crystalline ball of rage that had driven me in my initial fight against Leviathan.

Even now, days later, the best explanation that I could come up with is that I gave myself over in part to automatic reflexes of my new body, similar to when Bakuda’s first bomb went off next to the bus or when I fought Squealer. Reasonably, I’m not sure I could argue with the results but I didn’t like the idea of subsuming myself to the control of non-conscious programs even in part, no matter how technologically advanced the society that produced them was. I suppose if anything had gone catastrophically wrong Nono would have stepped in, but that feels too much like shirking responsibility. I had decided that I was going to be a hero, I couldn’t just back out when it got a little tougher than I expected and make it all someone else’s problem. All of those thoughts swirled around my mind now but during the battle with Behemoth I hadn’t really thought of anything at all. That had been part of the problem at the time, in fact.

The dynakinetic Endbringer was too large to attempt the same aerial tactic that had worked on Leviathan and though my attacks created sizable craters wherever they landed. Even when I excavated a cave in its side large enough for me to stand in the monster didn’t seem to notice much less care.

Distantly I remember feeling the eyes of the world watching me from the rubble of the ruined buildings nearby, as fires burned and people struggled to escape the devastation of our fight. What would they say about that day? Would I be the cavalry riding over the hill, or the interloper sowing uncertainty and fear in my wake? Really I was asking how I would be greeted on my return, with open arms, with suspicion, with mistrust, or some combination of all three?

Then Behemoth had, seemingly at random, changed course away from the city center and back out
towards the outskirts; whether because it had done enough damage to the city for its purpose and was seeking a new target, or because it had accomplished whatever goal had driven it there. I changed tactics too, concentrating on the head, hoping to do enough damage in order to hamper both it’s ability to fight right then and there and to delay its recovery. Even with half of it’s face missing it did not seem impaired in any significant way, though I at least managed to get its attention.

With startling clarity I remembered the feeling of energy washing over my body like a cascade of warm water. Much of it simply seemed to sink deep through whatever I had for flesh before settling in my bones where it became simply another drop in the surging ocean available at my fingertips. I was able to contain the monster’s atomic explosion and stop it from devastating the city any further, but it took all of my concentration to keep it confine for those brief moments before I could absorb the released energy and cease any further reactions. By the time it was resolved Behemoth was already well outside the city limits and burrowing into the earth.

Some part of me considered going after the Endbringer briefly, but all the information available demonstrated that once they had returned to their preferred hiding places they did not return until the next attack and though the pattern had clearly been broken it had only been broken by the Endbringers as a whole. Individually neither Leviathan nor Behemoth had deviated from their typical behavior within the contexts of the attacks themselves, though of course the simultaneity was far outside the norm.

It was at that point that I noticed that I was still tied into Dragon’s and Armsmaster’s program and I was in fact drawing on its knowledge of previous attacks by the Endbringers to form my conclusions. With two threats at least put off for the time being I thought I could focus my attention wholly on the final Endbringer, and this time I wouldn’t have to break off at the end to deal with some other threat; I could instead go all out and possibly deal with at least one of these monsters permanently. Of course even then I realised that I’d left the trickiest and possibly most dangerous of the three to be dealt with last. Mostly it had been a matter of physical proximity rather than risk assessment but perhaps that was itself intentional?

As I prepared once again to warp to my next opponent I had felt vaguely frustrated that I might have played into whatever plan the Endbringers were operating on by leaving the Simurgh for last. I couldn’t consider it for long, though, because an instant later I re-emerged into the light of midday a little over a kilometer above mountainous terrain below. Instantly I was aware of two things; first the wreckage of what appeared to have once been a secret facility installed within the mountain itself or at least a portion of it, with great twisting columns of gray-black of smoke pouring out while the occasional bout of flame peaked through the haze, and second the stark white figure of the Simurgh rising away from the scene of the destruction. Its wings were unfurled but motionless around the comparatively small body of the Endbringer, and in the space beyond even the reach of its wingtips pieces of what might have once been machinery orbited, being torn apart into nothing but fine grains with every passing second.

Without waiting for my enemy to respond I had flung myself at it as fast as I could and I was on it in less than a second, unfortunately somehow it reacted even as I’d begun to move. The Simurgh managed to twist its body far enough out of line with my trajectory that I only clipped one of its wings, though the energy the collision imparted was too much for the joint to take and it snapped off. The impact also sent the Endbringer itself tumbling off its original path for a moment before it righted itself once more and then shot upwards into the sky again. I followed much the same as I had originally engaged it, but as I neared this time I was ready for the last minute correction and maneuvered to ram its main body again. Just as I was almost on top of the Endbringer though some force pulled me off course.
Several more times that same pattern repeated itself as we rose through the atmosphere, until from an outside point of view it would have appeared that I was spiralling around the creature. No matter what I did it was as if there were an invisible barrier a little under two meters from its body through which I could not pass, but I detected no distortion or energetic field to explain it at the time. Even now I am unsure of how exactly the effect was accomplished.

Two aspects of the situation were immediately concerning, firstly that the physical attacks that I’d relied on so far were neatly neutralized, and that the Endbringer in question spent most of its time high in the atmosphere and could therefore have had any number of traps prepared for me. The solution that presented itself neatly solved both issues, though for different reasons, and so I closed as close as I could to the Simurgh without being affected by the field and extended the warp gate to encompass the both of us. A cascade of lights proportionate to the expanded size of the aperture fountained around us in a miniature constellation in the instant before we disappeared from the sky above the Earth.

We were barely in subspace for more than a couple of seconds but when we emerged along the inner edge of Edgeworth-Kuiper belt some few hundred kilometers off of an icy bally of frozen hydrocarbons the Endbringer came out looking significantly worse for the wear than I had expected. My intention had only been to separate it from any prepared resources and give myself enough range to hopefully allow the use of the more dangerous armaments I knew were available, but something in the mechanics of my faster than light systems had caused strange and apparently significant damage. At the tips the wings appeared to have burst as new oddly colored material thrust out in gnarled and spiky protrusions, while along its body patches appeared to have experienced unrestricted growth like massive tumours; the left hand and right foot looked more like lumpy clubs than humanoid appendages.

White material flaked off the exterior of the twisted protrusions poking through the outer layer of Endbringer material in a thin, dusty trail of snow in the wake of its passage, which streaked past me as I sped to catch up. More and more material fell off until there were large clouds of the grayish material and it coalesced into swirling storm in miniature with the Simurgh at the center. A wave of the flakes passed over me as I closed in on the Endbringer, briefly plastering my left arm before sweeping past and trailing along the line of my body and then a sudden force impacted me, momentarily slowing my progress.

I recovered easily and redoubled my efforts to catch the Endbringer, of course if I did catch up with it I wasn’t sure what exactly I would do considering I hadn’t been able to touch it after my first strike. At that point I was desperately wishing for some method of attacking at range and as if in answer to that wish, in fact it probably was in answer, something seemed to slide away in the back of my mind. In fact it probably was literally in answer to my prompting. It felt as if thousands of little channels had just been opened up all over my body and were filled with by the vast reservoir of power I had felt before when I’d absorbed Behemoth’s blast.

My arm was swinging forward through the swirling maelstrom of white flakes as soon as I felt the surge, a brilliant pinpoint of light already growing at the tip of my pointer finger. From that brilliant point a beam speared forth a moment later, aimed for the center of the Endbringer’s torso. Power literally flowed in an unbroken stream from my fingertip.

It missed almost completely however, as the creature twisted way from the lance of energy. A spike of the new outgrowths was sheared off, the previously attached edge glowing hotly against the diamond-dust backdrop of countless stars brushed against the inky black anvas. Somehow those swirling flakes were providing some sort of early warning system, though why the Endbringer couldn’t simply keep an eye on my I wasn’t sure; unless it was blind? That explanation made little sense even as I thought about it now despite the fact that we were so far from any
source of light and even the sun was nothing but another star, and though I still wasn’t sure what the actual reason was, it was apparent that the Simurgh relied on something that wasn’t quite visual observation. My solution at that point was simply to drop back, taking myself out of the radius of the storm and take aim again, my beam once again charging.

A stream of white particles sailed in from the left but instead of passing over me some of the little flakes glommed onto my hands or arms, fast enough and with enough force that my aim was once again pulled off even as the Simurgh moved away. Those flecks which hadn’t adhered to me on the first pass came sweeping back over and twisted around my white-scabbed limbs, covering them in more and more material until they resembled fuzzy clubs. I brought my fists together, activating the same functions that I’d used in the previous fights with both Behemoth and Leviathan, instantly turning most of the material into a tiny, brilliant, but very short-lived star right in front of my eyes and then turned my attention back to the Endbringer I was currently engaging. I had expected to find an even more distant white figure retreating ahead of me, but instead I found it bent upon a headlong course right for me.

Several spherical objects were clustered before it, one directly in front of it and five more evenly spaced in a circle around that center, while in its wake larger objects trailed haphazardly. Some of the objects looked like half of an arch, while others might have been pipes, and still others looked like oddly contorted engine blocks from some sort of science fiction car. Everything had the gray-ish off-white coloring of the flakes that had swirled around the Simurgh, but where had it gotten so much material? Not enough had sloughed off of the Endbringer itself seeing as it had not been significantly reduced in size. We were a little over a dozen meters apart as I brought my right hand up for the third time in as many minutes, the point of light already growing on the tip of my finger. I almost had the Endbringer in my line of fire when the spheres exploded and seemed to swallow up the universe in between us. Every form of radiation that I could detect simply vanished into nothingness in an area roughly five hundred meters across. When the utter lack of anything dissipated into the familiar radiation of reality the Simurgh had vanished entirely except for a few errant flakes of material which hung suspended in the lack of gravity and the encrusted clumps that remained on my upper arms.

For the first few minutes following the Endbringer’s disappearance I cast about with my enhanced senses for any sign of it, but even with the enormous range of my sight I couldn’t identify any trace of it anywhere in the immediate area and the further afield I looked the farther back in time I was technically seeing and thus the longer I would have to wait for any sign. I couldn’t just sit there waiting for something to show up and besides Earth, the mostly likely target for any sort of attack, wasn’t even a speck at the distance I had taken us to.

I warped back to Earth, to a position over the middle of the Pacific relatively near where’d we’d left from and for the next couple of hours I darted around the upper atmosphere, skimming through the thin veneer of molecules and searching for any sign of the smallest Endbringer. Nothing turned up, as far as I could tell it had vanished into the blackest reaches of space where I couldn’t feasibly locate it in any less than a few hundred thousand years.

The entire exercise brought up an issue I’d encountered briefly before, namely that I had no real way to monitor things beyond my “visual” range and therefore had to rely on tapping into someone else’s warning systems and lines of communications. Even if I had suborned all the remaining satellites in orbit, those few that remained, most could never provide the quality and quantity of information I would need, being in large part both too old and covering too little of the planet’s surface. What I needed was my own monitoring system in place which could alert me to at least the more obvious incidents like Endbringer attacks and major destructive events.

At that thought Nono had decided to chime in, though I’d sensed her the entire time from before
the Behemoth fight and through my altercation with the Simurgh she hadn’t been beside me so much as it seemed like we were one. Now though she was clearly right beside me, framed against the rays of sunlight creeping over the horizon behind her.

“The Buster Corps,” she had said.

“What?” I’d asked, but then a flood of images appeared in my mind; a red tinged Milky Way, a pulsing swarm of machines of all shapes and sizes keeping an implacable and monstrous enemy at bay with their very bodies, and the chattering of their requests for guidance as they acknowledged their commander.

“Nono can help you rebuild the Buster Corps,” she had told me seriously. “This is the purpose for which they were designed, to defend the Solar System and its inhabitants against dangers which threatened to wipe them out.”

“How do we build them though?” I asked. “I have no tools, and I don’t think there’s anything at all down there,” I pointed towards the planet below us, “that at all measures up to the stuff your people used to build them originally.”

Nono shook her head and said, “No, no, only the seed is needed and then some guidance. Nono can show you how.”

She was offering me exactly what I needed and more even, not just a way to keep myself informed but also possibly a way to help in a very large way with the recovery efforts, though the second possibility would have to be handled very carefully as it could very easily set people off asking all sorts of uncomfortable questions. Of course it sounded, with the mention of “guidance,” like this would not be something I could do from the safety of my home; there would after all be people crawling all over Brockton Bay in the rebuilding effort and I didn’t want to take the chance of someone stumbling over my own project.

Really, anywhere on Earth had been out of the question what with all those Tinkers running around, detecting who knew what, plus the Corps was originally designed for operations in a vacuum. Though they could work in atmosphere I knew, it was probably better to start there. Unfortunately from the sporadic snatches of ground based broadcasts I was picking up my FTL was more than a bit showy and so it would be very difficult to conceal, which probably meant I would need to stay in one place.

It occurred to me that I was basically talking myself into spending who knew how long isolated in the possibly the most remote location in the solar system, completely cut off from my dad and anybody else. No one would really be able to tell I was gone with the chaos that had to be dominating the city in the wake of the attack, no one that is except for my dad who was likely already worried sick. My stomach seemed to drop out into a pit, and I was suddenly unsure of what I should do.

On one hand I desperately needed the base of power that the Corps could provide me and I was increasingly eager to learn everything I could about all of this, but at the same time leaving my Dad alone for that long felt very much like a betrayal of the fragile resurgence of our relationship. That thought had felt vaguely selfish though, was it right to put the good of my relationship with my dad before the chance to help so many more people? I’d already committed myself to being a hero, to doing the right thing, so could I give up on something which would make me so much more effective at that just so I could avoid hurting one person’s feelings?

No, I couldn’t. I felt horrible for making the choice to all but abandon Dad alone but I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I put it off now and down the line even one person paid the price.
Before I warped back out in the farthest reaches of the solar system I assuaged my guilt by sending a message; “Dad, I’m okay. Have to take care of some things. I know I promised I would come back and I’m keeping to it but it’s going to take longer than I thought. I love you, Taylor.” I sent it through every communication network I could get my digital fingers into, hoping desperately that the messages would make it through to him and save him the pain of worrying over me. That done, I vanished back to the far reaches of the solar system.

* * *

Within just a few hours Nono and I had a small pustule of material growing rapidly on the surface of a lonely, icy hydrocarbon snowball, already large enough for me to have curled up inside if it had been hollow. It had grown from a small dollop of shimmering material smaller than my fist and would grow even larger over the next few days, only slowing down once it had the space to begin germinating the drones that were its offspring. With that little blister that would become the mothership for the entirety of the future Buster Corps Nono had shown me how to manipulate and guide that very same future; from the original designs of the first generation of reproducing Buster drones all the way through their evolutionary history in her original universe. There was a vast database to draw upon, with countless variations, modifications, and designs to play with but at the time and even as the hours turned into a full day I didn’t feel comfortable really playing with any of that yet. There was such a vast array of choices available and still so much about the capabilities, advantages, and possible drawbacks of each that I decided at the time it would be a waste of those precious first few drones that would be so important to what I wanted to accomplish.

Thoughts of my plans had turned my mind to my progress with my independent studies over the last few days, though I’d covered years’ worth of material I knew I was nowhere near where I needed to be in order to understand all the intricacies of both my own body and my new creations. What was more, the isolation I had essentially enforced on myself would put me even further behind where I wanted to be. I suppressed the issue in my own mind for the first day or so but toward the end of the second day, not that the clock really meant much of anything in the environment I found myself in except a way to tie myself back to the situation back home, it came to somewhat of a head.

“Nono,” I started saying, pausing to think of how to phrase what I was about to say and then turned my head a fraction to look her right in the eyes. “You know I started studying before we left? I need your help getting back to that, I know you probably wanted to me get farther on my own before you got involved but with what’s happened I need that knowledge sooner rather than later.”

She looked away for a brief moment to look at the growth of the mothership, now bulging out of the asteroid it was attached to like an oddly shaped balloon, before turning back towards me.

“Nono did want you to go farther on your own,” she said, her voice low as if to keep others from overhearing. “Nono was afraid that if she gave you everything you would rely on the Buster Machine too much, that you would not push yourself on your own... but now Nono thinks you are right, that we do not have the time to take it slow anymore. So much more threatens your world than Nono first imagined; the coordination of the Endbringers’ attacks and what Nono observed of the creatures themselves have demonstrated that.”

We at least seemed to agree with one another on what was needed going forward, so I asked,
“What’s next then?”

“In a few more hours the Penelopa -class drone will be far enough along, its central data core developed enough to receive a partial database download that you will be able to enter into it and receive the lessons you need.”

“How long will it take?” I asked.

“Five days, though that will only bring you part of the way,” she answered. “But by then the ship will be almost done, and will have produced a little over two dozen Pararagon -class drones. Nono thinks that that will be enough to start with, enough to watch over most of the landmass of the earth with a few for reconstruction efforts. It will only take two days for full coverage from that point and then the drones that follow may be tasked to patrol of the rest of the solar system and the development of infrastructure.”

And that was that, once the womb-ship had grown a little more and developed the crucial components I entered through a small portal in the side and was quickly ensconced in a tight embrace.

For the next several days I slipped in and out of consciousness. My “dreams” were complex simulations of all the subjects I was learning; physics, biology, engineering, math, and others. Occasionally I would peer through the eyes of first the mothership itself and then later the other drones it produced. I had thought it would be like operating another limb but it was a decidedly disorienting experience; like looking through a pane of glass that distorted all that was viewed through it. Not so much that it was unrecognizable but enough that it took sometimes a moment or two to really understand what I saw.

Once those five days passed the systems released me, though I could have exited on my own at anytime, and I drifted back into the vacuum of space and saw all that had been accomplished. Nono reappeared by my side, smiling as she drifted around me.

“Are you ready to return Taylor?” She asked.

“Absolutely,” I told her, only partially lying. I was ready to go back home, but at the same time I was afraid of the consequences; both in my personal life and due to what I’d done right before I left. Whatever else, I knew that the world would not quietly ignore me after those events, whether everything that had happened was widely known or not I would no longer be anonymous in any shape or form. Worse though was the thought of what my father might think. Would he be angry that I’d stayed away so long? Would he have even gotten my message, and if he had, had he he have believed it? Overall, I think I was more nervous about his reaction than anything else.

A crowd was developing around me, as the drones clustered in close to come along for the ride as I returned home.

“Well, okay. Let’s do this,” I said finally, and then in a burst of light I and the miniature swarm of drones disappeared from the outer edges of the solar systems and reappeared above the swirling blue and white marble of home. Swatches of green or brown broke through in places, mottling the almost paint like appearance.

Quickly the drones shot off, presenting their tentacled trailing limbs to me as they whipped by on their way to their assigned orbits; a few would remained clustered together high above Brockton Bay ready to respond to my call if I felt they were needed. I still had another short hop to make though, and so in another flash of light I disappeared into warp, thinking of home.
Wind streamed over my face as I warped back into reality above the city. As I fell wildly towards the ground my hair was whipped up in front of my face into a curly mess. My hair was briefly plastered to my face as I turned to face the ground before being swept back past my head to trail behind me.

Correction, I would have been falling towards the ground if a new body of water hadn’t appeared in the middle of the city. I had only a moment to try to slow my descent before I crashed into the water, continuing down until I struck a sunken slab of concrete sidewalk. A burp of bubbles churned around my body as the slab split under the impact and released a trapped pocket of air.

The concrete I had come to lay against was under a little less than ten meters of water, though a little ways off I could see the water dip further. Most of the underwater terrain was composed of a mixture of disturbed soil and chunks of asphalt or concrete though here and there were the remains of structures, some of which had survived intact enough to break the surface of the water into clear air.

I kicked off from the remains of the sidewalk, taking care to angle myself towards the shore, and shot through the water like an arrow. Half of a metal blue car poked through some rubble on my right and inside I could see what looked like a pile of clothes. Hopefully, whoever those had belonged to had merely been forced to abandon their property. As I approached the edge of the sinkhole the buildings shifted from apartment buildings to smaller houses, having been centered roughly between two neighborhoods. I slowed down somewhat and once I could keep my feet planted on the bottom and get my head comfortably above the water I started walking.

Water streamed off me as I used a branch of a half tipped over tree to pull myself onto the grassy surface of what had once been a small park. Sand trickled through a crack in the siding of the abandoned play pit where the swings and jungle gym just barely still stood. Past the edge of the park, just a block further down, I could see police barricades plastered with warning tape and one of those light up traffic signs facing away from me so I couldn’t read what it said.

In the sky the shattered panes of reality through which I had returned were knitting themselves back together. Given how attention grabbing the effects of my warping were I doubted my arrival had gone unnoticed. Thankfully though I couldn’t see any activity in the immediate area so evidently I’d gone at least somewhat unnoticed, hopefully I could just disappear into the city and find Dad. With the state of the city I doubted my picture could have gotten out to too many people so I probably didn’t need to worry too much about everyone recognizing me off the bat. Sooner or later I would have to deal with the fallout of my actions though and start dealing with what others would make of me. Right now my priority had to be getting back to Dad, to make sure he was alright. To avoid attention, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to find a change of clothes just so no one would recognize my “costume”.

Where could I find clothes though, maybe inside one of th-

“Did it hurt?” A voice asked from off to my right.

I whipped my head up and around until my gaze settled on a blonde girl standing just a few meters away between a couple of tall trees, a cell phone clutched in her hand. She was roughly around my age, maybe a little older, and pretty in an unassuming way with freckles scattered across her cheeks and sharp clear eyes. She seemed vaguely familiar somehow, but I didn’t think she went to Winslow so pinpointing where I might have seen her from would be difficult. There were too many
possibilities to run through right now, but the simple fact that she was here did not endear me to her in any shape or form. Of course it could just be coincidence, but what were the chances of running into someone randomly just as I returned without them having been laying in wait for me?

“What?” I asked, though a dozen other more pointed questions ran through my head, I decided to play dumb, hopefully she would figure I was just a normal teenager playing around in a dangerous place I shouldn’t be and leave me alone.

“When you fell from heaven,” the blonde answered, her face holding perfectly still for a moment before she let out a small laugh. “Sorry, couldn’t resist the bad joke.”

“What,” I said. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“No playing dumb now,” she wagged her finger. “Won’t work anyways. Technically we’ve already met, but I guess I should introduce myself again. Tattletale,” she finished, hand outstretched to shake.

Of course, with my luck I would run smack into a villain the second I got back. Why was she out of costume though, and where were the rest of her little gang, waiting out of sight in case she couldn’t take me down herself? I couldn’t find them even with my enhanced senses though, at least not anywhere close by so either they were a lot better at hiding than I was at searching or they weren’t here.

“Just tell me what do you want?” I asked, backing away from her a little. She dropped her hand.

“Straight to business, I see,” she said. “Well, the question’s a little complicated. What I want is straightforward enough; you won’t even have to get your hands dirty, morally speaking.”

“Well, what is it you want from me? I won’t promise anything until I know what it is I’m agreeing to do for you.” I told her firmly, confused as all hell. What the hell could someone like her want me to do that wouldn’t be six different kinds of rotten?

“I want you to save me,” She said simply, spreading her arms before her as if to say “that’s all.”

I stared at her for several seconds. How the hell was I supposed to respond to that?

“What?” I finally asked.

“Recent events have shed some light on some matters concerning my current employer which have convinced me that I need to get myself out from under his thumb,” she said.

“So?” I asked. “You have a team, get them to help you.”

“Nothing more than a partnership of convenience,” she shrugged. “And his power lets him manipulate events to favor himself, I’m not quite sure how, which has so far very neatly stymied my own so far.”

I searched my memory for any local villains who matched that sort of description but couldn’t think of any. No one knew what Coil’s power was supposed to be, but then again he might not even have have one; over the years there had been a few normal humans who’d adopted cape personas. Usually they were in entertainment or something, but the idea of a cape gangster wasn’t so weird when it came down to it. Of course it might also be some parahuman who had managed to keep their powers secret, or it might be someone from out of town.

“A name would be helpful, I can’t do anything if I don’t have someone to go after,” I told her.
“Shit! Sorry,” she said, waving the screen of her phone to show me the word alert spelled out all in big red capital letters. “We just ran out of time.”

“Hey, wait!” I called after her. “I thought you wanted my help?”

She didn’t turn back to answer, just waved her hand as if brushing my question away, “We’ll talk later, don’t worry about finding me, I’ll come to you.”

“Hey!” I shouted after her again. “Hold up! I haven’t agreed to anything!”

I was about to go after her when I saw what she’d been warned about. From a disembodied vantage point I could see a crowd of Protectorate capes converging, obviously having maneuvered to surround the area. Shit! Not just local members either, but big names too like Alexandria, and Eidolon with twin trails of capes behind them, and though I didn’t recognize any of them the sheer amount of capes was a problem. I’d known the reaction to my actions would be significant but this seemed a lot less friendly than I’d been expecting. Now I really needed to get out of here without getting caught.

Thankfully they obviously didn’t know exactly where I was because they were still fairly spread out, but going by the fact that they were quickly encroaching on the park they seemed to have a general direction.

Had Tattletale tipped them off for some reason? No, she seemed to have expected to have more time so unless it was all some sort of misdirect I didn’t think that made much sense so there had to have been a witness of some kind; either someone who happened to catch a glimpse of me out of a window or some sort of surveillance system. I reached out briefly, probing to see if I could sense any networks in the area which could have been some sort camera network but just as quickly I gave up. I needed to focus on getting out of here, I hadn’t actually done anything wrong of course but I knew there would be questions but I didn’t want to deal with them until after I’d found Dad.

I dashed in the direction Tattletale had gone. Mostly looking for to get under the cover of the trees, to avoid being spotted from the air, but it also happened to be the shortest route towards a street. A change of clothes would be good too, it wasn’t as if my costume was all that distinctive but trying to blend in as much as I could wasn’t a bad idea. My options were kind of limited, and growing more so by the second.

I dashed across the street from the park to a row of houses and peered in through the front window of the first house I reached. There was no evidence of anyone within but I gave a sharp knock on the door as I approached it anyways and waited for any sign of life. No new sounds emerged, so I tested the door gently; locked. I could Brute force the door but that would make a lot of noise, but I didn’t immediately see any other options which didn’t have the same risk. I glanced around, searching for one of those fake rock things people sometimes bought to hide spare keys in but there wasn’t anything that looked anything like that. The flood waters would probably have carried anything like that away anyways, given the state of the yards all down the street, in fact I was a little surprised the windows have survived the waters, but then it might just have been that the water didn’t get that high up this far away from Leviathan’s attack.

I tested my weight against the door again, it moved a little but only the tiny amount allowed by the bolt lock. I was almost ready to give up when I figured it couldn’t hurt to ask Nono if she had any ideas, no sooner had I had the thought than she was leaning down besides me, peering at the door lock. After a moment she looked back at me a little disapprovingly.

“I don’t like it either,” I told her defensively, and it was true; the idea of breaking into someone’s house was leaving me feeling a little queasy. “But I like the idea of answering whatever questions
the Protecorate has even less. Besides we know their address, I can always figure out who the stuff belongs to later and make it up to them.”

The idea seemed to mollify her because she turned back to the door for a moment before an idea seemed to strike her and she turned to me again and said, “Don’t be alarmed, Taylor.”

She reached up and made a motion with her hand, at the same instant my vision changed; strange new colors replaced the familiar palette of everyday life and everything around me became distorted, almost like it was shifting between two different states rapidly.

“Focus on the lock,” Nono’s voice whispered in my ear, and as I looked towards where I knew the lock was and did as she told me, it seemed to come into focus. Details solidified, except that instead of just the typical brassy outer surface I could make out the latch itself, the screws anchoring everything to the wood of the door, and the tumbler with its pins inside. A tickling sensation ran up my arm, and I once again felt the now familiar sensation of a new ability coming into focus; like an unused but healthy muscle suddenly coming to life at once hot and heavy with the flow of new blood and light with the sudden lifting of dead weight.

I knew what I needed to do. I stretched out with invisible fingers for the mechanism of the lock, feeling a strange tacky sensation as the little bits of the lock briefly jiggled in place. I waited a moment, but nothing more happened, so I reached out and brushed over the device again. There was no significant effect.

“Gentler, slower,” Nono whispered in my ear. Vague memories of Mom’s voice, murmuring in my ear as she taught me to read, brushed at the back of mind at the sound of her voice. “Imagine dozens of tiny fingers.”

A cluster of tiny mechanical spiders, their abdomens filled with whirring gears and their eyes tiny little cameras, each suspended from a web of wire, came to mind at the suggestions. I imagined them crawling inside the lock and working their way through the small gaps until they were each position- then I tugged at their webs and sent them all into motion.

Before my eyes, the pins smoothly slid up and turned slightly. I held them in position and reached out with one hand, gripped the knob, and turned. The door opened with a slight squeak, revealing the darkened entryway of the house.

Once inside I set about looking for any clothes that would even slightly fit me. The house looked to belong to a family of three; mom, dad, and a little girl of about eleven going by the pictures in the living room. The girl’s stuff was right out, but any of the mom’s or dad’s stuff looked like it might fit as both looked to be about my size, so I went searching for the parent’s room. The house was oddly clean, at least it was a lot cleaner than I expected an abandoned house to be especially one so close to a sinkhole. Really the only sign of anything out of the ordinary were a few pieces of clothing scattered in the hallway leading to the bedrooms and a few cushions knocked to the floor in the living room.

The actual bedroom showed more evidence of panic. Drawers had been left open, or sometimes pulled right out of their slots and upended to empty them of their contents. Clothes that they hadn’t taken with them had been left in piles scattered on the floor and crumpled up on the bedspread. A body length mirror had tipped over and cracked on the corner of one of the dressers and in the process had knocked over a bottle of lotion which had spilled onto the carpet and dried out into a brownish encrustation.

Avoiding any shards of mirror and the spilled lotion I quickly perused the available clothes, the dad’s stuff was mostly too big around the waist and chest while the mom’s was for someone at
least a few inches shorter than me. The extra room of the guy’s clothes might even be an advantage and serve to hide what little figure I had at a distance. I picked out a university sweater which had probably been a bit too large for the man who’d originally bought it, a pair of cargo pants, and a belt to keep the pants from falling. In a few moments I was out of my old clothes and in my pilfered outfit.

As I moved through the house searching for clothes I’d kept an eye on the patrolling heroes, they were close now, in fact one of the capes I didn’t recognize was setting down in the park where I’d met Tattletale. I didn’t know if whatever his power was would allow him to figure out I’d been there but seeing as I was changed it was time to get moving anyways. On my way out I grabbed a paper bag from a stack they had next to the recycling bin and stuffed the dress into it as well as grabbing a baseball cap with the logo of some team I’d never heard of on it. I didn't want to go out the front door, with one cape already in the park it would be too exposed. Instead I went to the other end of the house and squeezed out of a bathroom window which opened onto the back alley.

Over the next several minutes I managed to avoid being seen by any of the increasingly nearby capes or making any loud noises which might draw their attention. Now that I was a block past my original position and half a block past the barricades I figured that I was probably more or less safe from arousing suspicion if I was spotted. The only troublesome point had been when I’d reached the barricades themselves. Most of the officers only seemed to be partly paying attention though, and they were few and far between anyways; it made sense, because the majority of PRT and police officers had to be tied up with more important duties.

I went through the gap between the two houses and crept along the alley way until I could see the closest pair of officers. The two men were leaning against the side of one of the vehicles facing towards the sinkhole and chatting away. They were close enough that if I just walked right out they were sure to see me, but so long as I only peeked around the corner of the garage I was hiding behind they weren’t going to notice me. I could just make out what they were saying.

"...only meant that I keep expecting someone to try something,” said the closer of the two men.

“With two thirds of the Triumvirate sitting at headquarters?” Asked the other one incredulously.

“Who do you think is stupid enough to tr-”

The officer closer to the car door stopped mid sentence to reach inside through the open window and grab the radio. I took the opportunity as both of them were now turned fully away and distracted to dash forward, dropping once I’d reached a gap between two of the vehicles. I popped briefly back up just enough to get a glimpse of the two officers and make sure they hadn’t heard or seen me while I’d made the trip. Both were still distracted by whatever was being said to them over the radio for another moment, then the one who’d reached in to grab it said responded briefly before leaning back in through the window to put it away again. I sighed quietly in relief once the men had turned away again, and resumed their conversation. After a quick glance back to make sure neither was even glancing in my direction, I took off at a sprint for the other side of the street, aiming for a tall tree only one yard away.

Now I needed to find Dad, and to do that I needed to angle round the sinkhole to get home. Assuming he was home- which assumed that it had survived intact, but a quick glance verified that it had- but where else would he be? His office had been located down by the docks and was likely unusable, though I suppose he might be meeting with the dockworkers at some temporary meeting place. He would return home sooner or later though. I would have called him except that I’d lost my phone somewhere between fighting Leviathan and ending up in deep space. Ultimately I didn't have much of a choice except to do things the hard way.
This far from the bay the damage done to the city was a lot less intense than I’d expected, here and there people were going about life and if I hadn’t known many parts of the city didn’t have basic functional utilities I wouldn’t have batted an eye. But I did, and so I knew that the bottles of water people carried weren’t just conveniences but necessary, that the absence of cars on the street wasn’t the sign of a quiet day but because of the scarcity of fuel, and that the more frequent appearance of police cars wasn’t simply random chance but a necessary precaution to alleviate fear. Even so, this area of the city was lucky because it was so far from the water and hadn’t been as hard hit, plus it was in general more affluent and so was probably receiving more attention in an official capacity than other parts of the city. As I circumnavigated the sinkhole towards home, the damage became more intense; the roofs of some houses had been all but torn off and others had been essentially knocked to the ground. Some people were beginning the process of repairing the damage to their homes and others were simply picking through the wreckage of their lives searching for something to salvage.

I was about two and a half kilometers from the house when I saw a gathering of maybe fifteen people clustered on a relatively clear lawn, as I neared I saw they were clustered around a television hooked up to an antenna someone had managed to salvage. I sped up my pace a little, I was interested to see what had gotten the interest of so many people though it could have just been the novelty of a working TV with the state of the city. The screen had a crack in one corner, which though it distorted the colors of the image still left it recognizable. On screen a man in a suit stood in front of the PRT building, PRT officers to his left and right and a cluster of microphones in front of him.

“...details to release at this time,” said the balding bureaucrat on screen.

The camera kept on the man as a voice, presumably from some reporter, shouted from off screen, “Online sources are claiming to have Princess’s identity! What steps, if any is the PRT taking to verify these claims, and or protect her privacy?”

“Princess is not, as of this time, a member of the Protectorate or the Wards and so the actual measures we are able to take to protect her identity are limited.” A tense smile from the man on screen this time, shifting into a more stern expression. “We are investigating the claims themselves, and if any criminal violations of privacy have been committed the PRT will of course bring its full force to bear on the individuals responsible. At this time the PRT would like to remind the public that rumors from such sources cannot be trusted and urge news organizations to be cautious in how it reports on these rumors.”

“Now, crews will be working on power lines between Mayberry and Fairview today from ten…” The man continued but I tuned him out, as did a number of other people watching. Holy shit, had my identity been revealed? I turned away from the crowd and started walking away, hiding as much of my face as possible in case my name really was out there.

It was possible, like the man said, that someone online had simply chosen a name at random and claimed that as the secret identity of Princess but it was also possible that someone really had figured out it was me and gone blabbing. How hard would it really be to figure out? Not that hard, I concluded as I thought about the question and it wasn’t even because my costume sucked so much. Even with a better costume I doubted I could have hidden enough identifying characteristics to protect my identity that much; things like my hair, height, sex, age, and skin color would all be relatively apparent no matter what I did. All of which could probably be easily brought together and used in conjunction with the dates of my first appearance to create some sort of list of likely candidates for anyone with enough time and resources. After all, I’d done something eerily similar when I was looking for Lung the first time.
Shit, that meant the PRT or Protectorate probably had Dad under some sort of surveillance, at least if they were at all interested in finding me. If I went right home, even if he was there at the time, they would be there in minutes armed with all the questions I wasn’t quite ready to answer. I needed some way of getting in contact with Dad without communicating directly with him, some way to get him to meet me somewhere they wouldn’t be watching and also wouldn’t be suspicious of. All I wanted was the time and space to talk to him without worrying about other people’s questions, so that I could figure out what the possibility of my exposed identity and what my heavier involvement in the broader world would mean for us.

I tried to remember the names of Dad’s friends from work, it had been years since I’d seen any of them and I’d never gotten to know them terribly well anyways, given my age. The last time I’d seen any of them was at Mom’s funeral. I remember a big burly man who’s name started with a “k”; was it Kenny? Kyle? Keith? No, none of those sounded right.

“Nono,” I whispered. “Can you find a list of members of the Dockworkers Union?”

“One moment,” she answered and I waited a tense few moments before she continued. “Nono has it, but it might be out of date, who are you looking for?”

“A friend of my Dad’s, his name starts with a ‘k’ but I don’t remember anything else, it’s been a few years since I’ve seen him,” I told her.

A few more moments passed, and then a list of names starting scrolling right past my eyes, there were apparently a lot more dockworkers with names that started with k’s than I’d anticipated. A couple of familiar names flashed past, “There!”

Two Kurts, but I didn’t know which one was the right one. “His wife’s name is Lacey, I think,” I told her. I only remembered her because she’d tried to comfort me during the funeral.

At the time I’d felt irritated, I knew it was irrational now and had even somewhat been aware then but at the moment I’d felt she was trying to replace Mom. Later I recognized that she had simply been trying to comfort me but I don’t think I’d been very receptive at the time.

One of the names disappeared, leaving me staring at the name Kurt Brown and its attendant address. The house still stood, but it was also a good deal farther away from me, past even my house and a deal closer to the docks. Well if I wanted to avoid any possible surveillance of my house or my Dad they were probably my best bet for being able to get in contact with him. Hopefully either Kurt or his wife would be home when I got there.

*  

It was a little afternoon by the time I got near the Brown’s house and the condition of the surroundings had worsened as I’d walked. Most of the houses were still standing relatively intact, but there was a lot less of an official presence, and much more evidence of the lack of utilities. Though the area had been essentially on the direct path of Leviathan’s initial attack it was more towards the outskirts of the city and so the intervening neighborhoods had absorbed a lot of the damage. Still I could see some homes abandoned due to obvious cracking along the foundations or because a weak wall had simply fallen, as I walked.
I thanked any listening gods when I neared the correct address and saw a car parked in front of a relatively well-kept lawn. The house itself was a single story, nice for the area at least before Leviathan struck. Probably because it was on a slight hill their house and the surrounding houses had survived mostly intact. Carefully I walked up to the front door, keeping an eye out for any possible spies; I didn’t think anyone was likely to be watching the house or its owners but it didn’t hurt to keep myself aware. I rapped my knuckles against the door and waited.

A moment later the door opened and a large, well muscled woman stared out at me, her arm partially behind the door.

“Taylor?” She sounded a little stunned, and I was surprised she recognized me given that she hadn’t seen me in at least a couple of years but then Dad might have shown her a recent picture or something.

“Hi, Mrs. Brown,” I said, suddenly unsure of what I should say to her. What would she have heard? Had she heard the rumors, if they existed, that claimed I was Princess?

“Sweetie, what are you doing here? Is your Dad with you?” She asked.

“Uh, no,” I told her. “Actually, that’s kind of why I’m here, can we go inside?”

“What? Oh, of course,” she answered, stepping to the side to let me pass by her. As I walked by her I noticed that her hand was close to the handle of a wooden baseball bat that leaned against the wall behind the door and once the door was closed Lacey led me into the kitchen.

“Do you want something to drink?” She asked, opening the refrigerator.

“No, thanks,” I told her. “I lost my phone, so I was wondering if you could call my Dad for me? But, uh, don’t mention I’m here because I think someone might be watching him.”

She was already reaching for her phone when I added the last part, and suddenly a shocked expression came over her face.

“Honey, is everything alright?” She assured me.

“No, I mean, yes, sort of,” I struggled to find a way to explain without really explaining what was going on. “It’s complicated and I can’t really explain, I just need to talk to my Dad.”

Lacey looked at me for a couple of moments, her expression searching. I wondered what I must look like to her, dressed in clothes too big for me that were obviously not my own, carrying a paper bag with a crumpled dress balled up in it, showing up in the middle of the day. She seemed to make a decision an instant later.

“Tell you what, I’ll call Kurt and tell him to bring your dad by for lunch, how’s that?” She asked.

“Thanks,” I said, smiling and relaxing at her suggestion.

I didn’t listen to the specifics of the conversation that followed between her and her husband except to make sure my name wasn’t in there, Lacey was actually surprisingly adept at sounding very casual while making it absolutely clear that Kurt ought not to be late. I wondered if it was a skill she’d developed over the years, or whether it was just a talent she had?

“The boys should be here in half an hour,” She told me as she hung up. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell me what’s going on?”
“No,” I assured her. “I don’t want to cause you anymore trouble.”

“No honey,” she said. “Just so you know, I ain’t in the habit of quitting on anyone when things get tough. Me an’ Kurt wouldn’t be where we are if I was, so you can tell me anything you like so long as you ain’t planning on hurting someone else.”

I smiled at that, it was sweet of her to offer but I wasn’t ready for that yet. Maybe once I’d talked to Dad I would, as a sort of test case for how it might go with other people, because I had the sinking feeling that whatever I wanted my identity was not going to be staying secret for very long. I settled into the chair to wait for Dad to arrive. An awkward silence settled over us both, interrupted only by her repeated offer of something to eat or drink which I declined again. After that she decided to start preparing something for lunch and began hauling out sandwich supplies from the fridge and cabinets while I waited in silence for them to arrive.

Maybe twenty minutes later I heard the sounds of a car pulling up outside and its engine cutting out, I stood up and took a few short steps until I was standing facing the entrance. Lacey came up to stand beside me and a tense moment or two passed as we waited for the door to open, when it did Kurt came through first with my Dad trailing just behind him.

“Honey-” He began to say.

“Taylor!” Dad cried out, pushing past his friend and sweeping me up in his embrace the instant he reached me. I was lifted briefly off my feet as he pulled me as close as he possibly could, if I had needed to breathe he would probably have been smothering me more than a little.

“Hey Dad,” I whispered against his shoulder, feeling a little lame at the words but he laughed out loud in response.

“Kiddo, where were you?” He asked.

“I tried to send you a message before I left, but I wasn’t sure if you got it,” I told him.

“I know, I got it,” he said. “But you didn’t exactly say when you would be back.”

“Right, sorry,” I said hesitantly, unsure of how to start the conversation I really wanted to have.

“Listen Dad, there are some things I need to tell you about,” Lacey looked me straight in the eye over Dad’s shoulder briefly and then led Kurt out of the door to give us some privacy. “I need you to just listen at first; not to react to what I tell you until I’ve finished because this is hard enough for me.”

“Taylor, you’re scaring me a little,” he said a little shakily, pulling back to look me in the eye and furrowing his brow.

“Well, the truth is…” I began, and then I told him everything.

Everything that seemed important at least; I told him how it all started. I told him about the months that followed where I experimented with my powers, testing the limits of my durability. Eventually I told him about my first night out, about fighting Oni Lee and then Lung. It wasn’t until I got to the moment when Nono first appeared I hesitated.

“Alright, this is where things really start getting weird,” I said after a moment. “Sometimes when someone becomes a parahuman they get more in the bargain than just powers, you know the ones I’m talking about; the ones that don’t look human anymore.”

Dad nodded along, a confused expression on his face as he waited for explain exactly what I was
getting at. I think he probably had some vague ideas swirling in his head after the mention of the case-53’s, but I doubted he was thinking anything close to the truth.

“Well, that’s me,” I said. “I mean obviously I still look like, well, me but when I got my powers they did more than just make me virtually invincible; in fact they changed the entire way my body works.”

As I got further and further into explaining the new weird facts of my life I realised that my explanation was a little bit disingenuous; from everything Nono had told me I knew that my “powers” were in actuality a great deal different from most parahumans’s. Dropping all of it on him at once probably wouldn’t do much good though.

“The reality is that all of that stuff; the invincibility, the flight, the super strength, and the rest are side effects of my new body.” I gave myself a moment to gather my thoughts before I continued.

“I’m not human anymore,” I blurted out. “Not really, I mean I’m still me, but I don’t have flesh and blood like I used to; my skin is rated to withstand the inside of a star, I can see colors I never dreamed of before and through solid surfaces, and I can never forget anything ever again. My body is a machine from the most ridiculous sci-fi movie you’ve ever seen.”

Dad still hadn’t said anything, and though his face was now a sort of blank slate which revealed nothing about what he might be thinking I was still glad because actually saying this stuff out loud to someone other than myself was probably the hardest thing I’d ever done. Somehow telling Dad was making it seem all the more real. That was nonsense of course, saying it didn’t change anything about the reality of the situation but I couldn’t exactly stop myself from feeling how I felt and I was finally feeling like it was reality and not some absurd hallucination. Strangely, my telling him was making it easier to accept the situation for what it was, still it wasn’t an easy thing to explain by any stretch.

“I freaked out for a while and just sort of pushed those thoughts out of my head, just tried to focus on the more exciting parts of having abilities like I do, which is why I never told you any of this,” I told him. “I wasn’t even sure how I was feeling about most of this stuff, much less how you would react; I didn’t want to scare you away or make you feel like you’d lost me or anything, especially not after we started fixing things in our lives.”

That caused a reaction, Dad’s eyes widened for a split second and then he had crossed the small distance between us and wrapped me up in what would have been another bone crushing hug.

“You,” his voice rasped in my ear. “Will always be my daughter, no matter what. Do you understand me? I don’t care if you turn into a spider, you will always be the best of me and your mother, ok kiddo?”

There was a hard lump in my throat, and I tried to swallow past it but it felt like I was trying to swallow my entire throat with it and so I just nodded into his shoulder. Hearing Dad say those words felt like an enormous relief, the truth was that even though I’d be running around dealing with all this weird shit I’d always been most afraid that at the end of it all Dad wouldn’t recognize me, wouldn’t see me anymore. Here he was though, reaffirming that I was his daughter no matter; sure maybe he hadn’t fully grasped the situation but, after hiding this stuff from him for so long, it was like smashing open the floodgates. I sobbed into his shoulder for several long minutes, in a way I hadn’t done since Mom’s funeral.

Finally I extracted myself from his grip, took a moment to wipe away the residue of tears from my eyes and smile at Dad with a renewed appreciation for how much he’d really come through for me since those first few weeks after Mom died.
“Thanks, Dad, I really needed to hear that,” I said to him. “But there’s a little more. I didn’t just get a new body in the deal, I don’t know what to call her; partner maybe? Or co-pilot? Friend would work too, I guess, but the point is that she’s been helping me ever since my first real fight and I’d like for the two of you to meet.”

A confused look came over his face, as nothing seemed to happen for a moment, but then a light shimmered to my left and Nono appeared in her all her garishly pink glory.

“Dad, meet Nono,” I said, gesturing from him to her. “Nono meet Danny Hebert,” I repeated the gesture in reverse.

They each watched each other, Dad with a stunned and somewhat blank look on his face and Nono with a big grin on hers.
“Well it’s, uh, nice to meet you Nono,” Dad said after a moment or two had passed, at the same time extending his hand somewhat awkwardly to shake.

“Nono is very glad to be introduced to you, Danny!” she responded, enthusiastically shaking his offered hand.

Another moment of somewhat awkward silence stretched between the three of us once the two of them had released each others hand. Dad turned towards me and, glancing back towards Nono periodically, told me, “To be honest Taylor, I’m not really sure what to make of all of this, it’s a lot to take in. All I want to do right now is wrap in my arms, take you home, and make sure you never leave my sight again, but I know that can’t happen.”

“Dad…” I started to say before his hands came up and gripped my shoulders gently.

“No Taylor, I know it can’t. You wouldn’t let me, there’s too much of your mother in you,” he said, his right hand reaching out to stroke my face gently. “You just can’t hide away when there’s something you can do to help. Even if you could, it wouldn’t matter much kiddo; what you did has people talking everywhere. With everything going on in the city we haven’t gotten much of it here, but what we did get has been enough for me to guess what it’s like in other places. I just wish I could protect you from everything that’s about to happen, from everything that’s already happened.”

I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around him. He was right that I wouldn’t have been able to stand sitting back if something happened, though part of me was starting to wish it was an option. The more I thought about all the questions people would have, the more I wished that all of this had never happened; which I immediately regretted because I could barely imagine my life without everything that had happened in the last few months. When I considered how things had been at school I wasn’t sure what I would have done if I hadn't gotten my powers and if Nono hadn’t appeared and that scared me.

“I’m not sure what to do,” I told Dad as I continued to hold onto him. “I know people are going to have all sorts of questions and I know I can’t hide; I think someone maybe know that it was me; as in ME, me. But I just don’t know what to say.”

“I know it’s scary Taylor,” Dad said as he stroked my hair and pulled me tight to his chest. “And I can’t tell you what to do, but I can promise you that I will be there with you every step of the way, okay? I’m in this with you, kiddo.”

I nodded against his chest. It was such a relief to hear him say things like that out loud because, as horrible as it sounded even in my own head, after the way he’d just sort of given up after Mom died I’d given up on him in a lot of ways. Even though I knew that he was trying now it was sometimes still hard to remember that I could count on him, but hearing the words from his own mouth was like lifting a weight from my stomach.

“Nono will be there too!” she piped up over my shoulder.

“Err, right… and Nono too,” Dad’s said, having clearly forgotten completely about her in the last couple of minutes. I laughed at the thought of the two of them interacting more in the future, I wasn’t sure what would come from introducing the two but I was sure it wouldn’t make things simpler.
After that Kurt and Lacey came back inside, Nono of course made herself scarce at least so far as everyone else could tell, and we ate. Lunch was some simple sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly. Power was inconsistent so a lot of food had started going bad pretty quickly in the aftermath of the attack, even now the power wasn’t on most of the time and so the Browns had to rely on stuff that kept longer without refrigeration. The situation was worse at our house, Dad had to throw out everything a couple of days ago because the power hadn’t come back on even once since Leviathan had struck and he hadn’t actually spent a night the entire time I’d been gone.

The Dockworkers Association had set up a temporary headquarters in an old abandoned warehouse that had managed to retain most of its roof and were working with the authorities to distribute supplies. Dad slept there most nights. Rumors were circulating that the more well to do areas of the city already had power back and that all the supplies were going there first; Dad said it wasn’t true, but Kurt wasn’t so sure. Whoever was right, they both agreed it didn’t matter because enough people believed it that there might be trouble soon unless something changed.

As I listened to them talk about the state of the city and the feelings of the people they saw daily I felt a little guilty for not having somehow done more to prevent the devastation. I recognized that there was little more I could have done. After all, without knowing the attack was coming there wasn’t really anything I could have done to prepare or to change my response. There was plenty I could do now though, with the Buster Corps I could rapidly affect change on the situation of the city and its inhabitants much faster than was possible for the regular disaster relief agencies. Of course doing so would only invite more questions, but my comfort seemed a small price to pay.

Once the food was gone, Dad and I talked some more. We had to be a little circumspect because I didn’t want to throw Lacey and Kurt out of their own house again, so all we really ended up establishing was that both of us had suspicions that Dad was being watched. Lacey was quick to offer their home for me stay the night, or “however long I needed” as she put it. I didn’t plan on needing it for longer than the night. The more I thought about it the more I felt that it would be better to “go public” so to speak, as soon as possible, and I said as much to Dad; at the very least I could talk to the PRT and the Protectorate and figure out where I stood. Dad agreed that we would go to the PRT Headquarters in the morning. Once I’d done that I would consider how I was going to interact with the media and figure out for sure how screwed my secret identity was.

All too soon we both sensed that it was probably time for Dad and Kurt to go back. Lacey and Kurt disagreed, they thought my dad could stand to stick around at least for a while longer but he and I both understood that for now it would be best to pretend nothing had changed. Strictly speaking it probably wasn’t really necessary that we be so cloak and dagger about the situation, it wasn’t like the Protectorate would come crashing down just to start a fight in the middle of the Browns’ living room, but it made us feel in control. For myself, I’d been screwed over by the people in power too much to invest much trust in them having my best interest at heart; I don’t know whether Dad was just humoring me or he felt the same but whatever the reason we were on the same page for the moment.

“I love you Taylor,” Dad said into the top of my head as we hugged again. “No matter what.”

I gave him a squeeze, not too hard. “I know Dad, and… I’m sorry, for putting you through all of this.” For not telling you sooner, for not trusting you more, for putting you in danger, and a dozen other things I couldn’t say out loud.

“Listen kiddo,” he said, one hand reaching up to tilt my head back up so we were looking each other in the eyes. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for, it’s not your job to look out for me. Your dear old Dad still knows how to take care of himself, okay?”
I nodded, not in agreement but because I knew it was what he wanted to see. I don’t think he even really expected me to listen, after all I was the one who was invincible but it felt good to pretend for just a little longer we were just a normal father and daughter. He smiled and kissed the top of my head gently, I closed my eyes and savored the feeling of being here in the comforting arms of Dad. I knew nothing had really changed out in the world, but I felt better having told the one person who really mattered about all the merging weirdness of my life.

Dad and Kurt left a minute later, I watched the car disappear down the street and around the corner. The rest of the afternoon I spent in occasionally awkward silence with Lacey, punctuated by the occasional update on the state of the city or the outside world. Which is how I learned exactly how big of a deal was being made of me in the outside world; I was apparently being called what amounted to a distaff counterpart to Scion. I wasn’t sure how to feel about that, being compared to the first parahuman was at once flattering and scary. People had nicknames for me apparently too, though Lacey didn’t really know many of them because news filtered into the city only sporadically and people didn’t end up paying much attention anyways. In fact the only one she could remember was “Our Goddess in Peach.”

When Lacey’s husband came back home later in the evening the conversation turned to the more mundane aspects of life in Brockton Bay. At least, mundane compared to cape stuff because I wasn’t sure how mundane I really considered most of the city being without basic utilities. The major emerging issue was turning out to be mold and mildew, which was springing up all across the city. The problem was, even as some homes and buildings became essentially uninhabitable there wasn’t really anywhere else for people to go; what shelters were available were already overcrowded as it was, and though more were being set up there still wouldn’t be room for everyone. A lot of people were leaving the city, those that could that was.

It was hard to be optimistic about the fate of Brockton Bay, though they tried as much as possible to emphasize that it wasn’t all doom and disaster. For instance, none of the villains had taken advantage of the situation so far, which was likely in part due to the presence of two thirds of the Triumvirate. Kurt and Lacey weren’t sure how long the relative peace would last, sooner or later Eidolon and Alexandria would have to leave and then, unless Princess showed up again, things would probably get pretty bad fast they said.

I went to sleep even more determined to do something.

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When I got up in the morning the sun was only barely starting to reach over the horizon. I got up from the couch, still in the clothes I procured yesterday, and folded the blankets they’d given me for sleeping.

It was 5:47:13 AM, Dad had said he would be here at six and then we would head to the PRT headquarters together. Once again I was glad I didn’t have to do this alone. In this case Nono didn’t really count, I wasn’t saying she wasn’t a person or anything just that it would be nice to have some support that wouldn’t make me look crazy when I started talking to them. Plus I expected at some point they would try and get me to join the Wards, and Dad might not completely understand why I wasn’t open to the idea of joining them I was at least confident he would back my decision.
“Ready Taylor?” Nono asked, appearing to my right.

“No,” I said flatly. “But I don’t think it really matters whether I’m ready or not. Anyway, I know what I’m going to tell them.”

Nono smiled and gave me a thumbs up at that. A few minutes later, just before six, I heard the noise of a car engine and opened the front door to see Dad driving up the street. Once he’d parked and gotten out we hugged again for a minute or two.

“Are you sure about this, Taylor?” Dad asked as we started on our way.

“No,” I said before correct myself in the next breath, “Yes. I mean, I’m sure I have to do it, I just don’t want to.”

“Nono is ready too!” Dad and I looked back towards the rear drivers side seat to see Nono grinning broad back at us. I noticed she was properly buckled in and everything.

“You’re an immaterial projection, why did you buckle in?” I asked her.

Nono gave me an affronted look, as if I’d just said something terribly offensive. “Safety first Taylor!”

Dad glanced at m out of the corner of his eyes as I chuckled, and then glance just as quickly up into the rearview mirror at Nono. None of us said much of anything else as we continued towards the shore and the PRT headquarters, though I got more nervous as we went. At this time in the morning the city looked almost abandoned, and for good reason given the debris still scattered all over some streets and the damage inflicted on homes and buildings. Here and there I saw small clusters of people camped out in alleys or on lawns. I would have mistaken them for your typical homeless if I hadn’t known that a little over a week ago those same people would probably have been waking up in nice comfortable homes.

Just a few blocks before the headquarters came into view Nono disappeared. My nervousness reached a peak as we pulled into the public part of the buried parking garage and I had to force myself to move to get out of the car. We passed a tired looking trio of PRT employees apparently just coming off of the night shift on our way to the bank of elevators that would take us to the lobby. We got on with a woman and what looked to be her seven or eight year old son who were apparently going up to the third floor, I wondered briefly what was up there.

The lobby was basically the same as I remembered it from the pre-Leviathan meeting, just a little worse for wear; some of the paint was peeling and I thought the carpeting looked a little discolored. There were a couple of men sitting behind plexiglass that had been covered by metal shutters when I’d been here last and a kid a little younger than me with dirty blond hair sitting in a chair playing with what looked like some sort of video game. Ignoring the kid Dad and I walked straight towards the nearest desk.

The man behind the glass was maybe in his mid thirties, and had the look of someone who’d been an athlete when he was younger but hadn’t kept in as great a shape as the years had overtaken him. He had a patchy beard and his nametag said ‘Mike’ on it.

“Good morning, how can the PRT help you today?” Mike said.

“Er,” I said and Dad put an encouraging hand on my shoulder, I breathed in and out once. “I actually need to speak to someone in private, it’s somewhat sensitive matter.”

“What matter is this in regards to?” He said, his tone unchanged from the beginning of the
conversation.

“I have information on a cape in the city,” I told him, and when he still didn’t react I got a little frustrated with how nonchalantly he was taking the whole situation, if I was going to be a big deal to me then dammit I wanted this to be a big deal to everyone. “It’s about Princess, I have information about Princess.”

That got his attention. “Hold on a minute,” He said before picking up a phone sitting next to him and speaking a few brief sentences into it. “Come around to the side.”

We turned towards the left and took a few steps towards the door to another shuttered up desk just a few feet away, after a moment it opened and Mike motioned us inside. We walked down a hallway into a busy office and turned a corner into another hallway. Men and women in PRT Officer uniforms and office workers walked by us occasionally as we walked. At an intersection we took a left turn for another short walk down a hallway until we came to a thoroughly unremarkable door which opened immediately to a swipe of the man’s keycard. The label on the door said A31C.

“Wait here please,” He told us once we were inside. “Someone will be with you in just a few moments.”

After that he closed the door behind him and left us alone in the room. I looked over to Dad, but he only shrugged in response, obviously as unsure as I was whether the current situation was a good or bad sign. The room itself was as unremarkable as its door had been, there was a row of cabinets at about waist height on the farthest wall and a long table in the center that took up most of the space of the room. Without a window the entire room felt a bit claustrophobic.

I made a quick circuit around the room and found absolutely nothing of interest except what might have been minor water damage, or might just have been evidence of ancient coffee spills. With nothing else to do I took a seat on the side farthest away from the entrance so I could face it and see whoever came in immediately. Dad paced slowly beside me.

After a few more minutes the door opened again and admitted a man in a slightly rumpled suit. He was a little shorter than Dad’s height and had the same lean sort of build, but something about the way he moved made him seem dangerous in way I couldn’t ever imagine Dad being. He set a manila folder on the table and smiled at us, not unkindly.

“Hello,” he said, his voice slightly gravelly. “I’m Agent Millton and I understand you have some information for us today about the parahuman known as Princess?” Both Dad and I nodded.

“Excellent,” he said. “Now, before we begin there’s some housekeeping we need to take care of.” He paused for a moment and cleared his throat and then began to speak as if reading a memorized script. “Knowingly giving false information to Parahuman Response Team personnel about a parahuman threat, location, or identity is a finable offense under the Duellar-Wing Act with a cap for private citizens of no more than ten million dollars. Understanding this do you still wish to give your testimony?”

Though I was surprised to find out that lying in this sort of situation was taken so seriously, I nodded again. I couldn’t very well be mistaken about this after all.

“Very well then,” he pulled out a small microphone attached by a thin cord to a black rectangle slightly smaller than a fist and set it on the table. “This is Agent Edward J. Millton, May 13th 2011, recording. Interview regarding the parahuman known as Princess. Now, what is it you wanted to tell us?”
“It’s me,” I said. “I’m Princess.”

Agent Millton stared at me blankly, behind me Dad chuckled.
A long moment stretched as Agent Millton seemed to process what I’d just said. His eyes widened fraction a moment before he actually reacted.

“Uh,” he said before standing up suddenly, as if someone had insert a metal rod into his spine. “I’ll be, uh, right back.”

He spun around, still straight as a ruler until he nearly tripped over the chair he’d just been sitting in a second ago in his rush to get to the door. It slammed closed behind him and then Dad and I were left alone once again in the conference room we’d been shuffled into.

I wondered at the agent’s reaction, hadn’t they been monitoring Dad? Maybe he’d just been too low in the hierarchy to know about it, but then why have him be the one to interview us? I supposed they might not have known that I would know that they were watching Dad, actually come to think of it they probably hadn’t known that. If that was true then sending someone in who didn’t know my identity made some sense. Hadn’t they send something about rumors though in the broadcast I’d watched yesterday, how come those hadn’t filtered down to him? Actually that was probably an example of the reporters having steadier feeds of information and a direct individual line of communication to the outside world; certainly the PRT had something similar but with the state of the city it wouldn’t be hard to justify controlling who had access and to what.

Thinking about it now, I could probably have done this all much better. Calling ahead of time probably wouldn’t have been a bad idea or I could have showed up in costume, such as it was. Amy might have been able to help too, or Glory Girl for that matter, and with one of them vouching for me it probably would have made it a lot easier to talk to the people I actually needed to talk too. There was no point in beating myself up over it, after all it wasn’t like I could go back and fix- Hold on, could I?

“No,” Nono’s voice whispered in my ear. “No time travelling.”

Well, that answered that question. Still, even though I knew there wasn’t much point I could help feeling like an idiot for not going about the situation in a better way.

“Ugh, I think I’ve made a mess of this,” I muttered, slumping forward and burying my face in my hands.

“You’re doing fine,” Dad said laying a hand on my shoulder. “If this is anyone’s fault it’s mine, I’m supposed to know how to deal with this sort of stuff but I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything. Which isn’t an excuse, just an explanation. We all have to make the best decisions with what we know, and you’re dealing with a lot right now.”

“You can’t hold my hand forever Dad, and besides, I’m always going to be dealing with a lot from now on,” I told him, perhaps a little more strongly than I’d intended. “And if I’m screwing up now, on stuff this simple, imagine how bad it could be later when I make a mistake.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Dad said, keeping his hand on my shoulder as he sat down in the chair next to me as I lifted my head and body to face him. “I’m still your father, you’re not on our own yet kiddo and if I have anything to say about it you never will be. Who ever said this stuff was simple anyway? Dealing with people is hard, there’s nothing harder really and let me tell you kiddo, you’re going to have a harder time than most because people are going to be putting a lot of expectations on you. Okay, so maybe we screwed up this time. The only way to fix it is to do better
“Okay, okay, so it’s not so bad,” I said. “What do I do now?”

“Right now?” Dad sighed quietly and shrugged his shoulders. “There isn’t really much for us to do but sit and wait, see who walks through the door next. The truth is, and this is something I’ve learned from dealing with the city over the years, bureaucracies have a tendency to make you wait. Sooner or later someone new will walk through that door,” he pointed towards the only door and I half expected it to swing open but it remained stubbornly closed. “Then, well it’ll depend on who it ends up being.”

Dad shrugged again and then moved his hand from my shoulder to grip the nape of my neck firmly, forcing my gaze away from where my hands fidgeted in my lap.

“Relax Taylor, I’ll be here the entire time; ready to warn you if I think you’re making a mistake, so just trust me…” Dad paused for a moment, considering his next words. “And Nono.”

As if that was her cue she appeared, beaming right over Dad’s shoulder at his sudden and unexpected inclusion of her.

“All right, I can do that, I think,” I told the two of them, and then for the next five minutes we all waited in silence for anything at all to happen.

I could hear the activity outside increase as time went on, though whether it was in response to my appearance or just the normal influx of people as the morning went on I didn’t know. With my extraordinary senses I knew I could peer through the walls surrounding us and find out exactly what was going on outside, but that felt like it would be a bad idea. Even though it wasn’t as if anyone would know but all the same it felt like the sort of thing that would get things off on the wrong sort of foot. After all, there wasn’t much chance of them trying to start something right in the middle of their headquarters so I really didn’t have much to be worried about.

Or so I told myself as my right knee jumped sporadically.

Finally after another few minutes of listening to the now almost constant sounds of activity beyond the confines of the room the door open on the figure of a slightly overweight woman with a stern and unhappy face. Some part of myself noted the subtle signs of an old injury through her movements, but it did little to diminish the self-assurance and authority with which she carried herself. Dad and I both stood up as she entered.

“Miss Hebert,” she said, nodding towards me and then turning slightly to face my father. “Mister Hebert. I can’t say your visit was expected, but all the same as local PRT director it is my pleasure to welcome you. My name is Emily Piggot.”

“We never told your officers our names,” Dad said as he edged slightly closer to me. We’d both suspected they knew who I was, but it seemed a little threatening for her to come right out and announce it like that.

“I don’t think we need to pretend either you and your daughter would be here unless you both at least suspected, we knew her identity,” director Piggot said in response.

“I wondered,” I told her. “After the way Agent Millton acted.”

“Not everyone needs to know every secret in an organization like the PRT,” she told me, turning to face me at the same time. “Perhaps now Miss Hebert we should proceed to the reason for your visit today, I do not imagine you got up so early just to say hello.”

“Uhhh,” I hesitated, she was right in that I hadn’t come just to say ‘hello’ but I also hadn’t really come with any more of an agenda than making sure there were no misunderstandings between myself and the ‘official’ capes. “Honestly? I’m just here to make sure there’s not… trouble between us.”

“That’s all?” the director eye me for a moment, and then briefly glance at Dad; as if searching for some hidden motive or goal, but he just laid his hand on my shoulder again. “I’ll be honest Miss Hebert, the PRT has some concerns; you were after all sightsed engaging in direct combat with the Simurgh. We were unable to monitor events after the first few moments, the uncertainty of the length of your contact has been the cause of some… uneasiness. Protectorate rules are very strict about enforcing stringent time limits of exposure, no more than 17 minutes per event.”

Of course, they were concerned I was going to go crazy at some point like so many of its victims had in the past. I couldn’t completely rule it out, but over the week I’d spent preparing to return I’d developed the beginnings of a theory about the Simurgh. What I suspected was that it had some sort of Thinker like ability similar to what was usually called precognition in capes. If I was right it went a lot of the way to explain why it’d acted the way it had during our fight, after all I knew that one of my abilities allowed me spontaneously impart momentum which had to screw with anything that tried to predict the future.

So if my powers were screwing with one of its abilities, it wasn’t so far fetched to believe it might limit the impact of others. If the Endbringer had managed to turn me into a ticking time bomb, well, I wasn’t sure what I could do; at that point anything I did could be playing directly into the monster’s plan. I just had to trust myself, and Nono.

“The fight took a little more than five minutes,” I said. “And even if it had lasted longer, I don’t think I’m vulnerable to its usual tricks.”

The expression on Director Piggot’s face did not change, at least not much, she simply continued to gaze intently straight at me. “I wish the PRT could believe you Miss Hebert, unfortunately the reality of the situation is that victims of the Simurgh often seem completely unaffected until the moment their actions could cause the most damage. There are procedures in place, you would be made as comfortable as possible—”

Dad slammed both hands onto the table open palmed, his face a frozen mask he very slowly spoke, “You will not lock my daughter away because of some paranoid fantasy. Taylor is the only reason this city is still standing. I know Eidolon and Alexandria are probably right outside that door, but I’d like to see them try and do what she did. I’d like to see them!”

I practically jumped up out of my chair to put myself in front of Dad, I pushed against his chest with my right hand to get him away from the table. “Relax Dad, relax,” I said, keeping my eyes locked on his. He glanced between me and Director Piggot before taking a couple of deep breaths.

“Mister Hebert, you must understand that the consequences could be very high for Taylor. The PRT only wishes to do what is best for all—” She started saying.

“He’s right you know. You can’t stop me,” I interrupted, turned to face her and dropping my arm back to my side. “Or, you could try but it would end very badly for everyone and I do mean everyone. But you don’t really want to stick me in some dark hole anyways, you were trying to get me to agree to join the Protectorate or the Wards, I’m not sure which, to avoid the more drastic measures you were threatening.”

I swear she almost smiled.
“Very astute Miss Hebert,” she told me as she remained unmoved from her chair. “of course there were elements genuinely calling for you to be quarantined, all pencil-pushers, but they were overruled. The offer is for the Protectorate, for your information. Normally of course your age would dictate that you join the Wards, but given your demonstrated capabilities and the public reaction at large the decision was made to make an exception and ‘put you on a larger stage’ so to speak.”

“I’m not joining, Protectorate or Wards, it doesn’t matter,” I told her.

She quirked her head and raised her eyebrows in the first real hint of surprise I’d seen so far, “I understand you have a close relationship with Panacea and New Wave, I would simply urge you to consider your father’s safety. Every member of New Wave is a parahuman, capable of protecting themselves in an emergency, your father would be a unique position of risk. With their limited resources, how much they would be able to protect him is questions, the PRT has a wide array of resources at it disposal for exactly your situation.”

“I like Panacea, I even liked her sister sometimes, but I’m not joining New Wave. I’m not joining anyone. I could give you a dozen reasons why I don’t want to but the truth is that I don’t need to because there isn’t anything you could offer me.” I said. “And now I think it’s time for us to leave.”

I looked back at Dad and he nodded slightly. As we moved around the table and towards the door Director Piggot stood up and moved, not quite standing between us and the door but almost.

“Are you going to try and stop me?” I asked.

“No Miss Hebert,” she said. “only urge you to reconsider.”

Instead of answering her I decided to simply move past her, opening the door for my Dad I found the hallway empty in the immediate vicinity but just a few doors down Eidolon and Alexandria stood and beyond them a thin milling crowd of men and women in PRT officer uniforms. I hesitated, the two members of the Triumvirate were between us and the exit but then Dad’s hand landed on my shoulder. He smiled tightly at me as I looked up at him and moved the both of us out into the hallway.

Both capes watched us as we approached and I had to quell the urge to shrink under their gazes. For so long, the two of them and the other heroes at their level had been as close to living gods I could imagine, and the idea of saying ‘no’ to them would have been unimaginable. Now though, it wasn’t that I respected them less, but recently I’d begun to recognize that I was at or near their level myself, and couldn’t afford to pretend they were anything other than regular people with powers.

Once we were within a few steps of the two capes Alexandria spoke up. “Princess, Mister Hebert. I had hoped our first meeting would be as colleagues.” The last she said to me.

“We’re still on the same side,” I said in response.

“That is true,” Eidolon said, nodding his head as we’d come to some agreement. He was different in person than on TV; less like a living god and more like man in a costume. “In that spirit, I look forward to working with you in the future.”

“As do I,” Alexandria added.

“As nice as it is to meet you two,” I said, trying to hide as much of my nervousness at the situation
as possible. “we really should be going.”

“You maybe want to take one of the other exits,” Eidolon warned, his expression caught between irritation and contrition. “Word of your presence leaked, you may rest assured the culprit will be apprehended and we will ensure no threat to your identity comes from this lapse.”

“The media is outside, I take it?” I asked, and both Eidolon and Alexandria nodded in response. “Well, that makes things simpler I suppose.”

The two members of the Triumvirate looked momentarily surprised by that, and in the somewhat awkward stretch of silence that followed I began pulling Dad away down the hall. Neither of the heroes said anything more or moved to follow us, and as we neared the intersection the crowd split slightly to admit us. A few people in the crowd gave us curious looks, perhaps wondering who we were.

After the conversation with Director Piggot my confidence in my decisions had been bolstered; whether they were the right choices was another question entirely. Having someone directly challenge me like that had kicked started the part of me that wanted to fight. It had felt good to tell that woman no in there, a little because I recognized that she was in all likelihood partly responsible for Sophia Hess. I recognized it was petty to try and blame the woman for Sophia’s actions, after all I didn’t actually believe she or anyone else would have sanctioned them if they’d known, but it felt satisfying all the same to pretend briefly this was an odd sort of punishment.

We retraced our steps in silence, passing by only the occasional worker or officer once we’d left behind the crowd. I wanted to hurry before the little boost of confidence I’d gotten disappeared under the weight of reality. We eventually came to the first office space we’d passed through on our way in and exited through the same door we entered. Once back in the main lobby I looked out through the row of doors at the front to the street beyond and saw a collection of large parked vans with what had to be reporters gathered in front of them. I stopped in my tracks and stared out through the glass of the doors.

Dad glanced for a moment out to the front before turning away and looking to me. “Are you sure you’re ready to do this?”

“Not really,” I sighed. “But like I said before, I think I have to.”

“Okay,” Dad said. “Take a moment, relax, and we’ll go when you’re ready.”

I nodded back at him and turned away from the doors to survey the lobby. There wasn’t anyone else present at the moment, but I didn’t know if that was normal or maybe if it was because of the huge crowd of reporters gathered out front. I glanced at the side of the room we’d just come from, sweeping my eyes along the line of counters. Seeing all those reporters gathered outside had made the entire thing all too real and now I couldn’t help but think that in just a few minutes I would be revealing the truth, or a version of it, to the world. Sort of, because of the state of the city it would obviously take a little while to get out but well, after I went out there it would be too late to take it all back.

“Okay,” I whispered mostly to myself after a few more deep breaths and started walking towards the doors, Dad fell in alongside me. Light streamed in through the door as I pushed it open and step out into the early mid morning. A few heads turned to glance at us, before determining that we weren’t anything interesting and returning to their conversations or preparations.

For a moment I stood there, not quite stunned but a little surprised at the total lack of reaction; movies and TV had trained me to expect a sudden rush of reporters to converge on me all shouting
for a comment or statement, and I’d been prepared for that. What I hadn’t prepared myself for
mentally was for people not to react at all. Once I got over the shock, and the slight wound to my
ego, I realized that they hadn’t recognized me at all because they didn’t actually know what I
looked like. Even if pictures of my fights had been plastered everywhere they wouldn’t have
exactly been close up or of very good quality, and even if some of them knew my name, they also
didn’t likely have good pictures of me. Had the school district’s records not been rendered
inaccessible at the very least if not outright destroyed in the attack, they still wouldn’t have released
my image to them. What was more, I wasn’t exactly miss popular around school so I’d never really
bothered to do the whole social media thing.

All of that meant that I would need to go about this the hard way and get the attention of the
gathered reporters myself. I didn’t want to really go through this more than once, so going up to
individual reporters didn’t seem the way to go, but would anyone believe me if I just started
shouting it? Probably not, which meant that I needed to start talking to someone and hope that that
would get the other reporters attention pretty quickly. The only question was, should I try and find
a local reporter and hope they might be more familiar with images of me, or go for someone from
out of town in the hope they would be more likely to jump on the story because they still had actual
viewers. I guess that sort of decided it.

I picked out a woman fairly closely by; tall with short-ish blonde hair and prettily narrow face, who
happened to be talking to a young man in his early twenties holding a camera. They were close to
us, not local, and she reminded me vaguely of one of the lunch ladies, so seeing as I didn’t really
have any better criteria I walked right up to her.

“Hello,” I started off saying, both her and her cameraman looking annoyed at the interruption. “I’m
Princess and I’m guessing you might have some-”

“Listen, Kid,” the reporter huffed, visibly irritated now as she rounded on me slightly. “I know
you and your friends think it’s funny, you know poking fun at the out-of-towners for being
gullible, but go try your prank on someone else.”

“But, I-” I began to say.

“Come on,” she said, waving at her cameraman as she brushed past me, and then Dad. “Let’s try
and get one of the receptionists to talk to us again.”

I watched them head towards the lobby doors and looked at Dad still stunned over the brush off I’d
just been given. Dad only shrugged, seeming more than a little surprised at that reaction himself.

“Let’s try that differently this time,” I muttered, half to myself again.

This time I picked an older reporter; he was maybe in his later or mid forties with just a little bit of
gray frosting the sides of his neatly groomed head. He had the sort of prototypical local
newscasters face, sort of blandly handsome but not terribly so. Again I walked straight up to him.

“Listen, I know this is going to be hard to believe, but I swear to whatever you want me to swear to
I’m telling you the truth, I’m Princess and I want to answer your questions,” I told him quickly
before he could start brushing me off. A long couple of seconds passed as he and the cameraman
and young woman standing next to him contemplated me.

“Where’s the costume?” he asked.

“What?” Really? My costume, that’s what he wanted as proof? The three random pieces of
clothing I’d picked up from a Goodwill for thirty bucks before I’d even picked a proper name?
“Pink dress, scarf, sweatshirt. The costume kid, if you’re going to lie at least be committed,” he told me snidely before turning way.

“What? But, that wasn’t even my costume,” I muttered softly, momentarily stunned at the second brush off. “I was coming from a party…”

I looked to Dad for what felt like the thousandth time today and he seemed as baffled as I did over the whole situation. Maybe it had been a little arrogant to expect them all to come running but it was a little insulting that none of them even asked me any questions. That many people couldn’t have claimed to be me in as little time as they’d been here, could they?

“We’ll find another way,” Dad said kindly, looking uncomfortable at the whole situation. “The association still has some media contacts, maybe I can use them.”

“No,” I said, slightly forcefully. There was another way to make them pay attention to me; I would give them a little demonstration.

I stalked over to an unattended news van, gripped the fender and lifted, while simultaneously stretching my power and reducing the apparent weight of the vehicle. The van rose into the air smoothly and I rose with it, eyes began turning towards me instantly, until I was maybe ten feet in the air.

“Hey!” I shouted, waving the vehicle about like it barely weighed anything, drawing even more attention towards me. “I’m Princess, and I wanna talk!”

Every eye and camera was focused on me instantly and then there were a thousand shouted questions springing through the air.

“Err, Hold up!” the cacophony continued as I looked to find somewhere to set down near Dad. “HOLD UP!”

The crowd shut up momentarily. “Right, let me just put this down,” I motioned with the van and several nice open spaces opened up. “And then we can talk.”

I settled down near Dad, and let the van rest back against the pavement carefully, making sure no one came even close to being injured or even frightened by a close brush with the tons of settling van. The crowd of reporters gathered around me again, looking hungrily on as I stood awkward in front of my Dad; at least they were more polite this time and refrained from piling on all at once.

“All right, to start off why don’t I introduce myself?” I asked semi-rhetorically, when no one made a comment I took that as a sign to continue. “As I assume you all know from the rumors, my name is Taylor Hebert, I’m fifteen years old and I am Princess. Uh, I don’t plan on joining the Protectorate, or New Wave, or anyone for that matter but I do plan on continuing to do what I’ve done so far; which is to help people. On that note, a clarification is somewhat in order; I am not as some people believe, what you would call a Brute or anything like that, what I am is a Tinker. I specialize in bio-mimetic self-modifying augmentation and self-guided automata, which would be a fancy way of saying I’ve enhanced myself and I can create helpful robots, which I should mention I plan to soon have helping around the city with rebuilding.”

There, I’d told the big lie, no to find out how much they believe me. Of course no one had a reason not to believe me. The silence stretched.

“Err, you can ask questions now…” A sea of voices washed over me.
It had taken an hour and a half to get out of there after that. Even then the reporters hadn’t really been quite ready to let me go, and some looked ready to follow me and Dad to the temporary headquarters of the Dockworkers Association where Dad slept. I’d had to make some rather pointed comments on exactly how un-well I’d take it if they followed us, or showed up out of the blue anywhere I wasn’t explicitly doing Princessy type stuff. That managed to dissuade ninety percent, but along the way we’d had to stop again…

“Dad, stop the car,” I said suddenly, watching a pair of vans that had been keeping pace with us from the moment we’d left the PRT headquarters. “I’ll be right back.”

I stepped out of the car and watched both vans stop almost immediately. Dad’s door opened and his torso appeared over the top of the car as he scowled briefly at the distant vans, apparently someone had not gotten the message the first time. I needed to make a point; nothing dangerous just enough to get the point across that following me around was not a good idea. My legs were moving almost before I’d even willed them to, and the distance between me and the vans shrank rapidly, and I could watch the shock and then panic spread across the faces of the drivers. Both vehicles started reversing, but the one on the left started just slightly quicker and so because I didn’t need both of them I focused on the van to my right. It had moved perhaps five feet by the time I caught up to it. My hand wrenched the driver’s side door open, eliciting an unmanly shriek from the driver and the reporter sitting next to him. With one hand gripping the door frame I arrested the motion of the vehicle momentarily and with my other hand I turned the engine off before either man could finish screaming.

“Listen closely,” I told them, doing my level best to stare as intimidatingly as possible at both of them. “The next reporter I catch following me when I’m not doing cape stuff, or my Dad ever; they and whatever paper, magazines, news station, or network they work for will never get another word from me ever. If they’re even in the room when I’m talking I won’t say a word. Forever. Got that?”

Both of them nodded mutely in response. When I shut the door it refused to latch, instead swinging gently out, so I held it closed with my left hand and heated my right until the air around it practically glowed and then welded it shut at the middle. I put on my sweetest smile and waved at the driver and reporter as I turned and walked back towards Dad. After that no one seemed inclined to try and play paparazzi.

By the time we arrived at the makeshift shelter-slash-headquarters it was around midday and I was exhausted. Not actually physically exhausted, which I was still fairly sure I couldn’t get anymore, but just sort of emotionally drained. Dad showed me around the place quickly and thankfully no one recognized me, at least not as Princess, most likely because there was so little access to media in the city. In a few days I expected that would change, but it was nice for now. Finally someone asked for Dad’s help, and I let him get to work while I wandered back to the little area set aside as his ‘room’ and laid down on the small cot.

“Err, Taylor,” Dad’s voice interrupted my thoughts half an hour later. “I think this is for you, one of the men said it was dropped off an hour ago.”

I looked up to see my father holding a small envelope, already torn open when he’d investigated it.
“What is it?” I asked, wondering who would even know I was here. Dad simply shrugged and handed it to me. I pulled out the small note card to read, and then flipped it over looking for some further explanation or really any clue.

What?

*Your royal highness, it’s your favorite gossip, sorry about running off the other day before we finished our conversation. Meet me where we had our first date?*
Once I’d gotten over my initial confusion I knew the note had to be from Tattletale. The villainess hadn’t exactly been subtle in her wording, though it was probably opaque enough that anyone who wasn’t already suspicious wouldn’t give it a second thought. When she’d said she would find me I’d worried that I’d wake up in the middle of the night to find her leaning over me creepily. I was a little relieved she’d settled for simply sending a creepy note. It took me another moment to figure out what she meant by ‘where we had our first date’ but that seemed pretty straightforward; it had to mean where we’d first met. If she was trying to be cleverer and meant something else, well, I wasn’t going to waste my time figuring it out since she was the one who’d come to me asking for help. That being said, I had to admit I was curious what had a criminal like her freaked out enough to come to me for help. From what I’d seen at the bank she didn’t surprise easily.

“Who’s it from, kiddo?” Dad asked, looking distracted.

“Just someone looking for my help,” I answered.

Dad raised an eyebrow at that and his attention was quickly focused solely on me. “Is it serious?”

“Maybe,” I told him. “I don’t know; they were cagey on details and now they want to meet.”

A pause filled the next few moments and then Dad moved to settle onto the cotton next to me. His brows knit together, wrinkling around the bridge of his glasses as his too-large eyes watched me.

“What are you thinking of doing?” he asked finally after a somewhat long moment.

“I don’t know,” I said as I scooted up and propped myself against the wall. “It might be serious, they don’t strike me as the sort of person who gets shaken easily, and it is then I don’t think I can not help. Of course, this might all just be a trick to distract me or try and trap me, but I don’t think... this person, can really hurt me.”

“Well Taylor, that kind of sounds like you’ve already made up your mind,” Dad smirked at me wryly.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. He was right in a way, I hadn’t fully made up my mind whether I was going to actually listen to her but I was at least sure that I was going to be there tonight. Sort of. I was going to use my more powerful senses to at least check it out and see if there was anyone waiting in ambush. Given that she hadn’t mentioned any specific time in her night I had to figure that anytime I showed up she would be there waiting, another point in the creeper column for Tattletale.

“Just, promise me you’ll be careful,” Dad said interrupting my thoughts. “If only to make your dear old dad feel better.”

“Of course,” I promised him as I reached over to hug him.

The rest of my day passed by entirely uneventfully; it apparently took a while for news to filter through the city to more damaged areas like this one and besides which people around here had more immediate concerns. There weren’t actually that many people staying in there anyways; only four other families and one older woman. Most of the traffic was either people from the Dockworkers Association helping around the warehouse, or stopping by to find out where they could help around the city and people from the surrounding area coming by to get what supplies were available. It wasn’t much really; blankets, toothpaste, sleeping bags, a few tents, and the meager amount of food that trickled in from PRT convoys or private donations which the
Association jealously guarded. A dozen of the largest men I’d ever seen worked in shifts guarding the section of the warehouse they were stacked in.

I wandered around the warehouse, making sure to stay out of everyone’s way until around three o’clock, when I had a late lunch with Dad. Dad told me a little about how things had been while I’d been away, mostly just about what he’d seen in the area and what he’d been doing; which was mainly organizing jobs and work groups to help wherever they could and making sure the supplies they received went to the people that needed them.

“Things have actually been pretty quiet,” Dad said, when I’d asked if there actually been any trouble with any of the gangs. “Mostly the trouble comes from normal people who want more than we can give them, and the guys handle that easily enough. I’ve only heard of one incident with a gang; the Merchants hit a supply shipment a day after the attack.”

He took a bite of the ham and cheese sandwich and took a few moments to chew before continuing. “It was actually one of the other gangs that hit them first, the ABB I think, though they didn’t give back any of the supplies. They have their own people to feed I guess, but there haven’t been any other attacks either.”

We finished eating and Dad went back to work and I went back to wandering around until I spotted a group of kids playing something that might have been soccer on the empty backstreet behind the warehouse. I watched them play for the rest of the afternoon. After a light dinner with Dad I finally decided it was time to get moving.

“I’m going now,” I told Dad as he sat half stretched out on his cot and half propped up against the wall reading a worn paperback book he’d salvaged from the house. He looked up and frowned ever so slightly up at me. “Promise me you’ll be careful, okay? And come straight back.”

“I so swear,” I grinned at him, slightly mockingly before leaning down to hug him and press a kiss to his cheek.

“I will,” I added more seriously as I straightened back up. Dad set his book aside and stood up, following me to the doorway of our small room he pulled me into a final one armed hug before letting me go.

I waved back to Dad from further down the hallway before he disappeared from view as I turned the corner. As I pushed open one of the side doors and stepped out into the dimming evening light I could feel the eyes of the dockworkers-cum-security guards following me from the second story windows. Even if criminal activity had been at an all time low for the entire week the Association wasn’t taking any chances; there were always a handful of members watching for signs of trouble. During the day they stuck to the ground level where they could also keep an eye on the supplies, but once it got dark or most of the supplies had been distributed, whichever came first, they retreated to the second floor.

So long as I didn’t leave the fenced off area that made up the former property boundaries of the warehouses none of them would so much as bat an eye, or so Dad said. Sure enough there wasn’t so much as a peep as I stepped through the door and started walking the asphalt. I kept a metaphorical ‘eye’ on the watchers on the second floor with my extra-senses and wandered until I found a blind spot where none of them could actually see me in one of the corners. After taking another moment to make sure I wasn’t going to be seen from either side I launched myself up and over the newly installed fence.
While I drifted over the chain link boundary I wondered if all this secrecy was really necessary, after all I’d just basically shouted my former secret identity from the rooftop for all the world to hear. On the other hand, I thought as my feet touched asphalt again, if the situation was as serious as I suspected given that Tattletale had contacted me of all people then a certain amount of covertness was called for. I set off at a run as soon as I had both feet on the ground firmly on the ground and kept an eye out for anyone following me. I didn’t see anything except darkened streets of the city occasionally offered paltry illumination by a passing vehicle or the few remaining still working street lights.

In the darkness it was almost easy to forget how much damage had been done; debris, less obvious damage lost definition and more serious conditions like sinking foundations became indistinct shapes in the dark. The only real indication of the Endbringer attack at least so long as I didn’t pay much attention with my new, more powerful, and very inhuman senses, was the uneven distribution of light across the city. Spreading out from downtown in something of an irregular semicircle everything except for a few islands with private generators was darkness, while out towards the edges a band of light extended thin fingers into the pool of unlit city. I was coming into that darkness from the north and slightly to the east in between the train yard and the old boat graveyard.

I slowed as I neared the place I thought Tattletale meant, about five blocks away in fact and started to carefully watched for any sign of a trap or ambush. From a birds-eye-view there wasn’t anything to be concerned about, but that didn’t mean that I was necessarily safe. Even though my senses let me essentially see through walls I wasn’t sure that would actually be much help in this instance, there were too many potential hiding places. Instead I pushed away my vision of the city and focused again on my ‘normal’ sight, returning to the merely human level that was easiest to use for a moment before I blinked and the entire world changed again.

Before me the world was no longer the familiar hues of greens, browns, yellow, blue, and all the other colors of human sight; instead objects were shaded in gradients of colors I could barely describe, much less name. It resembled, at least conceptually, the thermal imaging footage you sometimes see in movies or TV shows and in fact that is what it was. The difference was that I could see exactly as much detail as I normally would have been able, it was just that the details I saw were in some cases very different. In the flood of details surface details were somewhat lost to me but at the same time I could, after a fashion, peer through them and see movement inside; areas of inhabitance became apparent, as did the type of occupant, whether animal or human, and areas of mold or fungal growth.

I started making my way towards the cross street we had first met on, slowly creeping through the back alleys and keeping an eye on the buildings surrounding me to spot any likely spots for traps or ambushes. Occasionally I switched from thermal view to more revealing modes; like x-ray, when I wanted to investigate something suspicious. Nothing like what I was worried about was ever revealed by my inspections.

By the time I’d crept to within shouting distance of the spot we’d first met at I’d satisfied myself that there wasn’t anyone lying in wait, or at least if there was there wasn’t much more I could do about it. I also didn’t see any sign of Tattletale, the only ambulatory life I’d actually seen had been rats, raccoons, and a stray dog. Having more or less completed my reconnaissance of the area I switched back to normal vision and wondered where Tattletale was. A few possibilities came to mind; that she’d simply decided she didn’t need my help, she had been discovered somehow and her employer had killed her, that she was observing me from afar to trigger an ambush when I left, or that she was simply running late. None of the options made me very happy, though the first and last were my preferred possibilities both for being the most simple and the ones with the least knock-on consequences.
Well, if she expected she could jerk me around on a metaphorical leash or that I would wait indefinitely for her to show up then she should think again. I decided that I would give her about half an hour before I called it quits, wiped my hands of the entire situation, and left her to whatever fate she brought on herself. In fact, only another seven minutes passed before I saw a figure turn the corner a block down the street, after a moment I confirmed that it was in fact the same girl that had been in wait for me at the park the other day. Once she’d gotten closer I stepped out of the shadowed alley I’d been keeping to ever since I’d assured myself there weren’t any nasty surprises waiting for me. Without missing a beat or showing any hint of surprise Tattletale began angling towards me, as if she’d been expecting me to be waiting for her and not the other way around; which was a bit of evidence for the ‘observing from a distance’ theory I’d had earlier.

“Hi,” she said brightly as we each stopped a couple of paces from one another.

“Mmm,” I gave a noncommittal grunt as my only response. I might have resolved to listen to her, and I might be inclined to think she really did need my help, but that didn’t mean I liked her. It also didn’t mean I was going to agree to do anything until she gave me more information. “You’re late.”

“Yes, well some of us do not have quite as much freedom of movement as you,” she said.

“I’ll tell you everything you need to know,” she said, and I almost argued with her right then and there that she could hold anything back but then I thought better of it. I doubted I would get her to do anything else except tell me what she thought I ‘needed’ to know, no matter what she might promise. “But, first I have a question for you.”

“What?” I asked, suddenly confused. My brows knitted together as I wondered what she could possibly need to ask me.

“Why did you go all info-dumpy this afternoon in front of the press?” she asked.

“Huh? How is that any of your business?” I countered, slightly defensively.

“If you’re going to be playing co-conspirator with me, I’d like to know exactly who I’m dealing with,” she said.

“I thought you were a psychic or something,” I snapped sarcastically back at her, but she only gave me a level stare as if to say ‘really?’ and waited. “Alright, fine I’ll humor you.”

I took a moment to breath, even though I didn’t need to, and tried to think about what exactly I was going to tell her. Even if I’d trusted her enough to spill just a quarter of my more shocking personal secrets I didn’t exactly need to in order to answer her questions. Of course, I expected that she would spot a lie right off, so I couldn’t make it up whole cloth, but then most my reasoning didn’t really require me to tell all about the last few months of my life.

“You’ve seen my costume, though I’m not really sure it deserves the name. With the rumors about Princess’s identity going around I started wondering how long I could really keep it secret. Then I started wondering how safe any of us really are. It’s all this ‘cops and robbers’ crap, making out like we’re playing some big game out there, like there’s no consequences for any of the shit we pull off.” I let out a sudden frustrated breath. “Every cape out there is playing like they’re in one of those Aleph comic books, well I never liked any of the ones I saw and I’m not going to pretend this
is all fun and games. Besides I can protect myself and the people I care about.”

Tattletale didn’t say anything for the first few seconds after I stopped speaking, just watched me like she’d been doing the whole time I had been speaking. I wasn’t entirely sure where all of that had come from, I hadn’t actually given it that much thought before I’d decided to go public, it had just seemed like the right move; Nono had agreed, and I think even Dad had to a little.

“All right,” the villainess finally said, seemingly to relax somewhat. “I believe you.”

“Thanks, that really means a lot coming from you,” Not. “Now, would you mind telling me what that was about? And the rest of it too while you’re at it.”

“All right, don’t get your panties in a bunch your Highness,” she said, and I grimaced at grin that crossed her face and taunting tone in her voice. “My ‘boss’ is Coil and despite a rocky start to our relationship he wasn’t so bad, as crime lords go at least. Plus; job security and good pay just for maybe doing a job or two a month, pretty plum deal when you really get down to it. I’m making three figures year.”

“Must be nice for you,” I snapped, somewhat angrily, wondering why she was telling me all of this. “Did you ask for my help just to brag?”

“No, but you said you wanted to know everything,” Again that grin. “Anyways, where was I? Oh yeah, sure I was obligated to bring Coil’s whole operation down around his head; you know because of the whole blackmailing me into working for him. But the pay was good and the work wasn’t bad so I opted for a slow burn. Problem was, for the longest time I had no clue what his power was, and let me tell you with my own? Not fun.”

“And what exactly is your power?” I asked, glad for the opening to actually find out. Tattletale paused for a moment, like she hadn’t been expecting the question.

“Not really relevant, but I’ll give you the quick and dirty version,” she said. “Basically, my power lets me figure things out with just the sparsest information. For instance, I know you’ve been the victim of a sustained abuse, over a year and you’re worried about open public space. Emotional, not so much physical, and peer, not parent, so at a guess I’d say the trouble is at School, And I’d bet it involved someone you used to trust, ex-boyfriend maybe. Or girlfriend, no judging here.”

I stared at her in shock for a moment. What the fuck!? I’d asked her what her power was, not for a demonstration, especially not with me as a guinea pig.

“All right, get on with the rest of it,” I told her, glaring.

Her grin took on a sort of feral, animal, satisfaction like it had at the bank when she’d been prickling Glory Girl and Amy. This girl was messed up. “Righto. What I’ve managed to figure out about Coil’s power is that it’s something that lets him nudge events. He’s not always winning the lotto, but he never suffers more than temporary setbacks. Time was on my side anyways, so I wasn’t too worried. Except that ever since your fight with Leviathan, and the others, he’s been obsessed with you; has everyone running around trying to find you, keeping an eye on anyone he knows you’ve talked to, or trying to figure out how you tick. That’s where I come in by the way. I’d call it panicked, but there’s something else pushing him where you’re concerned.”

“Is that why came to me? ‘Cause you think I can counter his power somehow?” I asked, curious. The only power I knew I could stymie was whatever the Simurgh used to see and it wasn’t like I knew why that was, at least not for sure.
“I didn’t choose you,” she said flatly. “Me and the Undersiders aren’t the only capes he’s got on his payroll, though I think me and his pet precog are the only two who are less than willing, so to speak. I’ll spare you the details on her situation, since I don’t want you going half-cocked, but suffice it to say she’s the reason I met you the other day at the park.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up,” I threw my hands up and waved them to cut off whatever else she might say. “Did you really think I would just let that go? He has a precognitive, and her situation is like yours? If she’s the reason you found me at the park, then why wasn’t she there herself, or here today?”

“He keeps a, significantly closer watch on her than he does me. He knows if he keeps me too close, sooner or later I’ll figure out too much; actually I’m pretty sure he already thinks I know too much, he just needs me a little too much right now. That’s why I’m talking to you at all, but I guess you want to know who she is,” she sighed. “It’s the Alcott girl.”

Dinah Alcott? The Mayor’s niece? I hadn’t even heard she was a parahuman. I knew she’d been kidnapped a few weeks ago, right around-

“The bank,” I said suddenly as it hit me. “the day you hit the bank. You were the distraction while Coil sent someone else to take her from her family right in broad daylight.”

Tattletale grimaced unhappily before saying, “Yeah, I figured that out pretty quickly too. Let me be clear, I only found out that he had her at all a few days ago. He’s got some deep contacts in the PRT too so don’t go running off to them.”

“If that’s true I guess you do need my help, though I’d point out that New Wave could help too,” I started saying.

“Like I said, not my choice. But, that said I can’t say the irony of you taking him down after he’s been obsessed with you for the last few days doesn’t have a certain appeal.” She cut in before I could continue.

“Thanks?” I said quizzically. “Anyways, I’m guessing you have a plan. Otherwise I’m guessing you wouldn’t be here.”

This time her smile wasn’t the more familiar predatory grin I’d been seeing spreading across her face all night and at the bank, but something more like actual human pleasure. Or maybe I was just starting to see her as less of the villain she played. “I do,” she said, pulling a small black flip-phone and a quarter-inch wedge of colored paper rubber banded together. “The map has all the locations of his hideouts, at least the ones I could identify. They’re all underground bunker type deals built by some company he has his hands in, very regular and uniform; I sketched out the general layout on the back. I labeled each of the locations for you, if you can’t memorize all of it tonight then keep that on you all the time. You’ll receive a message on the phone telling you where to go; if you want to invite New Wave along for the ride at the time, be my guest, but when it happens time will be of the essence so be quick about it, okay?”

I nodded. “That’s it, that’s your plan?” I asked.

“Not mine,” she said. “I’m as much along for the ride as you. I have my own signal, more complex because we’re both watched pretty closely, but I’ll be waiting with as much suspense as you. Now, you have everything you need, and I don’t have anything else to tell you.”

“Wait,” I said as she started turning away, causing her to pause. “That’s it? We’re not going to meet again, you’re just going to trust that I’ll come when you call?”
“I’ve got your measure Princess, you wouldn’t have come if you hadn’t already decided to help,” she answered, turning away again and walking back the way she’d come.

I sighed, watching her recede down the street, and wondering how exactly this had become my life; meeting villains in dark alleys, agreeing to come at a moment’s notice based on some cryptic signal from out of a cheesy spy movie. Nono, who seemed content to remain silent the entire time up until now, popped into sight on my right side.

“It is a good thing we are doing, Taylor. Helping these girls.” She proclaimed solemnly.

“I hope so Nono, I hope so.” I told her, turning away and starting off in the direction of the warehouse again.

“No being pessimistic Taylor, Nono forbids it,” she said, grinning so widely and openly that I had to laugh as I ran. “Remember, tomorrow we begin repairing the city! That at least, even you cannot doubt, is good work.”

“Yeah,” I said and ran on.

* * *

Dad was still up when I got back, and it wasn’t very late so I stayed up for awhile. He didn’t ask about my meeting, and I didn’t really him anything except that I’d agreed to help but I didn’t know when they would actually need it. I distracted myself for the rest of the night by reading one of the worn books Dad had and then once he had fallen asleep I glanced at both sides of the map Tattletale had given me; storing them away for later. A sketch wasn’t the only thing on the backside of the map, she’d helpfully included what I guessed were all the things she’d figured out about Coil’s power. Nothing that really told me what his power was, just general advice about how to approach him; as far as she knew he wasn’t a threat in a straight up fight, but he was supremely slippery so I had to essentially trap him. According to her there was some element of choice to his powers; nothing that would leave him truly vulnerable but it was something that might be helpful in the moment.

I slept like I always did in the last few months, like flipping a switch from on to off. I still dreamed, but I hadn’t once sat there trying to fall asleep and not being able to since I’d gotten my powers. When I’d first noticed it had been a bit disconcerting but, now it was nice not having to worry about getting to sleep at night anymore.

When I woke up the next morning, at exactly 5:00:00 AM I got up without waking Dad and stared for a moment or two at my options for clothing. Dad had actually taken some of my clothes when he’d left the house, but since I was planning on diving head first into the cape stuff today I figured I might as well go out in ‘costume.’ What I had only barely qualified as such, but it was recognizable at least. Sort of. Apparently people identified me with the peach dress I’d bought with Amy for the party more than my actual costume, but it felt weird to think of that as my costume.

I debated for a few minutes over which to wear; what I actually considered my costume, or what people would most recognize me in. Finally I decided that since I’d already revealed my identity I didn’t really need to be recognizable and put on my real costume. Dad was still sleeping when I
Once I was outside the warehouse I paused. How was I supposed to start something like this? It was still early enough that I doubted most people would be up, and I didn’t know where most of the repair efforts were focused. Should I just drop in on random people and ask them if they wanted help? How should I start bringing in the drones? Would it be best to coordinate them with the city or just set them loose? I just didn’t know. I didn’t even have a clear idea of the spread of the damage across the city, maybe that was a good place to start.

With that decided I launched myself up into the air, rising until I could survey the entire city easily. At my new vantage point I did have a clear view of everything and in the light of a newly dawning day the extent of the damage was much clearer. From a ground level view it was difficult to really get a handle on it, even with my senses. Now that I could take in everything, from the ruined Boardwalk, to the massive water filled sinkhole I’d fallen into the other day, and out to the ruined neighborhoods beyond. Repairing everything would probably takes months, even with the help of my drones.

A whistling sound caught my attention and I pivoted to watch a gold and white streak coming at me head on. I immediately identified it as Glory Girl and was surprised that she was up this early. At her speed I didn’t have to wait long before she was pulling into a floating stop right in front of me.

“Hi,” I said, raising my hand to give a small wave.

“Hey,” she answered.

Neither of us said anything more for a moment.

“What brings you out here this morning?” I asked.

“You,” she said. “Since I know you, sort of, I’ve been elected to be your welcoming party.”

“They made you get up at five, just to say hello?” Kind of an asshole move on her family’s part.

“Ha! No,” she told me. “This was just luck. Nice job yesterday by the way, my cousins haven’t shut up about you ever since. Crystal reached a pitch I didn’t think people could!” She laughed for a moment. “Amy’s royally pissed though, pun intended.”

What? Fuck.
Emmaterlude: the Maybe it Happened

Chapter Notes

This was originally as response to chatter within the thread the story was first posted in, I liked it enough that I thought it should be included.

Emma stared at the figure before her; trying desperately to process what she was seeing through her small, insignificant mind before the world decided to come crashing down around her head.

"Would you just take it?" Taylor finally said in frustration, thrusting the device at the other girl again in emphasis.

The whole dumbfounded slack jawed look was really getting pretty irritating, it had been funny at first but over the last three minutes it had only started to annoy her. Anyway, the motion seemed to finally startle the former teenage model out of her stupor and her eyes began to focus on the girl before her while she hesitantly reached up with one hand towards the proffered item; shaking with increasing violence as the space between her hand and the item disappeared.

"Oh, just take it already!" Taylor snapped slapping the cylinder into Emma's hand and causing her to jump back, almost dropping what she'd just been given.

Emma stared at the object in her hand, arm outstretched, as if it would suddenly come alive and bite her. She swallowed; once, twice, before finally asking, "What is it?"

"Panic button," Taylor answered, "before you get any ideas, this isn't me forgiving you. It's just that I know some crazy is eventually going to get it into their head to attack you so they can get on my good side and I don't want that on my conscience. All you have to do is squeeze it hard and I'll be able to hear everything going on around you, so I'll know exactly what kind of danger you're in."

Emma stared at the silvery cylinder, it had no visible markings of any kind and just looked like a simple steel cylinder except for a ring at one end obviously meant to have a chain run through it. Every word Taylor had said so far had only driven her further into confusion; when she'd first heard rumors that Taylor was Princess she'd laughed it off, as if a loser like Taylor could ever be so powerful but then she'd shown up on TV just floating there in front of a crowd of reporters and a part of her brain just sort of stopped working. She hadn't left her room for three days, hadn't said a word to anyone, hadn't eaten, just sat and stared at the wall waiting for someone to take her away until finally it got too much. She'd bolted out the door of her room past her sister, knocking a tray of food she'd been carrying on her way out of the house and just kept on running until she found someone who looked even vaguely official and confessed everything. She'd never talked so fast before in her life.

Turned out though that they, the PRT, had already known everything. Not because Taylor had told them anything but apparently because Sophia'd been forced to talk somehow, who had been radio silent for the last week because she'd apparently been under some sort of house arrest. There weren't going to be any charges or anything, because the PRT didn't want the scandal but also because they didn't want to embarrass Princess in public and risk pissing her off. Ever since Emma'd been looking over her shoulder for the last six weeks, wondering when Taylor was going to bust down her door and lay into her. Her family hadn't understood; Dad had just been angry at
the embarrassment she could've caused the family, Mom endlessly kept trying to talk to her about her feelings as if they matter in this situation, but the worst of all was Anne who just looked at her like she didn't even recognize Emma.

She had tried telling herself that she'd only done what she had to, that she'd been trying to teach Taylor how to be strong like she and Sophia were but it rang even in her own head. For the first time she admitted to herself that it wasn't Taylor who was weak, it was her. Taylor had survived her mother's death without changing, had taken everything they'd thrown at her and kept on going, and refused to use her power to take revenge when Emma didn't she would have been able to in her place. She stared at the piece of metal in her hand.

"O-okay," she finally said shakily, Taylor nodded without saying a word and rose back up into the air exactly the way she'd first appeared. Emma looked around, as if to see if anyone had been watching them but all that greeted her was the dark of the night so she pulled her bedroom window closed and turned around to stare again at that small metal cylinder in her hand.

Was that it?
Amy was angry with me, according to her sister at least, and I wasn’t exactly sure why. It wasn’t that I couldn’t think of why she might be angry with me, but that I wasn’t sure which of the many valid reasons she had chosen in particular. Not that she had to choose just one. Truthfully I’d been so relieved when I’d gotten back that Dad wasn’t angry with me that I’d tried as hard as I could to ignore the fact that I’d kind of left Amy as much in the lurch as him.

Boy, I was really showing a lot of personal growth, wasn’t I? Hadn’t I already learned this lesson with Dad; that ignoring a problem didn’t magically make it go away? Well, I already knew what I had to do: apologize and do better in the future, just like Dad had said the other day. I was tempted to take care of that immediately but then thought better, I somehow doubted she would appreciate it very much if I disturbed her or her family this early. Plus I did actually need to be close by to monitor how things were going when my drones arrived, at least at the start.

“Is that all you came up here to tell me? How badly I screwed up?” I asked Glory Girl as she continued floating to my right.

“Kinda?” she answered grinning, before she apparently noticed my mood, “Relax, princess.” The way she said it I could tell she wasn’t using the word as my name. “I don’t think a week goes by that Amy isn’t pissed off at me. Just say you’re sorry and make some gesture to show her you get what she was pissed about and everything’ll be fine.”

“Gesture?” I asked, curious what kind of gesture Victoria Dallon thought would get her sister to forgive me. “Like, what exactly?”

“I dunno.” She shrugged, looking thoroughly unconcerned. “Depends on what you did to piss her off. She wasn’t super specific about what it was; I think maybe it embarrassed her that she’d gotten so worked up about you.”

Glory Girl chuckled a little to herself over the last bit and I looked away; searching briefly up in the sky for any sign of the drones even though I knew they wouldn’t start their descent for another minute or so. What sort of gesture would make Amy feel better? She already had my number, which would be as useless in a similar situation as it had been this time, but I wasn’t sure what else would help. I could tell her the truth about myself and my powers, at least as much as I’d told Dad, but what that would prove I wasn’t exactly sure. Frankly I didn’t much want to tell her either, it wasn’t that I didn’t trust her but rather that I was still only really coming to grips with most of it myself. Besides, she already knew more than anyone except Dad; or anyone who wasn’t sharing a body with me.

“Ooh! Ooh!” Nono exclaimed as she materialised in front of me, “We can take her into space! Everyone loves space!”

I really didn’t see how that was supposed to help exactly, though by her mere presence Nono had managed to give me another idea. I might not be totally comfortable enough to give Amy the nitty gritty details of my situation but I felt safe enough now that Dad knew about her to introduce the two of them, after all my identity as a Tinker very neatly explained her existence.

“Nono likes this idea! Nono wants to meet Amy, so that we can all be friends!” The girl in question
said as soon as I’d had the thought. “Then we can all be Topless together!”

“What?” I asked, a little too loudly.

“What?” Glory Girl asked in response to my sudden outburst.

“Nono didn’t mean that kind of Topless,” she clarified, without really clarifying much of anything as far as I was concerned, before adding with a giggle, “Though Nono once did that too!”

“Err,” I hesitated as I tried to think up a good excuse. “I was, uh, thinking of something else~”

I was saved from having to explain any further by the appearance of a dozen bright pinpoints of light organized in a tight diamond formation, with the slight addition of two stubby extensions angling slightly away from the ‘rear’, which transformed the early morning light into something more closely resembling midday. Over the next five seconds each of the lights flared briefly in unison three times, each time there was an accompanying thoom sound and then the light show was over. In the place of each of those brief and brilliant flares was a dark object traveling at just slightly less than the speed of sound. It took another ten seconds of slackening travel for the oblong figures of the drones to come to rest hovering roughly over what was left of the city center.

“What,” the other heroine said, staring wide-eyed at the distant objects. “Are those?”

“Mine.” I answered succinctly, then thinking better of leaving it at that, “Semi-autonomous drones I brought in to help with the reconstruction. I don’t have many available right now, but in the next few weeks their numbers should jump up; I’m hoping they’ll speed up work.”

Glory Girl kept glancing between me and the distant drones, her face a study in confusion. “Err,” I said. “I mentioned them at the, uh, press conference yesterday.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said distractedly as she kept her gaze focused on the hovering drones. “I just thought they would be, you know, smaller.”

I decided not to mention that these were fairly small, at roughly the size of an unarticulated city bus they were one of the smallest classes of drones the Buster Corps came in. Her reaction actually brought up an issue I hadn’t given much thought recently, if I was going to have the drones work in close proximity to people it wouldn’t be a bad idea to develop more human scale variants. Immediately a flood schematics rose up out of the recesses of my thoughts, detailing past iterations and branches of drones; nothing really like what I was thinking of, the purpose of the Corps after all was to deal with a threat which simply didn’t operate on so small a scale. Anyways, I could work on it later, for now I had plenty of work for the drones I had to do.

“I should get to work,” I told Glory Girl, “Need to figure out where they need my help and all that. Oh, and tell your sister I’ll see her later! Today!”

The other girl nodded somewhat mutely in response and watched me zip off towards the awaiting drones, waving in response to my departing gesture. On the way I relished the sensation of flying for the first time since I’d had access to it, the sense of freedom I had as I twisted through the morning air was unparalleled. If Glory Girl had been feeling like this for years I thought I understood at least a little of the arrogance with which she acted so much of the time.

Through my drones eyes I could see the entire city, similar to my own panoramic view but more detailed and more up to date; collated as it was from a dozen sets of sensors. Commotion was brewing as people reacted to the display my drones had put on with their arrival, I probably should have tried for something more understated but it was too late to be undone. I came to rest in the
center of the formation, and felt very distinctly the prompts for instructions from each of the drones but put it aside for a moment to consider how to approach the situation.

I could, theoretically, simply give the drones a general directive to help with the repair of the city. They had the capability on their own to identify areas of the most need and could somewhat creatively solve limited sets of problems, enough at least that I wasn’t worried about them creating problems in the infrastructure. Unfortunately I didn’t think people would take the idea of my drones being able to follow such general directives very well, I could practically already hear the accusations of a “conquering army.” Which meant that I would have to leave some in the hands of officials, and at least nominally have them follow instructions from them, though I could probably keep some of them back with the excuse that I could command a limited number from a distance. Now I only needed to consider where I should start setting them to work, and with whom.

Nono answered almost as soon as I posed the question as she floated lazily around me, “Providing power has to be the first priority, Nono thinks. It allows better communication of work schedules and supply locations.”

“What about water, sewage, and other utilities?” I asked her.

“Yes, very important, but power first and foremost,” Nono answered, and I could see the logic of the decision; utilities like water and sewage could be dealt with somewhat with temporary measures much more easily than power could be, generators being so resource expensive. Plus with more lines of communication open it would be easier to identify problem spots.

Already, I was beginning to divvy up my drones in task categories. I set aside six for repairing the electric grid; two to take up the slack that couldn’t be met by the current generation capacity on opposite sides of the city and the other four to do the actual job of working with crews to reconnect homes and buildings to the power grid. Three I designated to the crews I had observed working on water mains and sewer lines, and two others I decided to give over to the road clearing crews and other various repair projects respectively. I kept the last three as my roaming workers, who I’d claim to be directing personally from afar while I went about my business. While it would have been gratifying to participate in the reconstruction myself, I had a hard time coming up with a way that would really be useful, after all, I didn’t have the required expertise and it would be somewhat of a waste to have me acting as a glorified crane.

With the work divided between my drones all that was left was to actually get them where they needed to be. Since I was going to be leaving them in the command of others I figured it was best to handle the hand-off personally. I’d already identified the two power distribution stations which worked best for my purposes. Each had a work crew present and was positioned within the area of darkness I’d seen last night but not too far inside, so they could still pick up some of the load from outside of it too, in case of emergencies. With the entire flock of drones following I set off towards the nearest one.

Every one of the men and women had been watching my drones since their arrival just as I assumed every person who had been awake at the time, and many who hadn’t, now were. As we arrived I picked out whoever looked to be the most in charge and landed with a single drone as near to them as I safely could. Most of those present kept their gazes locked on the drone but a few, either recognizing me or simply noticing that I’d been in the lead of the entire party, watched me suspiciously.

“Hello,” I announced as cheerily as I could through the sudden bout of nerves that had struck me. “I’m, uh, Princess. Um, I’m a tinker and I’m here to help, err, so this is one of my drones. I want to loan it to you, to help you with the work you’re doing; it, uh, it can follow simple instructions on
The woman I’d first identified as in charge tore her eyes away from the drone and swiveled towards me as if she’d only just noticed me, then she took a step towards me before hesitating for a moment before opening her mouth. “Uhhh,” she began, “How do- I mean, what do you expect- Actually, do you- What?”

Okay, probably need to give people time to process things before I started in on the explanation next time maybe let them approach me first. I repeated the whole thing again, a little slower and with less in the way of pauses.

“Well, I was thinking you could use it as a temporary power plant; take some of the pressure off the rest of the grid. Open up.” That last part I said to the drone, which tilted its wide front end up to expose it’s ‘underbelly’. When the drone was pointed at nearly a sixty degree angle, balanced on it’s ‘hind tentacles,’ a compartment slid open to reveal its reactor, or at least that’s what it looked like. In reality this was an additional interface which served to obfuscate as much of the physical details of the actual degeneracy reactor from prying human eyes; not that I thought anyone was likely to be able to make sense of whatever they might see but still better to be safe than sorry. “Though I wasn’t sure how the actual connection should be made so I kinda left that hanging. It’s very adaptable though, I promise! Just bring over some cables, tell it how much voltage and if you want DC or AC and what polarity or frequency and phase. You can’t overload the power plant with what a station this size can draw, so don’t worry about that.”

Alice, the name of the woman in charge according to her nametag, cast around as if looking for something which would make the entire situation fit into her normal routine. After a moment she refocused on me.

“I, uh, I’ll have to ask my supervisor,” she said finally.

“Sure,” I responded with somewhat faked nonchalance, I had sort of expected something like that though I was still disappointed they weren’t seeming more open off the bat. “Anyways I’ll just leave this one here, plenty more stops to make.”

Without giving them any more chances to protest I rose back into the air and rejoined the rest of my drones, then we looped back the way we’d come in the first place and headed towards the next destination. Nono said nothing, but gave me a thumbs up and so I figured it had gone about as well as could be realistically expected.

Reaction at the other power sub-station was much the same as it was with the first of the working crews I visited though I at least managed to do the introductions much more smoothly. By the time I went to drop the fourth drone off with the workers I’d chosen they seemed somewhat prepared for me; either because they’d seen me flying around shedding drones gradually and put the pieces together or because word was being passed along. For the next few trips the entire exchange went off smoothly, and the men and women I talked to even seemed glad for the help. On the eighth trip, as I was explaining the sorts of instructions they would follow, one of the workers near the back spoke up.

“If these ‘bots of yours are so useful, why do we need to be out here?” he called out.

“That’s a good question, the truth is that my drones can’t handle very complex tasks yet without explicit instructions,” I lied. “If they run into a problem that needs a creative solution they won’t know what to do, not until they’ve seen you work a lot more at least. Besides this is only for the emergency, until the city is back up and running. I’m looking to take anyone’s job or anything.”
That seemed to satisfy the man, though I wasn’t sure if he’d been upset by the idea of being replaced by a machine or if it was the fact that they weren’t already getting him out of having to do the work that had annoyed him. Either way I wasn’t sticking around to find out, so I moved on to the ninth and final drop-off, which thankfully did not include any questions I had to lie to answer. As I flew back up into the sky with my final three drones I could already see the others I’d left around the city starting to be put to work with various projects. Those last three drones I sent to three of the poorer neighborhoods, making sure they had a healthy number of inhabitants milling about so that chances were higher my drones would actually see use. I placed as out of the way as I could while keeping them prominently visible, far enough away from any crowds not to spook people right off the bat, and had them wait to be approached.

After several minutes the first drone was approached by a girl of about eight years old; her dark hair was tied back in a ponytail, the light blue dress she wore was smudged with fresh dirt, and she clutched a stained teddy bear close to her chest. As she approached the drone it readjusted slightly, as if it were now paying special attention, and waited to be greeted.

“Hi,” the girl said without a hint of trepidation.

“Hello!” The greeting I’d recorded started playing. “I’m Princess and this is one of my drones, if you have any work that needs to be done just tell my drone and I’ll guide it through the task as soon as I’m able!”

Somehow Nono managed to make me sound much cheerier than I thought I’d originally been when I’d recorded it, but that wasn’t necessarily bad. The little girl seem to consider the questions serious for several moments before posing her request, “Do you have any candy?”

“I’m sorry I cannot,” my voice emanated out of the drone, though I’d never recorded anything but the first greeting, and then after a slight pause the drone mimicked back, “‘have any candy?’”

Satisfied that the drones would be able to handle anything that came their way (if they couldn’t they would contact me anyways) I pushed my connections with them somewhat from my mind and turned my attention to the issue of Amy. It had taken a little over two and a half hours to get every drone in place where I wanted them, so it was now mid morning and something resembling a sane time to actually try and have a conversation with someone. Of course her sister had never actually told me where to find her, and I didn’t know where the Dallon household was located. From what I knew of Amy I kind of doubted she would be at home anyways, more likely she was at one of the hospitals or emergency shelters taking care of people; which didn’t actually help much by itself given the number of those there were but I’d seen the direction her sister had gone shortly after I’d left and I figured she was just as likely to lead me to Amy herself, or at least someone who might know where she was.

I traced roughly the same arc that Glory Girl had flown this morning towards the south-east, until I reached the point where I’d stopped paying any attention to her. With no more clues to go on besides distance I pointed myself at the nearest shelter still in the same general direction which ended up being a middle school gym. I touched down just short of the main entrance and walked the remaining distance.

What greeted me wasn’t chaos, or at least not panicked chaos; after all, many of these people had probably been living in the shelter for close to a week. Still the scene took me by surprise, the noise of it, the disorder of it, and most of all the sheer number of people. There had to be close to three hundred people living in the single room of the gymnasium; cots like the ones me and dad had were packed from one end practically up to the door, with only a foot or two between them and a little more along the edges. Most of the people I could see looked healthy enough, though worn.
It was the children who were making most of the noise, the adults and the teenagers silently
watched them or huddled in small groups and whispered.

As I came in an older plump woman in her early fifties looked up from the sniffling little girl she
was kneeling next to and then quickly looked back down to make some final comment to the girl,
who nodded somewhat sullenly and ran off as soon as the woman was turning away. The woman
stood up with some effort and began to walk over towards me, her time lined face set in a serious
mask as if she were about to deliver bad news.

“I’m sorry honey,” she began once she got nearer. “We’ve no more room, you ought to try St.
Luke’s four blocks south. I can give a little something for the road-”

“Oh, no!” I interrupted, feeling suddenly embarrassed. “I mean, I already have a place to stay.”

“Oh,” the dark skin of her face relaxed immediately as a full mouthed smile spread across her
cheeks. A moment later her face had gone back to concerned. “Who’re you looking for, sweetie?”

“How did you know?” I asked, wondering if it was something about my expression or the way I’d
been watching the room that had given me away.

“If someone ain’t looking for a place to sleep, they’re looking for someone missing,” she answered
matter-of-factly. “So, who is it you’re looking for? Family? Friend?” Her voice dropped slightly
before she said the next. “Boyfriend?”

“No, no, no,” I said quickly, why did everyone have romance on their minds? “I mean, yes; I’m
looking for a friend.”

“Well, if you tell me her name I can tell you if she’s here.” She prompted me, gesturing back at the
gym.

“Er, I don’t think she is but maybe you can still help me. Do you know where Panacea is supposed
to be?” I asked.

“The healer?” she asked, a confused look passing over her face. “Last I heard she was up at the
college, but that was yesterday. Might be moved on by now, you think your friend is getting help
from Panacea?”

“Er, something like that.” I told her before turning and sprinting back towards the entrance. Before
I turned the corner and disappeared behind the wall I called back, “Thanks, you’ve been a huge
help!”

Once I was sure I was out of sight I launched myself into the air and aimed myself slightly
northeast towards the campus. I was a bit closer to finding Amy, but the fact was that there were
two shelters on campus alone and more dotted around it so I wasn’t much better off though now I
was at least looking in the right general area. On my way to the college I actually ended up passing
over one of the work crews with one of my drones, not too far from where I’d left them less than an
hour. I waved absently down at them as I passed and continued on my way.

Soon enough I was dropping back down outside the student commons, which happened to be both
the largest and closest emergency shelter to me at the time. I went completely unnoticed once
again until I walked through the doors, Immediately a college kid was in front of me reaching
towards an array of clipboards with lined pieces of paper on them.

“Returning, or first time?” He asked impatiently.
“Uh, neither I’m actually looking for someone.” I told him.

He sighed and grabbed one of the clipboards before looking at me expectantly, “What’s the name?” He asked, and then before I could start to answer, “Last name first.”

“Da- no, I mean I’m looking for Panacea.” I corrected myself, and the college kid huffed in annoyance.

“North quad, can’t miss it.” Was all he said before tossing the board back onto its spot and staring back at the doors as if they’d done something to him personally.

I left him to glare at inanimate objects and began to make my way across the campus towards where he’d said I could find Panacea. I was somewhat familiar with campus because of my mother, though it had been years since I’d visited and undoubtedly some things had changed I was confident enough that the basic layout remained the same. As I walked I noticed that the college had come through relatively unscathed, sure here and there I could see where trees had been knocked over, or where windows had shattered, and there was probably mold and mildew growing in places but most of the buildings had survived relatively intact. Probably there was more damage on the buildings at the edge of campus, as they would have shielded the inner buildings from some of the force of the water.

Sure enough, as soon as the quad came into view I knew exactly where Amy was. Two humongous party tents stretched across the north side of the quad, and emblazoned on each side of those tents were large red-crosses signalling clearly that this was a place to get medical attention. What were presumably medical professionals moved among a loose crowd of people while a tighter knot clustered around the left side. That had to be where Amy was.

As I got closer I caught a glimpse of a figure in a white costume with a red cross along her back, and there standing besides her was her sister in all her imposing glory. I walked around the crowd, which was mostly just a ring of onlookers with a few genuinely sick or injured people mixed in. Finally a couple of the looky-loos turned away, opening up a gap in the ring of people which I stepped into. Amy and her sister were in the center, Glory Girl looking thoroughly bored as she watched her sister work and Amy absorbed in the task at hand which was a squalling red-face baby in what I assumed was it’s mother’s lap. I was hesitant to interrupt her at while she worked, partially in fear of causing some sort of screw up and partly because I knew she wouldn’t like it if I did interrupt her and I figured she was already peeved enough with me.

After a moment the child went quiet, and its color returned to more normal pink and Amy lifted her hand off the kid and smiled at the mother, telling her, “She’ll be fine now.”

The mother thanked Amy profusely and then, holding her child tightly, left the crowd. Just as her sister was about to motion for her next patient to step forward Glory Girl spotted me; she snorted and nudged her sister in the shoulder. Amy looked up at her sister, ready to ask her what she wanted when she spotted me herself and after taking a moment to glare and both me and Glory Girl, straightened her posture and motioned for a an with a broken arm to step forward. Glory Girl shrugged at me, and I sighed; it looked like Amy was going to make me wait.

And so I waited while she fixed the guy’s arm, or rather made sure it was healing properly and sped up the process a little. Then I waited some more as she checked over an elderly gentleman with a cough assuring what I guessed was his grandson that it was just a cough and not pneumonia, though she fixed that up as well. Finally, I waited some more while she checked a young woman who it turned out did have pneumonia, at least before Amy got done with her. I was prepared to wait some more but it turned out there weren’t actually any more people who needed her help right that minute so I stepped into the center of the circle, distinctly aware of the onlookers surrounding
“Hey,” I said with as much confidence I could muster, I really wasn’t sure how conversations like this were supposed to go.

“Hello, Taylor.” She answered without getting up from her seat.

“Err, can we talk,” I tried. “Maybe somewhere, uh, less crowded?”

“Actually,” she said, looking to her sister for help but the other girl only shrugged and grinned, causing Amy to sigh. “Fine, it’s about time for my break anyways.”

The healer stood up and turning away from both her sister and myself, walked out of the little circle and headed for a smaller tent in one of the alleyways leading into the quad. No one else followed her except me and Glory Girl. I took a few quick steps to bring myself even with her and then settled in to match her pace.

“So, taking breaks now?” I asked, unsure how she was going to respond.

“Fifteen minutes every two hours,” she answered flatly. “After I passed out the third day after the attack, the family forced me to take breaks and sleep every twelve hours.”

“Oh,” was all I said in response.

The smaller tent turned out to be some sort of rest and snack area. Two people, one man and one woman, looked up as we walked under the cover of the tent and waved to Amy before going back to their book and food respectively. One a thin table to one side there were a couple of those large coffee pots, shrink wrapped box of juice bottles, and baskets of sealed snacks laid out.

“Okay, Taylor, let’s talk.” She said, after grabbing an orange juice and a snack.

“So, you’re mad that I,” I glanced for a moment at the other two people, but then realised it was pointless to worry, the cat was already out of the bag. “That I revealed my identity?”

Amy sighed and said, “No, I’m not, though if you’d asked I could have told you that being out is no fun at all. I’m also not pissed that you didn’t tell me you were a Tinker,” she said, glancing at her sister while at the same time stalking towards me, “Also? Not pissed that you fought in the dress I bought you. So, do you want to know what I’m pissed about? Huh, Taylor?”

On my name she poked me in the sternum with the hand she was holding the orange juice in. Unsure if actually speaking would be a wise move I simply nodded in response to her question, though it wasn’t clear if she was actually looking for an answer because she started speaking again before I’d finished nodding.

“What I’m pissed about is that my friend disappeared on me for a week, right after she fought two Endbringers.” I decided not to correct her and point out that it was actually three. “And then when I next see her it’s on national TV, without so much as a call, a text, a letter, or a single fucking smoke signal to let me know she’s alright!”

I waited a moment, to see if she had anything else she needed to say, before I responded.

“Look, I know I screwed up and I can’t even say I had a good reason,” I said, trying to sound as apologetic as I could. “I mean, I had a good reason for leaving, but I should have let you know I was okay. The truth is that I just didn’t think about, I only barely sort of let my Dad know that I wasn’t dead and I didn’t even see him until the day before yesterday. I’m a little out of practice
with this whole, friends thing so I’d really like it if you could give me another chance, I promise I’ll be a better friend this time.”

“I didn’t mean,” Amy sighed setting down her snack and drink on the nearest table. “Look, I was just angry, I never meant I wanted to stop being friends. My people skills aren’t exactly great either, so how about I forgive you for worrying me and you forgive me for being kind of a psycho just now?”

I laughed a little and said, “You have every right to be pissed, I think, but yeah, sure, forgiven.”

Amy seemed to relax immensely at that and then we both sort of just stood there for a moment or two, obviously neither of us quite sure what to do now but aware that we probably shouldn’t just leave it at that. Seemingly at the same moment we each decided that a hug was the appropriate end to the moment, but just as we each went in for it the other hesitated. It took us a moment to awkwardly coordinate ourselves so that we were embracing each other and I was sure that we both looked like we’d never been hugged before in our lives.

“Awww,” Glory Girl’s said from behind us, quickly followed by her making a gagging sound. Amy gave her the middle finger.

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♦ Topic: The Endbringers, Thread XXXII

In: Boards ► World News ► Main

Jelly Laridae (Original Poster) (Not an Avril Lavigne Fan)

Posted on April 16th, 2011:

Starting a new topic because the last one hit post limit.


The Simurgh attacked Canberra, Australia on February 24th, 2011. Thread here.

Estimated time for next attack is April 28th, 2011. This time is not exact, and is likely to deviate by as much as 15 days.

Official speculation points to North America as the next likely target.

(Showing page 27 of 51)

► Automatic Messiah

Replied on May 6th, 2011:
@Nis: before yesterday I would have told you to ignore the rumors, now? the chinese can’t keep it secret forever if it did happen

▶ **TheOctopodGod** (Protectorate Employee)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

Okay, what the fuck has happened? I went off my double shift yesterday and crashed around 3pm and this moring I wake up to the news screaming about TWO(!) Endbringer attacks. And some princess?

Did this really happen? Did someone spike the water supply? Im kinda losing it here.

▶ **Seam** (Veteran Member)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

Yeah, it all happened.

Leviathan attacked Brockton Bay. Behemoth went after Ottowa (though they thought it was Montreal first).

It’s not a princess they’re talking about, but Princess. Some cape no one had ever heard of until last night, amputated one of Leviathan’s arms (seriously there’s a video of her using it to lay the smack down on Behemoth floating around, I know Endbringer attacks are serious but I don’t think I’ve ever laughed that hard in my life).

▶ **Zog** (Wiki Warrior) (Prime Indexer)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

@Seam: Speak for yourself, she’s had a wiki-page for weeks. I know because I had to go back and source the damn thing after the original author forgot to. It’s still technically only a stub, but I expect that’ll change soon enough.

▶ **whitedragonphoenix2187534**

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

ur articles shit bro. my frend lives in brocton, he sed princess was a crimnal

im prety sur

▶ **Zog** (Wiki Warrior) (Prime Indexer)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

I sincerely doubt your friend exists, much less that he lives in Brockton Bay given the local coverage she’s gotten. She gets mentioned in at least three PRT press releases; first for taking down Lung, then for something she did during the bombings a couple weeks back, and finally there’s a fight with the Merchants.

▶ **Gourmand**

Replied on May 6th, 2011:
I don’t see that it matters much what she is, the fact is that we have a second Scion. Not even the Triumvirate working together all at once could have driven off any of the Endbringers that quickly.

► NumerOneAcrobat

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

I don’t know if she’s as powerful as the great Golden God, or at least Princess looks less versatile. She looks like a Brute/Mover (even if she might be scale breaking in both categories), whereas anyone who’s reading even a little bit of the available eyewitness testimony surrounding Scion knows he can handle a lot of different situations. Of course Princess has one advantage over Scion, it looks like we can actually talk to her.

► Know Won (Moderator: World News Main)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

This discussion is off-topic. If you want to debate Princess’s relative power, make a thread for it in the appropriate sub-forum.

► Gourmand

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

@Know Won: Sorry.

Anyway I’m still kind of freaking out that both Leviathan and Behemoth attack on the same day. Is anyone saying if they expect this to be the new pattern, or that this was just a one off (preferably someone credible, talking out of more than than their own ass)? Does anyone even have an idea what might have triggered the change?

If I’m being honest this is actually really freaking me out because even with a new cape who can almost solo them one on one two simultaneous Endbringer attacks is scary as fuck (and yes I know the rumors about the Simurgh, but I’m going to live in denial until I hear it from someone more credible than some random chucklefuck online).

► TheOctopodGod (Protectorate Employee)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

Ok, just got off the phone with a friend who’s on duty today (it’s my day off) and apparently the official casualty lists are about to be released for Capes who attended the fights. Hooo boy! Some of the lowest numbers EVER, I’m talking low double digits, like not even legal to drink double digits. Of course that’s just for capes, numbers for civilians will be higher but those won’t start firming up for at least a few days (lot of wreckage to sift through, whatever else).

► Seam (Veteran Member)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

Jesus Christ! Really?

I guess we shouldn't be surprised but still that’s huge.

@Gourmand: Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. You know what I jsut thought about? Every other time the pattern
for the Endbringers changed a new one showed up.

► Nis (Veteran Member)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

@Automatic Messiah: Is not rumors I am hearing, cousin told me.

@Gourmand: Am not some random ‘chucklefuck’ as you call me. Cousin lives in village near where Lady of Death showed up, could hear singing, said there was big explosions for several minutes then silence and big light show in sky. He saw piece of Lady of Death fall off and hit ground.

Cousin and family are leaving village.

► Bagrat (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

Nothing I’ve dug up so far has even hinted at a third attack by the Simurgh, and until something does I’m going to assume it isn’t true. Frankly two Endbringer attacks at the same time is enough scary enough.

► EggPaintInAustralia (Veteran Member) (Not in it for the Money)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

If there are two, why not three? The regular pattern has already been broken, why would they hold back?

► Biri Bruce (Veteran Member)

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

They’ve been holding back for almost 20 years, why would they suddenly stop now?

► Au Revoir

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

@Biri Bruce: Same thing that always has; too many powerful capes, and too much organized resistance. Only this time it didn’t work. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer bunch.

► A Quick Short Lane

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

I heard Lung actually showed up to the fight, anyone know if this is true?

► Automatic Messiah

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

Yeah, early reports say he showed up at the briefing in Brockton Bay and fought Leviathan again. I guess it’s just lucky for the city that it wasn’t a repeat of Kyushu.
Gourmand

Replied on May 6th, 2011:

Lucky nothing, without Princess I’m not sure there would be an East Coast anymore. Anyone else getting the urge to prostrate themselves five times a day towards Brockton Bay?

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ... 26, 27, 28 ... 51

Chapter End Notes

7/22/19: Totally forgot the PHO segment at the end of this chapter.
After another moment of reveling in the feeling of someone besides my father or a technically incorporeal hyper-advanced time travelling/dimension hopping intelligence hugging me I decided that it was time to let go and avoid the potential awkwardness of a too long embrace. If my social isolation has taught me anything, it was to be hyper-conscious of physical interaction in social situations; though for very different reasons. With Amy at least I was sure there were no hidden ulterior motives.

“So,” I said, intensely aware of how utterly I’d failed at avoiding awkwardness, again. “Uh, yeah.”

“Right,” Amy said, just as stiffly.

“Jesus Christ,” Glory Girl interrupted. “I know one of you is a sorta robot, but I’ve seen chatbots with better social skills.”

“Victoria!” Amy squawked, whirling on the smirking figure of her sister.

“What?” The girl in question said indignantly.

I decided to interrupt before this turned into some sort of sisterly brawl that might get splashed on the front pages, not that I thought either of them was likely to take it that far or really anywhere at all but people were giving us glances and I could already imagine any number of headlines. Over the years comparisons had been made between the cape focused magazines you could buy in every convenience store, supermarket, and bookstore and the celebrity gossip magazines of Earth Aleph; none of it complimentary.

“Relax Amy, I don’t mind, honestly it was kind of funny.” And it was, not in the sense that I was about to suggest Glory Girl take up a career as a comedian, but at least it meant people were buying my lie. Sort of. Actually, I turned towards her and opened my mouth to ask, “Uh, you know that’s not actually true, right? That I’m not a robot, I mean.”

Glory Girl rolled her eyes, “Yes, of course. I know the difference between a robot and a cyborg. Just because I like to punch first and ask questions later doesn’t mean I’m a drooling moron.”

“Uh, err, sorry,” I said, apparently I’d hit some sort of raw nerve.

“It’s whatever,” she answered back, waving the entire issue off with her hand at the same time.

“If you say so,” I didn’t actually think it was, but then again it wasn’t really my place to push her on the issue, so instead I turned back to Amy who I found giving her sister a curious look; a mix of aggravation, pity, and resignation. Still, even if I took this as confirmation, it definitely wasn’t something I should stick my nose into. “Though, actually I just wanted to know if that’s what the news was saying about me.”

“Oh,” Glory Girl said, looking faintly embarrassed.

Amy elaborated for her, “No, I don’t think most people have connected all the dots yet. Mostly they just play clips from your interview and try to figure out what you’re like from that. There’s also speculation on what’s going to change because of everything that happened, mostly opinion is divided; either you’re a more talkative Scion, the herald of the coming Endbringer apocalypse, or everything will just stay the exact same.”
“Don’t worry, the crazies will really start coming out of the woodworks soon enough, then you’ll discover things about yourself you never knew,” Glory Girl said. “Like, did you know I have a drinking problem? Or that my aunt is in love with my dad? How about that Dragon is Narwhal’s secret lover? Ooh, or my favorite; Amy, my own sister, is mooning over dear old fashioned Gallant,” Amy snorted at that, though it something about the way it came across was a little too emphatic; like it was simultaneously stupidly far from the truth and dangerously close. “See, they’ll start coming up with all sorts of ridiculous shit sooner or later for you too.”

“I, uh, guess I’ll just have to ignore it,” I said, after all it wasn’t like I could actually stop anyone from thinking or saying those sorts of things to people. Besides even if I could, trying to would probably only make people think that the rumors, or similar rumors were true because I was trying so hard to make sure they didn’t get out. “Not to totally change the subject, but seeing as I’ve been gone a week, what’s been happening?”

“Neither of us is probably the best to answer that question,” Amy said slightly apologetically. “I’ve been rushing from one medical emergency to the next since the fight started, when I haven’t been sleeping or eating that is, and it’s honestly a lot easier if I avoid finding out about how things are going.” She looked contrite, though I could understand her viewpoint fairly easily; if I were dealing with all that sort of misery and pain up close I don’t think I could handle the larger stuff either. “And Victoria, well the reason they have her watching me is that she ran herself ragged those first couple of days helping with the search and rescue operations.”

“Shut up,” her sister said though it was quiet and without rancor, after a moment she continued the explanation herself. “When the fight ended we went right to work evacuating the shelters that had been damaged and looking for people who hadn’t been able to make it to them in the first place. Just like that,” she snapped her fingers. “Like flipping a switch. I was running on adrenaline the entire day, when I got home I cried for half an hour and passed out.”

Glory Girl paused and a far away look came over her face, her eyes got a watery looked and she turned almost immediately away from me. Suddenly I felt embarrassed, not because of the sudden display of emotion from the heroine but because I was acutely aware of exactly how long I’d been gone and how much must have happened while I was gone. Amy had stepped closer to her sister and was whispering in her ear.

“I should have been here,” I said quietly and mostly to myself, though Amy apparently heard me because she glanced at me for an instant before whispering a few more words into her sister’s ear. Whatever she said, Glory Girl shook her head a second later and then seemed to return to her normal somewhat cocky self as both of them turned back to me.

“You had a good reason for going, right?” Glory Girl asked me.

“Yeah, “ I answered immediately. “No, maybe. I don’t know, I thought I did but now that I’m back I’m starting to think I didn’t. Maybe I should have stayed.”

“Maybe,” she said, eliciting another significant look from her sister to which she only shrugged. “What? Not like it really matters now, you already made the choice; can’t go back and make a different one.”

“Where did you go?” Amy asked after a moment of quiet passed.

“Uhh,” my eyes flicked towards her sister for an instant before I glanced over at the other two people underneath the small tent. “I mean-”

“You don’t have to tell me!” She amended nervously, looking around us. “It’s not really my
business and I get that it might be a secret, I was just curious since you were talking about where you went.”

“I should tell you, I want to tell you,” I told her. “It’s just that the explanation is a little complicated and while I don’t know that I would call it a secret, it is kind of private. How about...”

While we’d been talking the drones that I’d sent to take care of ‘odd jobs’ in those three neighborhoods had finally found some work; one was in the process of removing a tree which had fallen over and landed on someone’s home, another was in the process of excavating a sewer pipe which had ruptured in the storm and the last was currently being ‘interrogated’ by Miss Militia and Arsmaster. It was the last part which had given me pause and now I was realizing that there were a number of capes watching over each and every one of my drones. Most were being unobtrusive enough, watching from the air or from a distance on the ground while the drones worked with and responded to the instructions of the people guiding them through their tasks. Honestly it wasn’t terribly surprising that the Protectorate had sent people to watch my drones, though the number of them was kind of surprising, two or three for each; though none of the Triumvirate were among their number.

I focused my attention just as the drone in question began answering the most recent query posed to it.

“This unit was directed to aid the inhabitants of this neighborhood in any and all aspects in which this unit is capable of providing adequate service,” the drone said in its tinny little voice to the heroes before it.

Armsmaster certainly looked much better than the last time I’d seen him, of course at the time he’d been little more than blood and bones in a crushed metal suit so that wasn’t exactly saying much. He had a new suit, though it lacked his iconic colors and was instead the dull sheen of steel from head to foot except for the blue of his visor. Clearly it and the halberd in his right hand were works in progress still. Meanwhile to his left Miss Militia was standing a little further back, looking essentially the same, maybe a little worn but not majorly.

“Any assistance?” Armsmaster asked, glancing around as if searching for something with which to test the statement. “Pick up the blue car.”

“The vehicle in question has been appropriately stored according to local traffic regulations, what is the intended purpose of repositioning it?” The drone asked.

The Tinker sighed, apparently frustrated with my drone’s recalcitrant behavior, and motion towards the car again while saying, “There is a child trapped underneath.”

“Incorrect, the heat profile indicates no living or decomposing organic matter of substantive mass in the immediately vicinity of the indicated vehicle,” the drone was right, I could see what it did and there was no evidence that anything living was under there at all; in fact the car itself was so cool it probably hadn’t been used in days. “Have you lost a child?”

“No,” Armsmaster said, though the drone had already raised itself up and starting angling to attempt to locate any lost children. “You told me you had been told to help with any task asked of you, well I am asking you to lift that godforsaken blue car.”

“This unit has judged you do not have any serious need of it’s services, please move along, others may have more urgent requirements.” The drone was right, sort of, a crowd had started gathering to watch the spectacle of the Protectorate Tinker arguing with it, though everyone was watching from a ‘safe’ distance of several meters away.
Miss Militia had also noticed and motioned for the other cape to take notice of that fact, seeming to recognize that it might not be the best public image to be seen arguing with a robot in the middle of the street. As the two capes moved off I returned my attention to my own physical location, and found Glory Girl waving her hand in front of my face as Amy peered at me with concern etched across her face.

Nono flicked into my eye line attempting to appear as nonchalant and innocent as possible, which given her general cherubic nature and appearance made her look like a kid who’d just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. I had the sudden image of her standing behind me making funny faces and giving me bunny ears. Why exactly she would have done that when no one else besides myself could even see her right now, I wasn’t sure but then Nono was constantly amusing herself.

“Err, sorry,” I said as I shook my head to dislodge that errant, though amusing, image. “I got distracted by something happening with some of my drones.”

This earned a look of surprise from Amy, “Oh, I didn’t know you could monitor them like that.”

“Uh, yeah, actually speaking of I kinda need to take care of something now.” If the Protectorate was nervous enough to have capes watching every one of my drones I should probably talk to them about it and now was as good a time as any, especially because Armsmaster since was the local branch’s leader. “But I meant what I said before, I do want to tell you about…” I glanced at her sister for a second before continuing, “stuff. Maybe later tonight, okay?”

“Sure,” she said, looking a little unsure. “I don’t even know where I’ll end up though; some days I barely move from one place, and some others I move three or four times in a day.”

“Shit, and I lost my phone too,” I suddenly realized, not sure if I’d lost it before, after, or during the Endbringer fights. “I’m staying with my dad at the warehouse the Dockworkers Union set up to distribute supplies, if you come by tonight we can talk.”

“It’s the warehouse up north, near the docks, right?” she asked.

“Right, err, actually have your sister come too, I have something else I want to talk to both of you about.” Glory Girl gave me a surprised look at that, but I simply shot them both a smile and turned to step out from under the tent.

If there was anyone who could help me with the whole Tattletale/Coil situation it would be the two of them; being unconnected to the PRT and Protectorate meant I could trust that whoever the informant was wouldn’t learn about this, and I trusted Amy and by extension that meant I mostly trusted Glory Girl. Frankly, I didn’t think Coil was anything I couldn’t handle by myself but given Tattletale’s notes on his power the best bet for a clean victory was to throw as much unexpected obstacles in his path to trip up whatever it was that he did.

“Wait, hold on,” Amy said as she followed me out from under the tent and then hesitated. “Um,” was all that came out of her mouth before she’d wrapped in another hug.

It took me a moment to respond, a little surprised at the sudden show of affection, but once I did I returned the hug for a moment before we both let go and we both took a step away from one another. Simply because I wasn’t sure what else to do I gave Amy a wave goodbye and then, because it seemed ruder not to, I waved to her sister too, “Well, bye.”

With that I launched myself up into the air. I was five meters in the away and already arcing towards the drone which Armsmaster had been harassing before I realised I’d forgotten something. Or Rather Nono made me aware by barring my path with her floating, though incorporeal, body.
until I realised.

I fell back towards the Dallon sisters along the same path that I’d taken on the way up but stopped short of actually touching the ground; only coming close enough so it wasn’t awkward for us to talk like normal people. Not that any of us had thus far shown any indications of, you know, actually being normal; but there was the sort of crazy that came with being given superpowers when you were still figuring out how your own body worked, and then there was crazy.

“So, uh, there’ll be food,” I told them both. “But, like, it’s all basically stuff from cans so we won’t be offended if you eat before hand.”

“Oh, well most of what we’ve been eating,” Amy said, motioning with one hand to her sister. “Has been from cans too, so uh, whatever is good for us.”

“All right, I mean, good,” I said, once again unsure how exactly to wrap up the conversation. “Well, uhh, bye again I guess.”

This time no sudden thoughts or mistakes came to my attention as I once again flew away from the two New Wave members and towards the Protectorate capes who were, I confirmed through the drone, still there. Armsmaster and Miss Militia had moved off a ways, having apparently taken the drone’s suggestions to let others approach it seriously, though no one had so far come near it. They seemed content to simply monitor the situation for now. Something about Armsmaster struck me as odd as I made the quick flight over, though I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was; there was just some aspect of his behavior which felt, not wrong but not quite right either. Of course it wasn’t as if I’d ever spent a lot of time with the man so I wasn’t exactly any expert on his normal behavior, though so far none of my other observations about the world around me had turned out to be wrong; if probably only because I hadn’t really tested many of them.

The question of what it was about Armsmaster’s behavior that my mind had seized upon continued to nag at me lightly as I touched down next to my drone, not occupying a large portion of my thoughts but still definitely there. My head shook in automatic response as I tried to clear those thoughts from my head. With my left hand absently stroking the drone I waved at the gathered crowd of people, hoping my presence and a friendly air would encourage some of them to actually make use of it; otherwise there wasn’t much point in it wasting time here. Here and there a few people waved nervously back, but no one made any moves forward; it was doubtful any of them actually recognized me so it wasn’t as if my presence was likely to have any effect.

If by the time I was done talking to Miss Militia and her ‘boss’ no one had so much as talked to the drone I would move it. Which was an entirely arbitrary deadline sure, but I wanted my each of the drones to be doing something at least and not sitting around waiting.

Speaking of waiting, both the capes were doing a bang up job of not reacting to my sudden, though unlikely to be unexpected, appearance. I wondered if cool aloofness was a skill the Protectorate taught to imitate those cool action movie scenes, or if it was the other way around and those same action scenes were imitating real life. The drone remained where it was as I stepped away from it and towards where the two Protectorate capes stood some forty or so meters away.

As I approached the pair, once I passed through the patchy ring of people who’d gathered to watch the goings on surrounding my drone, everyone else seemed to lose interest in me in favor of the more obvious spectacle of the hulking robot while the two capes finally seemed to take notice. Neither made any sign of greeting me, or did anything except watch me approach and I was for a moment taken back to another similar moment just a few weeks ago. It was odd to think that these were the first two other capes I ever actually interacted with in some other than a fight and here I was again; it almost seemed like the closing of some metaphorical circle. If my life were a story
this would be one of those important parts that everyone has something to say about, it would mean something and there would be symbolism throughout. All I was hoping for was that at the end of this they wouldn’t think of me as an enemy.

“Hey,” I said for lack of anything better to say. “Err, I’m glad to see you doing better Armsmaster.”

“Your kind words are appreciated,” he replied, his voice the same gruff and matter-of-fact tone that I remember from the first night. “Princess.”

He didn’t sound particularly appreciative and in fact he seemed more grated by the admission than anything else, as if these sort of polite pleasantries were something to be endured. Next to him Miss Militia looked relaxed, even with the enormous green pistol in her hand, her posture contrasting the rigid stance he’d held since I’d arrived. She hadn’t flopped down to the ground or anything, but even just the subtle movements of her boy adjusting to keep balance made her look less apprehensive than Armsmaster’s rigid stillness.

“Well, uh, you’re welcome I guess?” Why exactly was meeting Armsmaster and Miss Militia for a second turning out harder to navigate than meeting two-thirds of the Triumvirate? “Uh, so do you have any questions for me? You know, since you were interrogating my drone a few minutes ago.”

That got an eyebrow raise from him or at least I thought it did going by the way the muscles in his jaw were pulled, I couldn’t actually tell because his helmet obscured the top half of his face.

“Not questions,” he finally replied after a moment. “Concerns. You have introduced a new, and potentially very dangerous, element to the city in the form of your ‘drones’, Princess. Tinkers as young as yourself simply do not have the experience to adequately safeguard the types of creation you have unleashed upon this city. I understand your intentions were only to aid in the reconstruction efforts, but to leave such powerful technology in the hands of whoever walks up to it is inviting disaster.”

I almost wanted to laugh, I’d been thinking people would be worried about my drones having too much independence and instead people were worrying about them following someone’s orders.

Nono meanwhile took offense as well, “No Buster Corp drone has ever violated, by action or failure to act, any established safety directives! The Pararagon class drone has served reliably in production for more than six thousand years without failure or fault! Hmph! Nosey old-”

“I can’t exactly go into specifics but I am monitoring them, though there are limits; so I can only directly control three at a time, still I can switch to any of the others in an instant. No one is going to manage to bypass the automatic safeguards before I can reassert control.” I interrupted, just so that I wouldn’t react to whatever she said next, and tried to make my smile as disarming as possible. “You already tried a little bit yourself so you know they won’t even take merely prank-like action unless there’s a good reason. Really, you have nothing to worry about.”

He snorted, and said, “The fact that you have undertaken such extensive modification of your own body,” he gestured towards me and I watched as the armor around his right shoulder shifted subtly. “As your interview the other day indicated, does not convince me you are as skilled or careful as you seem to believe yourself to be. You would do well to heed Director Piggot and join the Wards, so you might seek the advice and counsel of more experienced Tinkers.”

“Hold up,” I said, giving in to my burgeoning annoyance, and putting my hand up to forestall anymore irritating lectures. “You have no idea how careful I was, how skilled I am, or how long I’ve had my powers! Besides I was there when you fought Leviathan, I watched you take it on and I know that it wasn’t just you in your armor fighting then; you had some sort of predictive
algorithm running to help you in the fight. Only it didn’t quite work out did it? So who exactly isn’t as careful or as skilled as they think here, huh?”

What the hell was with this guy’s problem, lecturing me on being careful and on modifications? Armsmaster, the guy who walked around in a full body suit that made him look more like a robot than my drones did, who rode on a tinker-tech souped up bike and who carried a replica of a medieval weapon packed so full of widgets and gadgets it would probably need its own library to hold all the instruction manuals. That was if any of them had had instruction manuals. Hell, he’d even gone an- oh, well, that explained what had been bothering me.

“Besides, how exactly are you the one lecturing me on extensive body modifications,” I shot back before he could cut in. “When you’re sitting there with what your own work stuffed into what I’m guessing is thirty percent of your own body? And I know it wasn’t necessary, none of the damage couldn’t have been fixed by Panacea, though I’m guessing you would have still been in a hospital bed somewhere.”

“I,” he began heatedly, showing the first really emotional reaction I’d ever seen from him. “Am experienced enough to know what is safe and sane to undertake. You, like all new Tinkers are still being carried along by your power; content to let it guide and shape your designs instead of taking control of it and funneling it to your own ends. Do not-!”

Miss Militia had placed a hand on his shoulder to get his attention and leaned forward, careful to keep her now transformed from a pistol into a large machine gun weapon pointed towards the ground. Annoyed at the way he had acted so far, and thus feeling somewhat petty and entitled to a minor violation of their privacy, I enhanced my hearing until I could make out what she was whispering in his ear.

“Colin,” her accented voice was a pleasant contrast to his own. “Remember our instructions.”

He continued to stare at me for a moment, his jaw working angrily, and then he nodded sharply once in agreement and she removed her hand from him and resumed her former stance. He took a moment to visibly relax before saying, “We have other duties to attend to, I urge you to consider joining the Wards, Princess.”

Armsmaster didn’t actually give me a chance to really respond, just turned away and started striding towards a set of bikes parked further down the street; one his own painted in a deep blue with silver highlights, that apparently had not been destroyed, and the other a thoroughly ordinary one painted in army green that had to be Miss Militia’s. What an asshole.

I stewed as Miss Militia followed after Armsmaster towards their bikes, wishing for a moment that I hadn’t decided to come after all. I watched them mount and then roar off down the street until they turned the corner and disappeared, though I followed their progress somewhat farther by the sound of their twin engines.

I sighed, partially in relief and partly in frustration, that had not gone as well as I’d hoped. Part of me, a big part of me, wanted to lay all the blame to Armsmaster’s shoulders and say if it weren’t for his frankly rude behavior none of that would have happened but I knew it was my fault at least as much as it was his. Honestly I didn’t even have a very good reason for getting so worked up, it was just that something about the way he’d talked to me had set off every last frustration I’d had. Maybe it had to do with Sophia? He was after all in charge of the Wards in many ways and he’d failed to stop her from participating in my torment for the last year, failed to teach her how to be an actual hero rather than a bully on the right side. It probably wasn’t fair to blame him for her though, I doubted she was stupid enough to act the same in front of people like him as she did with me.
It as easy and tempting to try and blame Armasmaster for Sophia, and by extension for my reaction but it was also a cop out that I knew I couldn’t take. I sighed again as I turned back towards the drone.

“Sorry.” I whispered contritely to Nono.

She smiled back, her expression a somewhat muted mirror of my own, as she answered, “Nono is sorry too. That man’s attitude irritated Nono too, when she should have been there to help you remain calm.”

*

Most of the rest of the day I spent monitoring the drones, making sure everything was going smoothly and nothing was going wrong with them. A few times I swooped in to help with one of the three drones I’d tasked with helping the neighborhoods when they were presented with a problem which required more delicate maneuvering. For the most part I simply waited out the day and stewed on the disaster of the meeting with Armasmaster, coming to the conclusion that he was in fact a giant egotistical prick. Unfortunately just because he was hypocritical and an all around asshole didn’t mean that others wouldn’t agree with him, and that left me with another aspect to worry about. That occupied most of the remainder of the day until I was sick of thinking about it.

As I settled distractedly in front of a pair of burly men standing guard in front of the entrance to the warehouse that was for the time being my home, I decided that to least for tonight I would try to forget about everything as much as possible. Which was easier said than done, because the first thing Dad said to me after we’d hugged each other hello was, “How was your day, kiddo?”

“It was…” I hesitated, not really wanting to lie but at the same time not wanting to go back over the entire thing with Dad. “Pretty bad. Well, that’s not totally true; it started out okay but it ended kind of shittily. After I got started this morning I went to see Amy, and that was good, you know to clear the air and everything, but then after that I kind of got into an argument with Armasmaster.”

“What!” Dad shouted, his face suddenly twisting angrily as he paced hotly around the room. “We told them no, and now they’re harassing you out in the open? I’m going to call up the men and march right down to that Piggot woman’s office and show her-!”

“Dad, no,” I said grabbing his hand and pulling him back towards me. “It wasn’t like that, I mean yes, Armasmaster was an asshole but he wasn’t exactly trying to recruit me and,” I hesitated as I struggled to admit it to myself. “I may have pushed his buttons a little. He was just, he was so condescending and I let it get to me when I shouldn’t have, I know but after everything that’s happened I just didn’t have it in me to sit there and let him talk down to me like that.”

Dad’s face softened again and he pulled me into another tight hug, “Oh, honey. None of this has been fair to you, I know, and you’ve handled it about as well as I think anyone could; I just wish that I could take some of the burden off of you, shoulder it myself. I know, I know, you’re not asking that, but it’s a father’s prerogative to want to protect his child from all the hard parts of life, even if I know I can’t, and even shouldn’t always.”

We stood like that for a few minutes, just me and him hugging in the middle of the small room we
had to ourselves; the faint stale smell of dried sweat was oddly comforting in that moment. At least until I remembered the other thing I needed to tell him.

“Uh, Dad?” I asked into his chest.

“Yeah Taylor?” He responded immediately.

“I, uh, kind of invited Amy and her sister over for dinner,” I told him quietly, still not letting go.

After a moment he simply sighed, and then started laughing quietly; not a big laugh but a kind of relieved laugh that started in his chest and percolated up towards his head. “Well, at least I know there’s still a teenage girl in there somewhere,” he said, his breath ghosting across the top of my head to punctuate each soft laugh.

“Sorry,” I said, a little confused by his reaction; I hadn’t expected yelling or anything but still I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of this reception.

“No, no, it’s alright Taylor, honestly,” he said as he gave me another reassuring squeeze. “There’s plenty of food, and it’s good to see you reaching out. Now, how long until they get here?”

“Uh, I’m not actually sure,” I grimaced at how utterly unprepared I was. “Amy wasn’t even sure where they would be at the end of the night, but I don’t think they’ll be much longer.”

As if on cue one of the dockworkers poked his head in through the half-open door after quick knock, his face slack and blank in shock. He tried a couple of times to say something, his mouth working but no sound coming out until he cleared his throat and finally spoke, “Um, Danny, there’s two girls here to see you and your daughter. Kenji swears it’s a couple of them New Wave kids, them Dallons I think.”

“Yes, thank you Sam, we’ll both be out in a moment,” Dad told the man, who simply nodded and disappeared back in the direction he’d come from.

After another quick squeeze we finally separated. The walk to the main entrance took only a couple of moments, and then we were rounding the corner and the two parts of my life met for only the second time. It took several moments of awkward uncomfortable silence for me to realize that since I was really the only one who knew everyone involved it was my job to make introductions.

“So, Dad, you remember Amy,” I said, motion to Amy and then back again to Dad. “And Amy, you remember my dad. And then this is Amy’s sister Victoria.”

Dad and Amy briefly shook hands, and then so did he and Victoria. Another moment of silence filled the air, which it was very quickly becoming apparent was sort of the general theme of my entire life.

“Well, it’s very nice to meet both of you, now if you excuse me I’m going to go cook the meal Taylor has already promised you,” Dad said with a smile.

“Oh, that’s not necessary Mr. Hebert, we can eat later,” Amy said, but her sister shot her the strongest look I’d seen from her yet and elbowed her roughly at the same time.

“Nonsense,” he said cheerily. “Never let it be said that Heberts ever let a guest go hungry. Now, it’ll probably be an hour before anything’s ready, so why don’t you show them around Taylor. When you’re done come to the kitchen and well eat as soon as it’s ready.”
Before anyone could say anything else he’d turned and started walking away, disappearing around the corner a moment later. I turned and looked at the Dallon sisters, and found Victoria still staring seriously at Amy with a fierce expression on her face.

“You almost cost us a free meal,” she said mock seriously. “Alright, so Hebert what’s this you wanted to talk to us about?”

“Uhm, not here,” I said, glancing at the two men standing up near the doors, neither of them seemed to be paying attention anymore but still I wanted a little privacy. “Follow me,” I finished, waving for them to follow me.

The walk back to the room seemed to take interminably long, as the silence stretched every step into what seemed like minutes, but finally I showed them into me and Dad’s room and closed the door behind us. As I turned from the door I found both of them watching me expectantly, and had to take a moment to gather my thoughts before I dove right into the explanation.

“Right, so you both know who Coil is, right?” Each of them nodded in response. “Good, well the deal is that someone came to me a few days ago, actually right after I returned and asked for my help in dealing with him.”

“Coil’s smalltime. Most people don’t even think he’s actually a parahuman, just another gangster playing a game, so why exactly do you need our help?” Victoria asked.

“My, err, source is fairly sure he does have a power and though they don’t know exactly what it is they have some solid info that paints a dangerous picture,” I said. “For right this second, the important part is that his power lets him avoid defeats with uncanny frequency and that my source is pretty positive he has a mole inside the PRT, which is part of why I’m not going to them.”

“Gee, thanks,” Victoria muttered sarcastically.

“Oh shut up Vicky,” Amy interrupted. “You keep talking about this source, it might be helpful if we knew who or at least what they were and how they know all this.”

“Well, see the thing is that my source is someone you know,” I told them hesitantly, wary of revealing exactly who my source was for fear of putting both of them off of helping at all. “But not someone you like,” that got a pair of confused looks and I sighed as I decided to bite the bullet. “It’s Tattletale.”

“The villain?!” Amy shouted before catching herself and lowering the volume of her voice significantly. “The one who held up the bank, the one from the Undersiders?”

“Oh this is priceless,” Victoria laughed simultaneously. “Princess is being hoodwinked by the psycho-bitch villain.”

“Yes, her,” I said matter-of-factly. “Look, at first I didn’t totally buy it either but the truth is that I don’t think there’s anything she can actually do to me.”

“Do you actually think you’re invincible?” Victoria chuckled unironically.

“Look if it were just her I probably would just leave her to rot,” I said over the blonde Dallon sister’s muffled laughs. “But Coil is the one that took Dinah Alcott; because she was, is, a precog.” That sobered Victoria up quickly.

“I don’t know Taylor,” Amy said doubtfully. “I remember what she was like at the bank, she knew exactly what to say to stall long enough for her friends to swoop in and rescue her. You have to
admit this is all very convenient for her.”

“Actually, I don’t think it is,” I said. “But anyways, I’m not asking either of you to trust her, I’m asking for you two to trust me.”

Each of them still looked fairly doubtful, but Amy sighed and said, “Okay, how about you explain the rest of it to us and then we decide.”

I knew it was as close as I was gonna get to an outright agreement at the moment, so I nodded and then proceeded to launch into a thirty minute rundown of everything I knew, starting from what Tattletale had told me about how she’d been recruited and how Dinah Alcott had ended up in Coil’s hands. After that I covered every scrap of info the villainess had provided on Coil’s powers, and everything I’d figured out myself as well as everything that had been reported about the gang leader since he’d appeared. Then I showed them the map and the phone she’d given me outlining all his bunker locations; which lead to a five minute argument with Glory Girl on why we could just raid every single one of his outposts at once. Finally at the end of it both of them agreed to help if they could, after all there was no guarantee Tattletale’s call wouldn’t come when either one of them was tied up taking care of something else but still it was reassuring to have someone willing to help.

At that point about forty five minutes had passed and so we decided to head towards the kitchen where Dad was still cooking away, he had apparently located some hidden cache of actual fresh ingredients and started making an honest meal. He simply motioned for us to sit at the long communal table that had been set up, but which rarely saw any use and was at the moment completely vacant except for the three of us.

Once again, a somewhat uncomfortable silence filled the air as we sat and I wondered how to fill it. The usual topics were kind of out because school wasn’t happening at the moment and their family in general just seemed to be somewhat of a sore subject so I really was at a loss as to how to fill the vacuum of conversation. Nono gave me a significant look, but the only thing I could think of to say was, “Man, Armsmaster sure is a dick, huh?”

Victoria and Amy both laughed, which seemed to break the tension somewhat.

“Yeah, you get used to him eventually,” Victoria informed me.

“Really?” I asked, finding it a little hard to believe that the man I’d spoken to this afternoon could ever really be ‘gotten used to’.

“No,” Amy and Victoria both answered simultaneously, which set us all off laughing for a couple of moments. I was glad to finally have some common ground with Amy’s sister, not that I particularly wanted to be her friend, but I would rather have something in common than be stuck always making awkward, stilted conversation with her. Of course, it wasn’t like I couldn’t manage that even when I did have a shared interest.

“So what are-” I began to say before we were interrupted once again by Sam the door guard.

“Um,” he said, looking, what I could only describe as shell shocked. “There’s a big Asian guy outside, all covered in tattoos asking for you Taylor. I- I, uh, think it’s Lung.”

Oh fuck me. This was exactly what my day needed, a visit from the psychotic probably racist Asian gang leader who I sort of had an ongoing rivalry with. Everyone had turned to look at me expectantly, ready for me to jump in with an explanation for why this insanely dangerous criminal was showing up asking for me. Instead of giving them an answer I simply got up and started
walking the way Sam had come in from, towards the main entrance again.


I didn’t respond to any of them and eventually each of them followed me out, leaving poor Sam standing there unsure of what to do. As I approached the entrance, I was acutely aware of the three people following behind me but ignored the weight of their stares on my back until I’d reached the door and then pushed past it into the cooling night air. Sure enough there was Lung standing not more than six meters away in all his muscled, tattooed, vaguely sociopathic glory. Thankfully he was not currently and showed no signs of transforming into his more monstrous form.

On spotting me he roared, “Excellent!”

It didn’t seem excellent to me.
“What do you want?” I asked, stepping forward a little farther just to put a little more separation between me and the others in case this actually turned into a fight.

Not that any fight between me and Lung would last long, or that I would let him get anywhere near Dad for that matter, but it wasn’t an entirely conscious decision on my part anyways. For a moment I wondered why my security measures hadn’t alerted me to Lung in the first place, I’d sent the first capable drone Nono and I had built to keep an eye on Dad, but almost before the thought was fully formed the answer was unfolding in my head, like a briefly recalled memory. I saw Lung approach alone from the west like a little figurine in one of those model train cities, at first in perfect birdseye clarity and then in the false-color of infrared sensors; he looked like any normal person. At a block out he passed through a cloud of nanites which the drone had dropped and dispersed as soon as it had determined his course, they rained onto his clothing and skin and began feeding results back to the drone; they tasted sweat for stress chemicals, probed at the initial dermal layers in search of scales and then died instants after reporting results, cooked by the waste heat of their own transmissions. Everything happened in seconds and the drone had determined he presented no immediate threat before Lung had even been seen by any of the guards.

When I’d set the drone its task I had only just learned what the machines were capable of, and so I’d been needlessly restrictive in setting its parameters; I’d told it that unless my father was in danger it was not to take any action whatsoever, and so it had dutifully obeyed. I almost made the modifications to it directives then and there, but I was brought out of my thoughts by Lung’s voice.

“Peace, girl,” he called out, that booming voice of his carrying across the space between us and causing Dad, Amy, and the Sam the door guard to flinch even as Victoria tensed herself, presumably in preparation for the fight she must think was coming. “I’m not here to fight you or yours.”

The last part he said with a glance towards Amy and Victoria.

“Then what, like I said,” I asked. “Do you want?”

“Come on and bring it,” Glory Girl snorted at the same time, taking a couple of steps forward and then continuing in an altogether too arrogant tone. “I’m not afraid of you!”

A look passed over the gang leader’s face, he seemed to subtly grow, and then he fixed her with his gaze and said, “Well you should be, New Wave runt!”

Lung’s face was already shifting into a more draconic visage and the skin across his entire body became almost dappled as scales began working their way forth, damnit the transformation was faster than it had been before. Did the speed of his transformation scale with the perceived threat or something?

“Enough!” I yelled in the instant before the sky above us tore open to spit out something roughly the size of a city bus which set the air crackling with enough energy to send the short hairs on the back of everyone’s neck on end. Nono’s voice joined mine in the second, though hers was directed at the drone and indeed no one else could hear her, “HALT!”
This display was enough to get everyone to pause as the drone menaced in Lung’s direction with a single spear like tentacle. I could feel the hum of the drone’s mind as it queried me for instructions and fed me its own observations of the various threats. It had identified Victoria as the aggressor though Lung was the primary hazard. The drone relaxed, at least in the sense that it no longer assumed an incident as imminent, though it kept its weapon at the ready.

“You said you weren’t here to fight,” I said to Lung. “So, tell me; What.” I took a step forward, and drew up alongside the floating body of my drone. “Do.” Another few steps and I reached out to touch the underside of the drone’s carapace; it was hard, though it had slight give, with a certain warmth that was almost like living flesh. “You.” While my steps took me forward the drone drew back, until I was even with the ‘head’ and could let my arm fall away from the body of the drone to rest at my side. “Want?” I locked eyes with Lung and crossed my arms as I came to a stop.

I had the sudden urge to laugh at myself and the entire situation, it was like a scene out of a ridiculous action movie and I couldn’t quite believe my life had turned in this, but I didn’t think Lung would appreciate the observation so I held myself back. Besides the dramatic flair felt appropriate.

Lung kept a hold of my gaze for a moment before he answered, “I am here to talk, nothing more. Leader to leader.”

“I’m not a leader of anything,” I interrupted quickly, slightly irritated at the implicit comparison to himself.

He gave me a slightly incredulous look, his face and body already basically returned to normal by this point, as he pointedly looked at the drone hovering slightly above us, “You command soldiers. No matter what you wish to pretend you are not one of those costumed idiots who submit themselves to the commands of weak fools; I told you before that were are alike in this. Accept it or others will use your indecision to bite and tear at you until nothing remains but the scattered ashes of your power. The others are already marshalling; the Empire, the Merchants, Coil, they are all waiting to seize the opportunities this unique situation has afforded them.”

I wanted to tell the gang leader that he was off his rocker, that I wasn’t anything except a simple hero doing the best she could to keep her city and the world from crumbling, but I knew he was at least partly right. What I’d already done had already changed things, and what I was planning on doing would change things even more. Heck, I was already pretty sure the PRT had given me a Class S rating because of my drones and the implication that I could make more. Still, I didn’t like the comparison to Lung.

I had to admit he was right in that the other gangs had to be preparing for major territory grabs and because my drones were out there helping set the city back on its feet there was a good chance they would be targets themselves. It wasn’t as if I had been planning on sitting back and letting the gangs take territory, but if they were coming after my drones that changed the situation it put the workers they were assisting in a certain amount of danger; turned the entire situation into something like war really. What I was wondering now, was what exactly Lung was doing here then? I somehow doubted that he’d decided he simply didn’t want to make his own move for the city, so had he come here to make some sort of alliance with me? He couldn’t think that I would actually let him ‘have’ the city or anything, could he?

“What exactly is it you want to talk about?” I asked. “You have to know I’m not about to let you take over the city anymore than I would anyone else, so what exactly would we be talking about here?”

Lung snorted and mimicked my stance by crossing his own arms over his barrel chest, “An
agreement of sorts, you might call it an alliance if you like; simple enough by itself, but with benefits for us both, I will not make any moves on new territory myself and will offer any aid you should wish in smashing the others and in return when the city is yours I will remain.”

“Why do you keep talking like I’m trying to conquer the city?” I asked exasperatedly, shifting uncomfortably.

“Because you have, girl,” he said simply. “Whether you or the others recognize it yet, you claimed it when you fought Leviathan and again by bringing in your soldiers. Now you must defend your city against others who would claim it for their own; this is not a duty you can lightly put aside when it suits you!”

Once again I wanted to argue, but I could see how it could make sense from a certain point of view; one which I was afraid his fellow gang leaders, and possibly even some within the PRT, would be apt to hold. I hadn’t been looking to create a new ‘faction’ within my city, at least not consciously, but it looked like I’d done so regardless of my intention and now I would have to deal with the consequences. Still, I didn’t like what was implied in this ‘deal’, it sounded an awful lot like I would basically be handing over the city to him.

“I don’t see why I shouldn’t just take you down now, be done with it,” I told him.

“You could,” He said, a sly grin spreading across his face. “But then my lieutenants would wreak such havoc across this city that I do not think there would be much left to rule over.”

Did he really just threaten to destroy the city, and more importantly did I think he would actually carry through? Yes, I thought. Lung was honourable in his own way, I don’t think he liked making the threat but in the end he seemed more like someone willing to do everything to ensure his own freedom and survival. That didn’t mean his underlings would be as quick to follow through and face the consequences for their actions without him around to threaten or cajole them, so I said as much, “You think they’ll risk the fallout just to back up your threat? Assuming I can’t get them before they have a chance to do anything, that is.”

The truth was I wasn’t sure I could get to them that was. I knew they weren’t nearby, or my drone would have seen them for sure, but besides that I couldn’t know for sure where they would be. I could try for a repeat of the trick we’d pulled for finding Lung, but even as I thought it I know it would be a no-go; too much of that had been helped along by the fact that Lung had never bothered to hide his face and the availability of public surveillance courtesy of the PRT, both of which were in much shorter supply in this situation. Besides, I didn’t want to place too much faith in the both of them being all that stable. They might fight me no matter what.

“Simply put?” He answered. “Yes. Lee is all but an empty vessel, waiting to be filled by another’s purpose and Bakuda is content enough to build without knowing to what ends her devices are turned.”

“Fine,” I sighed. “What do you propose again? In slightly more detail this time, you left it awfully vague the first time.”

“What I offer is this,” he began, smiling broadly at the victory he’d already won. “I will make no attempt to take any new territory, though I will defend any intrusions into that which is already mine by the others, and will fight by your side against any opponent you choose. All I ask in return is that when we have eliminated those who stand against us here you will not interfere in my affairs within the city.”

I almost laughed in his face at that, “You can’t expect me to actually agree to that. At least, not just
“You are telling me to be nothing but a figurehead, walking around and puffing myself up on little else but words,” he said incredulously. “Do you expect I would be any more willing to accept this?”

“You wouldn’t have to be a figurehead, you would just have to display some adaptability,” I told him quickly. “Run for City Council or the Mayor’s office, become more than a nuisance in people’s lives; make sure they know that if they need something done they can come to you and you’ll get it done. Be something more than a petty tyrant fighting for tiny little corner of dirt.”

Lung looked at me curiously, I wasn’t entirely sure how to read him so I couldn’t tell if anything that I’d said had actually gotten through, but he wasn’t laughing in my face and he hadn’t attacked which were both good signs.

“Such opportunities have never been open to me,” he said finally.

“Well, times are changing,” I said, though I didn’t actually know if he could run for public office. As far as I knew he hadn’t technically been convicted of anything, though if the PRT or Protectorate caught him I suspected that would be a formality that they rectified in short order, and as far as I knew being a parahuman only prevented you from joining the PRT proper so for all I knew, he might be able to. “Maybe it’s time for you to change with them.”

“And you would let me, rule the city thus? You would not dictate to me how I might govern in your absence?” He asked.

“Look,” I sighed. “I’m telling you I’m not looking to conquer anything and I’m not going to let you ‘rule’ like you’re thinking, but maybe if you help rebuild the city there’ll be a place in it for you when it’s over. All I want is to make the world a better, safer place,” I said, gesturing vaguely with my left hand at the sky and the distant outskirts of the city. “I know I can’t stop people from being assholes, that’s just people you know, but I can at least do my best to make sure there aren’t monsters hiding around the corner. People deserve that much, we deserve that much. We deserve to be able to go about our lives without worrying that someone is going to show up and turn the world on its head all over again.”

“Hmm,” Lung rumbled. “I will think on these things you have said, in the meantime I offer an altered proposal; I will, as before, agree not to take new territory myself and to fight besides you in battle and when this is done we will revisit what the future hold between us. Does that suit you for now?”

It wasn’t much really, and with my drones it wasn’t as if it was strictly necessary for me to make any sort of deal with him, but at the same time maybe this was an opportunity to get started; if I could convince Lung to be, or at least act like, a better person that would be a step in the right direction. Besides, it would be one less fight I would have to be looking over my shoulder for, metaphorically at least, while I worked out how I was going to break out into the wider world. The question remained though, whether or not I thought he would really abide by any agreement we made or not.

“Nono sees no reason to doubt the dragon-man’s words,” she said from her perch atop of the still hovering drone. “After all, he approached us. Why should he do so if he did not intend to keep them?”

I glanced towards Nono, as subtle as was possible in order to avoid bringing up any unfortunate
questions regarding why I was staring at empty space. She was right, it didn’t really make sense for him to come all this way just to try and trick me into a deal where I wasn’t giving anything up at all. In fact, the very act of coming out to ‘negotiate’ with me at all indicated that he understood he really couldn’t stand against me right now. As I thought about it more the whole thing came off more and more as a way for him to save some face and at the same time secure some measure of protection for himself in a rapidly changing and uncertain situation. More things like this were undoubtedly going pop up as people grasped the coming changes and scrambled to situate themselves; I was entirely sure how I felt about being at the center of it.

“Nono can’t promise it will be easy, even with the power of a Buster Machine few things that matter are, but Nono promises she will always be there to help,” I smiled involuntarily at the proclamation, it was something I already knew but it was still nice to hear. “And, Nono is sure the others will too when you ask them!”

That I wasn’t so sure about; Amy and Dad I knew would, they practically already had, but Victoria and I just didn’t know each other very well so I wasn’t about to ask for her undying support even if I thought she would give it. From her all I wanted was her help over the next few days, with Coil.

“All right,” I said, turning my attention back towards Lung finally. “I’ll agree to that for the moment, and then once everything has settled down we’ll discuss how things work out from there.”

Lung smiled and thrust out his hand, “Then we have an agreement.”

I hesitated, momentarily caught off guard by the seeming mundanity of the action, before mimicking his gestures and placing my hand in the palm of his. I half expected my hand to be completely enveloped by his, but it remained a steadfastly human sized hand and was merely significantly larger than my own. We shook for a moment before releasing and then awkwardly standing there staring at each other for a moment.

“Ok, so, how do I, uh, contact you if I want your help?” I asked, was he going to give me his number, was he just going to follow me around or something? I really hoped he’d put some thought into this.

“Send one of your pets,” Lung said, thrusting his chin in the direction of the drone suspended above us. “Or her, if you want,” At that he gestured towards Victoria and Amy behind me, though I suspected he meant Victoria. “I have made no secret of my location.”

“That sounds risky, what if-” I started before I realized that he’d probably known exactly how risky he was being. “You’ve been looking for a fight, haven’t you?”

“Why should I wait for what I know is coming?” He asked.

“Time?” I offered. “Opportunities to plan, set traps, prepare for a fight, you know time to gain advantages.”

Suddenly he laughed, letting out a short and sharp burst that was still a more human sound than seemed appropriate for someone who could turn into a dragon. He followed that up by saying, “I am the only advantage I have ever needed.”

“Right,” I said, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. Though I knew he’d fought entire teams of capes and come out handily the winner on multiple occasions that sort of grandiose and dramatic statement still seemed cartoonish in a way, “Fine, it doesn’t matter to me I suppose. I just need you to make sure your people don’t get any itchy trigger fingers and start blowing up parts of the city, you can do that can’t you?”
“I have instructed them on what is to happen,” Lung said, his voice once again quiet and calm. “My price for disobedience is death, all of my people know this. It is the others, the scurrying rats, that you need to watch for, not me.”

He punctuated the finality of his statement by turning and walking away. This wasn’t exactly the end I’d expected when he’d first appeared, there was a distinct lack of things on fire, bones broken and buildings destroyed. Given how he’d opened up the so-called negotiations I was happy enough at that, but still I wondered at the seeming ease with which things had gone. Was it really because Lung understood his increasingly tenuous position and if so had he ever intended to carry through on his threat? I couldn’t claim to know him all that well, but from what I did know it seemed out of character.

“Hey,” I called after him, he paused just as he was almost outside of the fenced in area and looked back in response. “You really have your minions ready to bomb the city if things didn’t turn out for you?”

Lung’s expression grew still and he stared at me intensely for a moment, “I do not make empty threats, girl.”

“Oh,” I said, not really surprised. “Okay, my name’s not ‘girl’; it’s Taylor Hebert.”

He gave me another searching look before saying anything, “I am Lung, any other name I have killed.”

Well, that was dramatic. After another moment of watching each other Lung gave a final quick nod, turned away, and walked back the way he’d come. I watched him for a moment or two, until I felt the drone hovering over me begin slipping back up towards its original position watching over my dad though it’s journey skyward was done with significantly less urgency and excitement.

As I sighed in relief a voice cried out behind me, “What the fuck just happened?!”

Shit, I’d completely forgotten that we had an audience. Dad and Amy both had similarly lost expressions on their faces, but standing next to them Victoria Dallon looked halfway trapped between confused and angry. Which maybe she had a right to be, I mean I hadn’t exactly consulted her or anyone else before making a deal with probably the most dangerous single Parahuman in the city besides myself. Of course it wasn’t like I was under any obligation to run my decisions by anyone, least of all a junior member of New Wave who I barely knew.

“Seriously,” Victoria said. “Would someone please explain to me what the hell just happened? Did you just make a deal with Lung?”

“Listen, I get why you might be angry,” I told her, trying to make my voice as placating as possible. “But you heard what he said, and you know as well as I do that he’s right. The other gangs aren’t just going to-”

“Angry?” She asked, pointing towards her own face and staring at her hands in confusion. “You think this is my angry face? This is my ‘what the fuck just happened face!’” Lung hasn’t talked that much to anyone outside of his own gang in more than a decade, much less negotiated with anyone; ever. And he shows up out of the blue and makes a deal with you, not the PRT, not one of the other gang leaders, but you. I know people are comparing you to Scion, but you aren’t that powerful,” The heroine paused and an uncertain look came over her. “Are you?”

“Um,” I said, unsure how to respond. Recognizing the scope of my power was easy enough in my own head, and in dealing with someone like Lung; who I could think of as the enemy, but it was
more difficult to actually come out and say to the Glory Girl, local cape celebrity, with her world famous healer sister standing right next to her, who it just so happened was my first friend in a long time, as my dad watched.

“Let’s go inside,” Dad and Amy said simultaneously.

“Sure,” Victoria said, still looking slightly dazed.

“Uh,” I stammered out. “Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

We all filed back inside the warehouse in silence, Sam the door guard watching us incredulously while he held open the door. My mind raced as we traced our original route back towards the kitchen and eating area through the building, trying to think of a way of explaining what exactly was going on with me. All they really needed to know was what had happened between me and Lung in the last few weeks, but a big part of me wanted to just spill my guts to them and have it done with. I just wasn’t sure how they would react to it, I wasn’t even sure how I was reacting to it and I’d been living with the situation as my reality for a little over a month; had it really only been a month since Nono had appeared in my life? It felt as if it had been much longer.

How could I explain what was going on without freaking them out? I mean, how do you tell someone that you’re- Wait, hold on. Was it really any weirder to say that I’d been shunted into the robot body of an almost incomprehensibly advanced super weapon from another version of the universe and currently sharing my brainspace with the hyper-chipper entity designed to operate aforementioned body than to say that I’d had one colossally shitty day at the end of a long string of several shitty months and woken up with almost completely unexplainable super powers? One was just the brand of weirdness that everyone had come to expect, but I bet if you’d told someone from back before Scion or parahumans were a thing they would have thought you were telling them the summary of a particularly fanciful story. Was I being fair to my father or the others to expect them to be freaked out by my particular weirdness?

The world had gotten over the shock of suddenly having real life superheroes strutting around in broad daylight, bad spandex suits and all, so who was to say Dad and my newfound friends would be able to deal with a new shift? In fact, I hadn’t seen anything out there that actually explained or even hinted at an explanation of where parahuman powers came from, so it wasn’t like anyone could claim my story broke the mold or anything; the only clue I had that I wasn’t a parahuman was from Nono. As far as I knew that was also the only real data that existed on what actually gave people their powers. Which raised some interesting questions about what sorts of secrets were hiding behind that lack of knowledge, when things were more settled Nono and I should-

And that was when I slammed my left leg into the corner of the table.

“Ow! Shit!” Though it didn’t actually hurt, at least not in the visceral sense I could recall; instead I felt the impact, knew exactly how hard I’d hit the edge and where without the unpleasant shock of pain. The feeling wasn’t new, I’d encountered it before when I first started testing and since in fights, but it served to pull me from my reverie. Dad, Amy, and Victoria all focused on me in that instant, “Um, sorry. Got lost in my thoughts a little there, anyways; you had questions?”

“My questions is still the same,” Victoria said quickly. “What just happened out there?”

“I made a deal with Lung,” I told her. “But that’s not actually what you want to know. You want to know why Lung was here at all, and why he agreed to basically not do what he’s always done and maybe be on his best behavior afterwards, right?”

She nodded while Amy and Dad just sort of watched, “Okay, so… um, let me see, where to start?
You all know how people become parahumans, in general at least,” As everyone nodded together I continued, “Perfect, ok so… um, no actually forget that.”

Crap, how was I supposed to start?

“How about like this, I kinda lied about what my power is,” I said. “I mean, not really, I can do everything I’ve said I can and everything happened like you saw, but- No, that’s too confusing, let me try again. When I got my powers, instead of a… um, I don’t know what to actually call it. Anyways, I didn’t get what other parahumans get, instead I got an, uh, a different thing. Shit, this is hard.”

Seriously, how was I supposed to start telling them that I was something besides a parahuman? Duh, maybe start by actually telling them that.

“Ok, let’s do a total reset. Hi, my name is Taylor Hebert,” I said, giving a semi-mocking sort of half wave. “And I am not a parahuman.”

“What?” This from both Amy and her sister, Dad it seemed had figured out that something about my abilities were not normal as far as parahumans went.

“I know that’s a little vague, and it probably doesn’t make a lot of sense,” I said somewhat apologetically. “Plus I’m not entirely sure it’s even true. It depends on what people mean when they say ‘parahuman’ but it’s the quickest way to say that I am not like every other cape around. I think this is going to be a bit of a long explanation, I’ll try and keep it as straightforward as I can, but well it’s complex all on its own, so just wait for the end to ask any questions you have. Okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” Victoria said, somewhat surly now as she crossed her arms.

“Of course,” Amy said.

“Right, okay. Here we go,” I started, drawing in couple deep breaths before preparing to launch into the explanation; I did a quick check of the surrounding area just to make sure no one was eavesdropping on us, we were all alone. “I got my powers back in January, and at first I didn’t even realize; it took a few days before I noticed that I just wasn’t getting tired on my morning runs. Then a couple of months of very carefully figuring out what it was that I could do, which so far as I could tell at the time amounted to some sort of low level invincibility and mild super strength; a shitty Alexandria knockoff. I couldn’t fly, I wasn’t lifting boulders over my head, or shooting so much as sparkly glitter. Honestly, I thought I would be stuck fighting the unpowered gang members, but it was something that made me feel significant and useful, still it took me another month to work up the courage to go out at all. So I’m sure you can guess who I ran into my first night out, Lung, and I’m thinking that I’m going to end up nothing but a headline in the news. What ended up happening is that I knocked him out cold right there in the street and that’s when I met… well, Nono.”

I paused, but only long enough to take in Amy and Victoria’s confused expressions before I rushed to explain, “I know what you’re thinking; ‘Who?’ Well, that’s a little more complicated and I’d like to make introductions first before we get to that.”

Right on cue Nono appeared standing next to me; dressed in the dress Amy had bought for me, or rather a replica of it, and looking as pleased as possible with the turn of events.

“Hi!” She said, beaming at what amounted to my inner circle. “I’m Nono! It’s soooooo good to meet you all!”
“All right, tone it down, Miss Happy-go-lucky.” I said, smiling involuntarily and her constantly upbeat attitude. “Right, so Amy, Victoria, like I said this is Nono. Nono these are Victoria and Amy Dallon.” I pointed to each sister in turn before turning briefly to my dad, “Dad you already know.”

“Hi Nono,” Dad said, smiling as he gave a quick wave.

“Uh, hello,” Amy said as she waved a faltering hand.

Victoria was considerably more assured in her reaction, “Ok, where the hell did she come from!?”

“She’s been here the whole time really,” I responded. “You see, the truth is that Nono is the reason that I have my abilities. Sort of. She found me and some… thing was doing something to me and she stopped it because it reminded her of this other, uh, thing she used to fight and in doing that she, uh sort of shoved us into the same body. Which, wow, that sounds kind of fucked up when I say it out loud, but I promise you we’ve worked it all out.” I could see the doubt on all their faces, but I decided the best way to deal with it was just to move on. “And that brings us to the big question, which is what exactly am I then if I’m not a parahuman. Well, I’ll let Nono tell you, she has a certain flair for the dramatic.”

Nono puffed herself up, and I could almost hear the swelling music and see the patriotically waving flag behind her, “Sixth Generation Interstellar Cruising Command Platform, Buster Machine No. 7!”

Though she looked very pleased with her performance, I could tell that it hadn’t been particularly helpful in explaining things to the others. Not that I’d expected it to be all to clear right off the bat, “Uh, so to explain… a Buster Machine is, uh… think of a piece of Tinkertech. Now take that piece of tech and just turn it up to eleven, maybe twelve or thirteen actually. And that’s what you build a Buster Machine out of. So, any questions?”

“I think I’m just going to stick with ‘What?’” Victoria said.

“Maybe be a little more specific.” I said a little tersely, after all it wasn’t like that constituted a question I could actually answer and I she had to know that. “What part of all of this is specifically confusing you?”

“All of…” She started, before she was interrupted by her sister.

“I’ve got a question,” Amy said, even raising her hand. “When you said built, who by exactly? cause if she, it, whatever, is the reason you have powers you couldn’t have built her.”

“People, humans, like you and me, err, well sort of like you and me,” I said. “Just from a different Earth, like Earth Aleph except a lot more advance and possibly from farther in the future. It’s a little weird and I don’t totally understand it myself, I should have a better grasp on it in a few months once I’ve worked my way through the current scientific literature. A year on the outside.”

“Uh, wha-” Amy began to say.

“Kiddo, did you just-” Dad said at the same time.

Meanwhile Victoria just stared with her mouth agape for a split second before she asked, “Like, all of science?”

“What? No, that would… well, okay I probably could but I wouldn’t be doing much of anything else in the meantime,” I said quickly. “Really, it’s just Math and Physics and even so I’m going to
be focusing on a pretty narrow subset of fields.”

“Taylor,” Dad said, looking thoroughly concerned as he stared at me intently. “No offense, but what are you talking about? You’re only in high school, and you know I love you and I think you’re brilliant, but you’ve never shown this kind of… kind of, well, genius.”

“Oh,” I laughed. “It’s all part of the package really; with my new body I have a perfect memory so I don’t forget things once I’ve read or heard them once, and I can, um, visualize things really well which is maybe even more helpful. Honestly, that stuff has been a lot less shocking than the rest of it, for instance I don’t need to sleep or eat anymore, though I definitely still enjoy doing both. Like I said before I don’t get tired anymore, which is a plus. Oh, and periods, I don’t miss those! Or I do, but I don’t miss them,” that comment drew quick startled laughs from both the Dallon sister.

“Though it sorta sucks knowing I can’t, you know, have kids or anything, but-”

“What?!” Dad suddenly screamed at the same that Amy and Victoria both let out a sort of, soft ‘oh’ sound at once. He rounded on the still hovering right next to me Nono, who looked quietly alarmed at the sudden purpling color of his face, “What did you do to my daughter, you pile of-”

“Dad!” I shouted, putting myself between him and Nono even though I knew he couldn’t hurt her.

He ignored me, either because he hadn’t heard me or because he was too angry, and I could see Amy and Victoria sharing alarmed looks at the sudden shift in my Dad’s behavior, “I swear to God if you don’t undo whatever it is you did to my daughter I will-”

“Dad!” I screamed in his face, giving him a slight shove; not very hard, honestly not even as hard as I could have before I’d change, just enough to move him slightly and get him to focus on me.

“Dad, I need you to calm down.”

“Taylor, I didn’t know- you didn’t, I mean why didn’t you tell me?” he asked. His voice returned to normal, though I could still detect the undercurrent of emotion that had just seconds before been on display.

“Mostly because I didn’t really want to think about it much myself, it freaked me out too. It’s okay though, Nono can take care of, uh, that whenever I want, it’s only temporary.” I told him, watching the way his chest expanded and contract slightly slower each time as he calmed down.

“Really?” Dad asked, again focusing on Nono. “Do you promise?”

“Nono swears,” she said, quite seriously. “Whenever Taylor asks, that she can give back everything that Nono took.”

“Besides, I wasn’t planning on having kids for awhile,” I said, jokingly.

“Oh, god,” Dad said, his eyes widening comically. “I didn’t mean, I mean I wasn’t saying you should- not that I think you would. I mean, do you need… or, um, do you have-”

“Dad, relax,” I said, smiling up at him. “It was a joke. I mean, I’m not planning on having kids for awhile, but you already gave me the talk. If I needed anything I would tell you, or I would go behind your back and get it myself.”

He shot me a steady glare, that quickly faded, showing that he understood I was just teasing him before he took a step closer and enfolded me in his arms, “I’m sorry for how I reacted. Honestly, I don’t quite know what came over me.”
“It’s okay,” I told him as I lay my head against his chest for a moment and listened to the calming beat of his heart. “It’s a lot to take in, like I said before; I’m still a little freaked out about it myself. I should have told you before, or at least shouldn’t have dropped all of this on you all at once.”

“I love you kiddo,” he said into the top of my head.

We held each other for another few moments before remembering that we something of an audience and letting go. Amy, Victoria, and Nono were all quite deliberately looking somewhere else, which struck me as pretty funny.

“Right, any other questions?” I asked.

Amy and Victoria glanced first at each other and then towards me before the blonder of the two cleared her throat, “I guess that was all really informative, or something, but it doesn’t really explain why Lung came crawling to you.”

“Shit,” I muttered explosively under my breath, mentally chastising myself for getting sidetracked by my own apparent underlying desire to unburden all my secrets and forget what I was actually supposed to be explaining.

“You’re right, sorry. Okay, so after I beat Lung the first night…” As I began again I had the distinct feeling that tonight would be a long night.

Chapter End Notes

I really like the interaction with Lung in this chapter, but some of the other stuff that happens I don't think works quite as well (It's the Nono stuff, and that's been something a recurring theme with this fic; as it went on I became less satisfied with how i was using her in the story).

Also I forgot a portion of 4.6 (chapter 33), but it's been added now. Not super plot important, but it contains a bit of the world's reactions to events of the previous arc.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the end the night wasn’t as long as I’d feared, after another forty five minutes of questions Amy and Victoria’s curiosities seemed to be satisfied. By that time everyone was pretty hungry, except for me, so Dad reheated the chowder he’d cooked earlier and we ate in a somewhat uncomfortable silence after which the Dallon’s left and I helped my dad clean up. No one had really felt like talking much during dinner and the somewhat awkward silence continued while we cleaned and then went to bed. Over the next several days the tension eased slowly as we both got used to the new dynamic; or rather as I got used to the fact that Dad knew everything and he got used to the new truths he’d learned. Nono was a consistent presence in my head but she was uncharacteristically shy towards the idea of making ‘public’ appearances. I agreed with her that it was probably best to ease my dad back into interactions with her.

On other fronts my life was even more spectacularly uneventful. I saw Amy a few times over the next several days, mostly I would stop by wherever she was working and have a meal or two with her and her sister depending on how things worked out. For Amy it was if nothing had happened at all, she took every revelation about me in stride or at least seemed to, though her sister was a slightly different matter. Victoria didn’t give me a hard time or anything, but she would occasionally ask weird questions about my body, most of what they’d asked questions about that night had been my powers and Nono’s story which was apparently no longer of interest to her. Her questions tended towards the bizarre or vulgar, things like, ‘Can you, like, change your body? Give yourself bigger boobs?’ ‘Since you don’t need to eat anymore, does that mean you can’t get fat?’ or ‘Can you control your hair and, like, use it to strangle someone?’ All of which earned various urgently whispered repetitions of ‘Victoria!’ from Amy, a refrain I was quickly becoming familiar with. It wasn’t like a constant barrage of questions, she only tended to ask when there was a lull in the conversation, not something that happened often in Victoria’s presence.

I spent most of my time with the sisters listening to them tell stories involving either their family or the Wards, or discussing the future of the city. Amy and I were both fairly optimistic that once things were fixed up people and business would come back to give a new life to the city, while Victoria held to the bleaker view that the city would shrink even more in a few months once people realized everything they’d owned was destroyed. It was all surprisingly normal, or at least so it seemed to me after months of varying degrees of social isolation and the just sort of general pall of weirdness that had taken over my life.

My drones continued their work and I continued to monitor them from highly visible vantage points, though in reality I spent most of the time reading math or physics textbooks that Nono and I had found available online. Their work continued apace, and after the first two days power was restored to almost the entire city. While the other efforts would take longer, they too were noticeably sped up as the drones tore down the remnants of structures and helped ferry away the debris to growing landfills. In general the mood of the city improved, though conditions remained fairly dire especially now with the looming threat of hostilities between gangs. Though, on that front nothing happened for the first few several days.

Meanwhile, every thirty-six hours another four of my drones would arrive in orbit around the planet. This did not represent the majority of the production, which had risen to dozens per day and were variously tasked with charting the solar system and establishing the necessary infrastructure for a proper space faring culture as well as other minor concerns. I had briefly debated bringing the
drones down to the ground as they arrived, but decided it would have been too easily misconstrued because there wasn’t really enough work to go around, at least not without revealing just how autonomous my drones could be. So, even though I knew they had to have been noticed by this point I kept them sitting in a semi-stationary orbit above Brockton Bay and just hoped that would be interpreted favourably by whoever might be watching them for the time being.

Thankfully I had no further interactions with Armsmaster, either he had more important things to do than watch me or his bosses were purposefully keeping him away from me; probably with more important things. I did see some other capes, all locals, though I didn’t actually get to interact with any of them. What would happen is that I would be ‘monitoring’ my drones, actually furthering my sped up education, and then I would suddenly feel like I was being watched and I would look up to find some of the local Protectorate capes with possibly one or two of the Wards in tow watching me from a nearby rooftop. They would watch me for a few hours before leaving, and that was the extent of my interactions with them; except for Clockblocker’s answering wave to my shouted greeting, after which he did not make another appearance.

It was definitely too calm to last for long in a city that was overfull of parahumans, many of which were not the sort to follow the rules. The lull finally ended on the morning of the sixth day after my little detente with Lung, as I was putting on my clothes and noticing that despite the fact that I no longer sweated my clothes could mostly definitely still get dirty.

“Dad,” I called out. “Where can I wash-”

Tattletale’s signal came without fanfare, just a single text message of less than a dozen characters indicating which of the bunkers Coil was keeping Dinah in and what the appointed time to strike was. Surprisingly it was the bunker which was located closest to the sinkhole by downtown; I was somewhat it hadn’t been compromised by the shifting earth, at least not enough to be abandoned, but perhaps the bunkers were too expensive to write off like that. I didn’t have a clear enough picture of what sort of toys the gang leader and his men would have to play with down there, it was highly unlikely anything he could have gotten his hands on would hurt me or my drones but the same couldn’t be said for bystanders.

“What was that kiddo?” Dad asked from the other side of the cloth partition which separated my and his bed.

“Um, nothing.” I answered as tossed the phone back onto my bed, I pulled on a relatively clean shirt and started planning the next frantic several minutes.

I had twenty seven minutes and forty-three seconds before the specified time, plenty of time for myself but I was less certain about my allies. I would have to let them know as soon as possible if they were going to be in place by eight o’clock. Already I had my drones pulling away from the daily duties, for the most part that meant nothing more than simply picking up and leaving seeing as they had not yet received tasks from the groups they were assisting, but others were already involved in the work of the day and so had to excuse themselves as politely as possible.

“This unit apologizes,” each drone said to the nearest human. “But urgent duties have been assigned to it, it or one like it shall return in as timely a manner as possible to resume providing assistance. Due to ongoing circumstances this unit further advises caution during any scheduled or unscheduled relocations today.”

Once that was done those two drones joined their fellows in the air above the city. I kept them all dispersed to avoid tipping my hand to any observes too quickly, except for one which I sent on an arc outside the city towards the area in which Lung was currently staying.
“Something’s come up Dad, no breakfast for me,” I said, stepping out from behind the partition and into the ‘living room’ portion of the room we shared.

“Is it the gangs?” Dad asked as pulled on my shoes and started for the door.

“No... well, sort of but not really. It’s the other thing.” I reassured him before giving him a quick hug and pressing a kiss to his right cheek and then stepping out the door.

“Be safe, Taylor!” he called after me.

As I dashed through the hallway leading to the nearest door, I reached out and called Amy. It was awfully convenient not to need phone anymore. Now I could simply reach out with a single thought, and so long as I knew a person’s number or could find it relatively easily, and be in touch just the same.

“Taylor,” Amy’s still slightly sleepy voice said from the other end. “Last night was actually super busy, maybe we can meet up later? We’ll be at the-”

“Sorry Ames,” I interrupted her. “Actually just calling to have you pass a message to your sister. I got the signal from Tattletale, Victoria should meet me above the sinkhole.”

“Okay, I’ll let her know,” she said.

“Thanks, I’ll let you know if we need your help, yeah?” I said. “I hope we won’t, but with everything we’ve learned about Coil I’m not prepared to put much past him. Well, talk to you later.”

“I’ll try to be ready,” She said. “Oh and, um Taylor? Good luck.”

I hung up on that, while we’d been talking I had taken to the air and was on course for roughly the center of the water filled sinkhole which now dominated much of the downtown area. It was a good place to meet Glory Girl, I’d used it a few times as the place I ‘monitored’ my drones from and so hopefully it wouldn’t draw much suspicion from Coil when I showed up there. The drone I’d sent to retrieve Lung was just arriving in his vicinity now. I’d sent it on a slower course because I knew it would be harder to keep him from diving right in and starting the fight, plus his presence probably would send up some red flags if Coil was watching. In part I also just didn’t trust him as much. My drone located the ABB’s leader easily enough but hung back from contacting him as I waited for Glory Girl to arrive.

After a couple of minutes I spotted the heroine slicing through the air towards me from the shelter she and her sister had been working at when I’d left them yesterday. Victoria flew through the air like a missile, arms pressed tightly to her side and legs held rigidly together with toes pointed as straight back as she could get them, it fit her personality very well I thought. When she reached me it was like she’d slammed into an invisible wall the way she stopped short, for all her brashness and ‘hit first, ask questions later’ attitude she had an impressive control with over powers.

“‘Sup, Robo-Girl,” she said by way of greeting, and then immediately pulled a face.

“Nope,” I said cheerily, she’d recently been trying to come up with new cape names for me since according to her my current one was, as she put it, ‘dumb as fuck.’

“Ugh,” she agreed. “Yeah, I heard as soon as I said it.”

“I’m fine with my name as it is, so you can stop. Now isn’t really the time anyways.” I told her.
“Yes ma’am!” Victoria yelled, throwing out a mock salute. “Down to business ma’am!”

I rolled my eyes at her, making sure to make it as obvious as possible, before responding, “Are you done yet?”

“Yeah, sure,” she said, relaxing from the mocking military rigidity she had momentarily put on and into a more relaxed posture. “So, what’s the deal then?”

“Do you see the three story building to the east, two blocks from the edge of the water; just north of the little inlet with all the cars? Don’t be too obvious, I doubt Coil has any of his people watching us that closely but I’d rather not risk it,” I said.

Victoria rolled her eyes right back at what I was sure she saw as my paranoia, but nevertheless she scanned the horizon as casually as she could and managed not to focus on the building I’d indicated, “Yeah, I got it. Is that where he has the girl?”

“If Tattletale’s message is right it is,” I answered, to which Victoria only snorted.

“What’re we waiting for then? Let’s go kick some ass.” Her eagerness was apparent by the wild smile that spread across her face as well as in the way her voice was inflected.

“Message also said eight o’clock, plus I’m waiting on my other back up,” my drone was just making contact with Lung now, and it would take him the remaining thirteen minutes until eight to make it halfway across the city to the location of Coil’s bunker.

“Really? You want to bring that jackass along, for Coil? I mean I like the idea of the two of them eliminating each other as much as I think anyone can, but it seems like overkill to me,” Victoria said. “I mean, Coil doesn’t even have any other parahumans working for him and I bet you his superpower, if he even has one, is nothing but some second or third-rate Thinker power. He’s only stuck around so long because he doesn’t get in any of the other gangs’ way.”

On the other side of the city my drone had just finished informing Lung that I wanted his help for an operation against Coil, Lung grinned in response and made a dismissive motion towards the drone through the screen door leading into the backyard of Lung’s home, “Tell your master I will be glad to join her in crushing the nuisance that is Coil.”

“This unit has been tasked with serving as a coordinating node,” the drone told Lung, though he didn’t seem to pay any attention to either it or its presence once it was through delivering its original message.

“He kidnapped a precog no one else even knew about and extorted either the worlds only known telepath, besides the Simurgh, or a Thinker good enough to fake it. That doesn’t sound second or third-rate to me,” in response Victoria only shrugged as I continued explaining. “Hell, if it were just about having the raw power to take him on I wouldn’t even need you. No offense. The problem is that I don’t know what sort of Tinker, or Tinker-derived, tech he might have down there so what I’m trying to do is come at him from multiple angles; limit his options.”

Briefly the drone had to detour around the structure of the ABB’s leader’s home in order to follow him as he moved towards the front entrance located on the other side where an asian teen I didn’t recognize from school lounged in the driver’s seat of what I knew was a ‘muscle car’, though I didn’t bother to try and find out the specific model. Lung opened the passenger door and uttered a single command in Japanese, “Drive.”

For a moment the kid hesitated, his eyes growing wide as the drone drifted into view, before fear of
his boss override any other reaction and he turned the ignition and pulled the car out into the street. The drone kept pace and positioned itself alongside the passenger window, or at least as close to it as the narrow two lane street would allow. “This unit is fully capable of acting as a conveyance.” Lung did not respond.

“Wait, hold up,” Victoria said from next to my body, putting her hands up and looking confused. “I thought you had like some sort of magical tinkertech x-ray vision or something, can't you just turn that on and catch a peek at whatever he’s got?”

“I have extremely sensitive sensors which can detect a variety types of radiative emissions, including x-rays as well as thermal and many others, but I’m not getting much from them. That’s part of why I think he has some Tinkertech down there, because all I can tell is there’s a fair amount of activity from the average heat signature of the bunker and that there are three potential avenues of escape.”

“You can’t just, like… overload whatever shielding he has?” She asked. “Or, like use sonar or something?”

Once it was crystal clear that Lung had no interest in communicating with anything as far ‘underneath’ as one of my drones, I routed myself through the drone, “Fine, I’m paying attention to you. Happy?”

“I was not seeking your attention,” he responded gruffly. “But now that I have it, I suppose we should discuss strategy.”

“Sure,” I said, mentally rolling my eyes at the man. “The fact that you’re come from the north is somewhat fortunate. It means you’ll be approaching closest to the cargo bay which is where I was going to suggest you head; it’s where the freight elevator is which means there’s more space for you, frankly I don’t think either of the other two avenues would accommodate your transformed state.”

“Hmm,” Lung grunted in response. “This location, it is a base of some kind, yes? A bunker maybe?”

“Yeah,” I said, surprised that he’d known or guessed that.

“As is to be expected of Coil,” he growled in response to the question I hadn’t asked. “He hides like the rat he is in his warren.”

“I could do either, in fact I already tried sonar but there’s too much intervening material to do it at a distance and getting in close would give away the game and I’m not even sure whatever shielding wouldn’t counteract it anyway. As for ‘overloading’ it, well I could, but any pulse I generated that was strong enough to penetrate could potentially hurt whoever was on the other side or react with something inside so thats out too.” I said to Victoria as I did a quick mental check of the time, six minutes to go.

“Alright I get it; Coil is not some two-bit thug,” Victoria said with a frustrated sigh. “So, what’s the plan then?”

“Well,” I said. “There are three ways in and out of the bunker; ones is the main entrance which is a long thin hallway, there’s what looks like a freight elevator, and then there’s a hidden back entrance. I was think you would cover that, it’s connects from the bunker through a thin hall that’ll only let two people pass shoulder to shoulder and I figured the close quarter would be an advantage for you. The freight elevator leads into the underground parking or the building so Lung’s, ah extra
bulk, will let him cover that easier I think and I plan on covering the main entrance, trying to keep their attention on me, maybe even get Coil or his men to give themselves up.”

Lung stopped his man a couple blocks short and got out of the car, which sped off at another command from his boss, and then proceeded on foot with my drone tagging doggedly along side. A single tentacle in his path halted the gang leader when he was within sight of the building.

“I want to coordinate this, for you know, maximum surprise,” I told him and then hesitated before I continued. “Also, we’re not going to be charging in straight off. I’m going to try and get him to surrender first.”

Surprisingly he didn’t seem to have much of a response towards that except to stare steely in the direction of the now visible freight elevator, so I reiterated, “Seriously, I don’t want you charging in unless I say so, okay?”

Still no response, but he wasn’t giving any sign of arguing; I would just have to take that.

“You’re seriously going to try and negotiate with these assholes?” Victoria asked incredulously in response to my lengthy explanation.

“No,” I said quickly. “I’m going to give them the chance to surrender in the face of a hopeless fight.”

“Ugh, boring.” Victoria said disgustedly.

“Ok, two minutes, let’s hit it,” I said to both of them.

It took a quick quarter of a turn to bring me in line with the building under which the bunker was buried, and then an instant later Victoria and I were streaking off towards it. We crossed the distance in a minute and twenty, timed so that she and I arrived in concert with Lung as he was lead in by my drone, and started dropping towards the ground roughly a hundred meters out.

“Back side, concrete utility shed in the southeast corner!” I called out to Glory Girl as I cut a steeper angle and aimed for the ground level entrance that connected to the front door lobby of the building.

Glory Girl gave me a quick nod as she flew past, angling slightly wide around the building before she disappeared around the corner. I continued to watch her through the eyes of my now downward streaking drones just as I kept an eye on Lung with the single drone which had accompanied him at street level the entire way here; he was already well on his way to full on monstrousness, though so far he’d only sprouted his trademark metallic scales and taken on a slightly more draconic physiognomy. My feet alighted on the ground softly just as striated bodies of my drones impacted with the ground, spiderwebs fractures radiated from each of the points where their tentacles had absorbed the force of their landings.

The drones arranged themselves in a circle surrounding the building, except for one which broke off to join Glory Girl, the one which had come with Lung and another two which broke off to flank me on either side. The additional twelve dones I had called in were overkill but I didn’t want Coil or any of his men to fall into the trap of over estimating their chances. A tense moment followed once we were all in place, in which nothing at all happened, followed by another moment of still nothing. Lung and Glory Girl both turned antsy; shifting nervously as they waited for the expected eruption of violence.

“Coil!” I shouted, not really expecting a response.
Sure enough nothing happened, so I strode forward until I was staring at the small empty lobby. To my right there was a receptionist desk which looked like it hadn’t ever been used, behind which there was a conspicuous security camera. After a moment the camera turned, as if it were readjusting to capture me more fully. I knew full well that though the camera functioned it was only set dressing; I could detect all three of the concealed omnidirectional cameras artfully hidden from purely human eyes. Pushing the door open, I signalled both drones to remain outside while I took a few steps into the lobby and stopped just inside.

“Let’s talk,” I said into the empty room, not bothering to look into the camera.

Still, nothing happened for several more moments, “Stop stalling, I know you’re here, Coil.”

In response the chime for the elevator sounded and the doors slid open, revealing a plain and empty elevator sitting invitingly for me to walk right into.

“I’m fine right here,” I said in response. “You can come up, or you can use the speakers.”

“If you’d sent word, I could have had a more welcoming greeting prepared for you,” a man’s voice said, which I assumed was Coil’s; it was more ordinary than I’d expected, like the sound of a middle school teacher and not a ruthless kidnapping gang leader.

“Which wouldn’t have worked out for you,” I said into the empty air. “Personally I’m betting you would’ve tried to run.”

“Perhaps you are right,” he said quietly, behind his voice I could make frantic sounds of activity. “I have always known when to cut my losses, it is part of the reason I have survived.”

“Sure, now quit stalling, you won’t suddenly come up with a brilliant escape plan.” I couldn’t pick up enough information from the background noises I was hearing to piece together anything concrete but it sounded like something was being moved, something large. “You’re trapped, no escape, no way to wiggle out of this, so let’s talk about your surrender.”

“I think you’re perhaps underestimating my resources, Princess,” he said. “I have men and equipment down here that I think would give even you and your toys pause.”

I sighed, I had been hoping that he might be reasonable about the situation and just give in to the inevitable, but either he was less rational that I’d given him credit for or he really did have something he thought could even the playing field. “Whatever you have, I promise you, it’s not enough so why don’t you surrender and no one has to get hurt.”

“I have a counter proposal,” suddenly I could hear the smug satisfaction coming through his voice, as if he’d figured something out. “I walk out of here, free and unharmed, and I don’t put a bullet in the Alcott girl’s head.”

Shit. It wasn’t exactly surprising that he’d figured out I was here for Dinah, from his point of view I had too much information about the set up of his bunker and movements for something other than a mole in his organization; and he couldn’t have missed that I was a hero, so all he had to put together was the who and what might have enticed me to come after him in particular. Still, I would have preferred that he remain in the dark.

“Ninety eight point one three five percent chance you die within three minutes if you do,” a young girl’s voice, Dinah’s, broke in suddenly. “Death is the mercy.”

“Hush, pet,” Coil said, trying to sound calm but clearly shaken.
Truth was, I was shaken too. Not because of the first part, the possibility of killing Coil didn’t bother me; instead it was the last comment that left me feeling unsettled. Would I really torture the man if he killed Dinah? As much as it might have been satisfying to think that I cared that much about the life a girl I’d never known, I didn’t really think it was true. No, even if I’d been willing Nono would never let me, but since Dinah was a precog she couldn’t be completely wrong; which meant that if I didn’t kill him something worse happened in three minutes. But who or what could the cause be; Lung? Glory Girl? Neither struck me as a likely candidate.

That meant there was something else, not something outside but something down there with them. Whatever Coil thought would even his chances, that had to be it. It had to be another parahuman, but what parahuman would agree to work with him and do worse than kill him if he killed Dinah as well as seem powerful enough to give me pause? No one I could think of made much sense.

There was an audible bang, like something slamming into solid metal.

“He won’t kill me now,” Dinah said, and this time Coil didn’t say anything to quiet her. “Three point nine seven six percent chance you die. You’ll want to die.”

Chapter End Notes

I’d say this is the last part of the fic that I’m REALLY satisfied with. From here on out I feel a bit hit or miss, this also represents about where I ran out of the loose plan I’d been following (which I’d actually been forced to change pretty radically just past the Leviathan confrontation). Quite honestly the biggest lesson I learn from this fic is that Outlines Are Your Friends.
Another bang resounded through the speakers, rattling the glass of the doors almost imperceptibly, louder than the first and accompanied by the slightest sound of metal tearing.

“Report!” Coil shouted. He must have been shouting into a two-way radio or something because the volume of his voice hadn’t changed.

“Sir, the subject is attempting to break containment,” a tinny voice answered, further distorted by being double transmitted. “I strongly recommend we enact quarantine now.”

“Have you forgotten our circumstances, Fyodorov?” Coil asked.

“No, sir, but better the devil-” the other voice began before the sound abruptly cut out, though the sounds of metal tearing had been almost continuous in the background as the two had talked. I was sure it had cut out because Coil had realised he was still broadcasting, rather than due to any failure in the signal. From the way the sound had carried whatever had made the noise, my mind conjured a thick metal slab, had been far away from Coil. What I was picturing now was a very large and very heavy vault door, sized to drive a box truck through.

Whatever Coil had locked up in there was big, and it wanted out.

Glass exploded across the lobby, raining down across my back and skipping off my sides as four tentacles shot through the doors behind me and speared into the crack of the elevator doors. Metal crumbled as the doors resisted for a moment before they disappeared with a crash. From the instant my drones had made contact I’d been in motion, so that as soon as the doors were open I was through them and dropping down the vacant elevator shaft. I slammed into the concrete bottom feet first, sending up small flakes of the material and suffusing the air with dust as well.

From where I was a hallway, concealed at the moment by a false wall, lead off into the rest of the bunker. Under Normal operation that secret door would shift to the side to permit Coil and his men entrance, but they were either preoccupied or weren’t inclined to invite me in so I’d have to make my own way in. Fortunately that was easy enough.

Two quick successive flashes of light followed as I used the same technique that I’d employed in my running fights with the Endbringers to annihilate the interceding material, though this time I limited the scope of the decohesion field in order to limit the destruction. Air rushed in to the space previously occupied by a little over twelve inches of concrete sandwiching a glossy, inch-thick plate of black material. Somewhat surprisingly I was not greeted by any sort of assault; in fact there was no one in the hallway or surrounding rooms at all. A great deal of noise radiated from the far end of the bunker, muffled by the intermediary structures and walls; the soundtrack of grinding metal, shouting, and a curious popping sound was intermittently interrupted by an intermix of a dull inhuman roar and what I could only described as the very human enraged shrieking of a teenage girl. Something told me it wasn’t coming from Dinah.

Pushing myself through the opening, like a diver exploring an old sunken wreck, I surveyed my immediate surroundings for either threats or some sign of where I might find Coil and thus Dinah. Despite my curiosity at what the villain might have locked up I had to remain focused on my initial goal of getting the girl out, along with Tattletale if she hadn’t already made her own escape. Only once I’d accomplished my initial goal would I investigate and I had already wasted two of the three minutes I apparently had before things went badly.
“What do you think?” I asked out loud of Nono, though as soon as I even thought the question I knew what her answer was. There was no hiding what each of us thought from one another really.

“Somewhere isolated,” was her answer. “A sanctum, away from potential danger but with quick access to any part of the base, Nono thinks.”

I knew exactly where she meant. Now that I was inside the bunker was more or less an open book at least in broad strokes and so I could identify a room, one large room with a smaller connected room, off towards the right of the building from where I was; it was both close to the entrance I had just come through and sat right next to what I strongly suspected was the tunnel leading to the exit Glory Girl was covering while being opposite from the freight entrance Lung was still watching over patiently. Assuming Nono and I had come to the right conclusions regarding Coil’s personality, that was likely where he was.

In an instant I was off the ground, flying down the length of the corridor, taking two successive sharp rights and then a straight shot down another hall before I dropped against to the ground in front of the doorway behind which I suspected was my goal.

From the other side of the door I heard voices.

“... Mr. Pitter, if she speaks again kindly put a bullet between- “ Coil began to say to someone. Okay, so that was at least one other person inside besides Dinah and Coil himself.

“He’s more afraid of her now than he is of you,” another voice interrupted; Tattletale.

Who was ‘her’ though, Dinah?

“Bought loyalty only works when they think you’ll be around to keep buying. There’s no getting out of this one Coil, you used your power too much just trying to delay; playing for a little extra time, hoping to salvage your little empire or at least your own miserable little life. Tell me Coil, what do you think Noelle- ”

Okay, so not Dinah. I tried to recall any capes named Noelle, but there weren’t any that I knew of, which might indicate she was new; maybe someone else Coil had forced to work for him. If so, then why hadn’t Tattletale mentioned her before? Too many unknowns to be able to say for sure, but none of the possibilities that came to mind were endearing me towards the villainess.

“-will do to you when she gets her hands on you? You made promises to her, ones you knew you couldn’t keep. I bet she pulls you apart, slowly - NOW!”

I took that as my cue and shot through the door, which more or less disintegrated under the force of my impact. Long splinters spun through the air into the room ahead of me as the world slowed down to a crawl before my eyes and I took in the scene. There were four people; Coil, Tattletale, Dinah, and the man they called ‘Mr. Pitter,’ forming a sort of triangle as the crime boss held Dinah against his side with one arm. Mr. Pitter stood at the back of the room, handgun held loosely and pointed mostly towards the floor, while Tattletale was to my right opposite the desk against which Coil had positioned himself. His arm was raised up as he brought the gun which had been pressed against Dinah’s temple just a moment before to bear on Tattletale, but not yet in a position to fire on her.

Dinah Alcott was a startlingly normal looking twelve year old girl, white with straight brown hair that hung just past her jaw line and framed freckled oval of her face, but it was her eyes that caught my attention. Through my sped up senses everyone else was only just beginning to react to my entrance, even Tattletale who’d known I was coming and must have divined I was just outside the
door, but Dinah didn’t seem fazed in the slightest. Which only made sense, seeing as she was supposed to be some form of particularly powerful precog.

Coil’s eyes began to widen slightly as his merely human brain slowly took in what he was seeing, and his arm halted in its progress towards Tattletale while behind him Mr. Pitter seemed frozen and his grip on the gun in his hand slackened further. I had covered the distance between the door and Coil before the man could bring the barrel of the gun in line with me, ducked under his outstretched arm and balled my right fist in the fabric of his shirt at the same time as my other hand smacked the gun out of his grip. Several of his bones fractured in the process, but I had carefully modulated the force I’d used to not do too much damage; there was too much going on that I didn’t understand and I wanted answers.

My perception of time sped back up to normal as I lifted Coil bodily off his feet.

“Drop the gun,” I spat at Coil’s lackey.

He hesitated a moment, eyes wildly flickering back and forth between me and his employer.

“Do as she says Mr. Pitter,” Coil said with barely a tremor, his wide eyes glued to mine.

I doubted it would have mattered, he didn’t look like could’ve pulled the trigger if he’d wanted to. The weapon slipped out of his trembling fingers and clattered to the floor, causing Coil to wince at the sound. Underneath his breath the other man let out a quivery ‘fuck.’

“Good,” I said, ignoring the expletive. Dinah’s face remained, not exactly expressionless, but certainly she betrayed no significant sense of relief or nervousness. Her face, if anything, had taken on a more distant expression, as if she were somewhere else very far away. “Now, I want to know exactly what the hell is going on here. Who is Noelle? What are those sounds?”

“Those sounds are Noelle.” This from Tattletale, not Coil, as she stepped further from the wall and shot, her now presumably former, employer a smug smirk.

“I didn’t ask you,” I said sharply, keeping my eyes on the man I was hoisting into the air.

“She is correct,” he said, grimacing as if the admission caused him physical discomfort. “As for who Noelle is; she is a young parahuman I have agreed to aid in seeking out a resolution to the unique condition to which she has succumbed.”

‘Mr. Pitter,’ who had pressed himself against the wall, seemed to want to do nothing more than disappear and for the moment I was content to be obliging and ignore him while there were more important issues to deal with. I wasn’t about to let him go though, after all I doubted Coil gave loaded weapons to people he’d blackmailed into working for him.

“Translation,” Tattletale said as he finished, “he’s been stringing her and the Travelers along with the promise of a ‘cure’ so that they’ll do his dirty work and he can turn Brockton Bay into his own personal little fiefdom.”

“I assure you, Sarah,” Coil spat back, causing her to visibly grimace as soon as the name left his mouth. “That I have never been anything but honest regarding my intentions with either you or the Travelers in our dealings. I have in fact invested quite a bit in researching potential avenues of treatment.”

“Enough!” I interrupted, whipping around to shoot a glare at Tattletale before she could offer whatever retort she’d opened her mouth to spit out, then turned back to Coil. “So you screwed someone else. Sounds like she’s pretty angry about that maybe I should just let her vent her
frustration on your and your-”

“No!” Shouted both Tattletale and Dinah, the latter looking particularly panicked at the idea, startling the two of us.

“You have to stop her, or it gets much worse,” Dinah pleaded, suddenly very present in a way she hadn’t been before.

I focused on the young girl’s face and wondered briefly if Coil had managed to twist her mind or something, if she were maybe experiencing something like Stockholm syndrome but quickly dismissed the idea; if she’d wanted to save the man she could’ve warned him I was coming much earlier.

“How does it get worse? What happens?” I asked her as gently as I could.

“I-I don’t know,” she admitted shakily. “You’re there too much, you make it too fuzzy when you do some things, but I know that if you don’t stop her now it turns out much worse. They’ll come after you, because they think you caused it and you won’t forgive yourself so you let them; and the world ends.”

A thick silence hung over the room as Coil and Tattletale both stare at Dinah openly, as if she has suddenly sprouted wings and turned alabaster white. She looked uncomfortable, almost sick, as she stood there shaking ever so slightly with her tired face contorted in pain. After a moment Coil’s eyes widened once again as he openly stared at me as if I’d just provided the answer to a question he’d been asking for a long time. Behind his back, Mr. Pitter looked so utterly lost and on the verge of panic that I suspected the only keeping him from running straight out the door was the fact that he was still very much afraid of what I would do.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, mentally kicking myself for not noticing her condition earlier.

“Withdrawal,” she whispers, and I whip my head back in Coil’s direction, but before I can lay into him she continues. “And a headache from asking too many questions; I had to otherwise I wouldn’t be able to help at all. Two minute before the headache gets so bad I can’t think straight, then in three hours I start getting really sick and I won’t be able to help for days. It’s done now though, you’re going to stop her.” Dinah stood on the tips of her toes suddenly and I responded by bending until her breath whispered along the crenulations of my ear. “You both just have to remember that Nono already knows the way.”

I stared at her in confusion as I straightened up. How did she know about Nono? Right, precog. She might not even actually know about Nono beyond her name, with powers like hers it was difficult sometimes to tell how much was actual knowledge and how much was a sort of cheating. The only way to find out right now would be to ask her and I didn’t really want to discuss this stuff in front of Coil and Tattletale.

“Okay,” I said, if things were really that serious then I needed to get Dinah and the others out of here, securing Coil and his henchman with one of my drones, and confront this Noelle and figure out how to stop her. “We’re going-”

A beat of relative quiet was suddenly broken by a distant crash that shook the room. White plaster flakes momentarily showered down from the ceiling and the violence of the commotion tipped the laptop that had been sitting atop the desk onto the floor before the sounds of fighting resumed with a renewed vigor in the volume of the shouts and gunfire. Everyone, except for Dinah and ‘Mr. Pitter’ who had let out an undignified squawk and almost collapsed against the wall, whipped their heads towards the door. Tattletale, who’d been edging closer and closer to the corner where Coil’s
gun had landed from the moment mine and Dinah’s conversation had drawn everyone’s attention now bent down and pocketed the discarded weapon. No one else noticed.

“How long will your men hold her attention?” I asked Coil.

He opened his mouth to answer but Tattletale spoke before he could, “A minute, maybe two.”

“Alright, let’s go,” I said, still holding Coil suspended before me. Both Tattletale and Dinah started moving immediately, the former almost immediately moving to help the younger girl who almost imperceptible leaned against her side as she moved, while Mr. Pitter started after us a second later.

I let the two other girl lead, guiding them back the same way I’d come in. A few seconds after the first turn a second crash sounded, soft enough that I was fairly sure only I’d heard it, signaling that Lung had finally grown impatient. Shit.

“What exactly will I be dealing with?” I asked as we moved, not directing the question to anyone in particular.

“Noelle copies people,” Tattletale answered quickly. “Spits them out, like bad caricatures of the people they’re mimicking with warped representations of the same motivations and goals. Even copies parahuman powers, but with nasty twists.”

“She needs only an instant of contact to initiate such clones,” Coil continued. “Though she does not appear to be able to produce more than two or three at a time, I suspect that is more a limitation imposed by available space than something inherent to her gift. Each round of copies takes several minutes to gestate, though worryingly there has been a marked decrease in the time required. Once contact is severed with whoever is providing the template she is unable to produce new copies.”

“Mm,” I grunted, as we walked down the hallway leading into the opening I’d made.

Then as we reached the end I turned my gaze on Coil again and quietly asked, “Anything else?”

At his blank look I shoved him through the hole and let him drop roughly onto the dusty rubble strewn ground of the elevator shaft and then pushed Mr. Pitter in through after him. Two tentacles appeared above the men, the last meter of their ends splitting into eight finer digits and gripping them both. Coil bore the treatment with as much dignity as was possible, only grunting at the suddenness, but his minion whimpered in panic as the tentacles coiled around his body and limbs. As the men were hoisted up the shaft and into the light streaming in from the lobby I turned to Tattletale and Dinah and offered a hand to help the young precog into the space. As she stumbled somewhat through the opening another tentacle appeared to catch her and provide support, she seemed to sag against the surface of the tentacles as she rose up.

Tattletale started moving to clamber through the hole, but I held out a hand, “Give it to me.”

After a longish pause she sighed and smiled as if to say ‘I had to try,’ before she extracted the gun from her pocket and dropped it into my hand.

“Thanks,” I told her. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, though I honestly don’t, but I’m pretty sure you were going to shoot Coil and even though I don’t actually care too much about what happens to him personally, I do want answers from him after this. Kinda need him alive for that.”

“Right,” she said as another tentacle dropped down and opened to form another sling to support her.

“Is there anything else I need to know?” I asked her.
“She’s an ugly bitch,” Tattletale said, shrugging at the look I gave her. “Also, don’t trust Trickster. The other Travelers aren’t stupid, so they’ll be realizing that Noelle is a lost cause, but Trickster is not a little obsessed and something of a sociopath.”

“Okay, thanks, I guess,” I said as the tentacle carried her up and through the open elevator doors.

Coil and Mr. Pitter were still firmly in the grasp of the drone that had extracted them, which was quickly moving from the battlefield to secure the prisoners against escape. Another drone I tasked with ferrying Dinah to a hospital so that she could receive the treatment she needed, but as it lifted from the ground to begin its journey she spoke.

“No hospitals,” she said weakly as she clung to the side of the sling in which she was ensconced.

“Dinah,” I said through the drone. “You need treatment. I’m sure the doctors can make it easier on you.”

“Can’t,” she said as she stared up at the drone unseeing. “Eighty two point one three percept chance I relapse, unless I do it the hard way. My body has to remember the pain.

What was I supposed to say to that? Nothing I could think of seemed adequate or remotely helpful and so instead I said nothing, just sighed to myself and had the drone turn towards where she had indicated her family was. Tattletale stumbled slightly as the drone released her, catching herself on the thicker trunk of its tentacle.

With all of that more or less settled I turned my attention to the situation unfolding within the bunker; Lung had melted his way through not only the elevator itself but the doors at either end of the elevator shaft, all the while ignoring the imploring calls of my drone to halt. He’d been brought up short when he ran into six of Coil’s soldiers who appeared to be feeing the action, but the situation had quickly devolved into a standoff as one of the men panicked and fired on him. In a few moments Lung would be too large and too durable for the shots to keep him at bay, despite any pain that he must have felt from the several places where ragged chunks of flesh had been burned away to leave oozing and pulsing craters, he was smiling; the mercenaries were only helping him ramp his power up to full blast. All of this was pointless diversion from the real issue of Noelle, one that made the eventual outcome stickier the longer it persisted.

The drone I’d tasked with shadowing Lung had squeezed in behind him, pushing the still glowing wreckage of the elevator and doors out in front of itself, and now it wrapped Lung’s arms and legs with a tentacle each to hold him in place out of the way of further shots. The gang leader struggled for a moment before my voice interrupted his efforts, “Back off Lung, we have a bigger problem than Coil now.”

After another moment he relaxed and the drone loosened its grip, waiting another second or two before retracting them fully just to emphasize the point. Lung made no move to rejoin the fight.

The drone maneuvered the head of its body so that it was just on the other side of the entry way into the common room and received a couple of shots, which did little more than raise the surface temperature of the drone’s outer armor by several degrees for an instant.

“Attention, Attention!” I shouted through the drone. “I have captured Coil, surrender now and I will make sure you remain safe while I deal with Noelle,” I paused, and a moment of silence followed. “Er, this is Princess by the way. I’m just going to assume you know who I am.”

The silence stretched for another second before a man in a glue-gray pseudo-military uniform stepped out into the doorway on the opposite side of the room where the men had retreated to after
the initial exchange. A futuristic looking rifle was cradled in his arms before him, more of a protecting talisman than an actual weapon at this point.

“You will guarantee our safety?” He spoke English with a curious accent, almost British but not quite.

“Yes,” I told him, dropping down in front of the drone. “If you follow my drone, it will ferry you to the ground level and guide you to somewhere safe. You understand I’m not offering you amnesty right?”

“I understand that ma’am,” he answered as he waved at the other men hunkered down around the corner; in total there were six of them, him included. “After what we’ve seen, I just want to get as far away from those... things as possible.”

There was a chorus of assent from the other mercenaries as they passed, all of them furtively glancing back down the hall as if expecting pursuit. While I watched the mercenaries flee I spoke to Glory Girl outside, “Some of Coil’s men are coming out, could you help keep an eye on them and Tattletale?”

She grumbled, but assented after calling the villainess a few choice names. I could still hear the sounds of fighting, even muffled as it was by the intervening doors and walls, so apparently the men Coil had hired were no more loyal to their fellows than they were to their former employer. Once the last man had left the room Lung squeezed himself through the doorway, which took several moments, and turned to look at me searchingly, “What is this threat?”

“Some parahuman Coil has been keeping locked up down here while he searched for a ‘cure’ to some sort of condition she’s suffering from, one connected to her powers,” I told him. “Noelle, that’s her name, can apparently create clones on contact; ones that keep your powers. There’s more to it though, he was at least as afraid of her as he was of you or I so I want you to be cautious, hang back when we head in until I get an idea of what exactly we’re up against. She might just be pissed at him for holding her hostage, maybe I can talk her down.”

“As you did with Coil?” Lung asked, arching what might have once been his eyebrows, but was now just a ridge of gnarled glittering scales.

Rather than answer I took off down the hallway the mercenaries had come through at a sprint, immediately I could hear and feel Lung following behind me. He was almost too large to fit through the hall, in fact he had to trail me almost on all fours to avoid jamming his head through the ceiling. As each man was ferried up to the ground level by my drone they were met by another, one which divested each of them in turn of their weaponry; though they might not pose a threat to me or my drones I wasn’t about to let soldiers for hire walk around armed. I made sure that where the drones were leading them to was far away from where the other drone still held tightly onto Coil and the other man.

As Lung and I ran the clarity of the noise increased steadily with each door we passed through until finally we came to a stop in front of a steel, reinforced set of double doors through which I could clearly make out the sounds of fighting and yelling. With a glance back at Lung and his increasingly draconic features I planted myself at the center of the doors, jammed my fingers into the crack and levered them open.

What greeted me beyond the doors was what was clearly the ‘command center’ of the bunker. One of the former vault doors was pressed half up against the wall through which the entrance came; blocking my view of the vault itself and its occupant but affording me a view of the other side of the room which took up a significant portion of the entire complex. Another vault door was
embedded in the far wall, a reddish brown smear of viscera across the bottom right corner. It was a scene of chaos; more mercenaries in the same uniform as before, fighting each other, Almost a dozen bodies littered the room, lying in piles of ones and twos or slumped against desks, blood and other fluids pooling around some of them and meanwhile off to one side five teenagers facing towards vault and presumably Noelle, the Travelers. Trickster I recognized, he was actually facing off against the rest of them, along with Ballistic, Genesis, and Sundancer but the fifth was an improbably good looking boy I had never seen before. Between Trickers on the one side and the rest of the Travelers on the other there was a glowing fragment of the sun casting long shadows as it flickered, Sundancer’s power.

“... don’t have to do this Marissa,” Tricker shouted, causing a clearly distressed Sundancer to flinch. Was Marissa her name? “You know how she gets, it’s just a mood. We’ll find a solution.”

There was a roar from behind the vault door. If that was Noelle then she apparently disagreed, but what did she disagree with?

“Shut up Krouse!” Yelled Ballistic furiously, he was almost shaking with constrained rage and I thought he might take a shot at Trickster for a moment.

Next to Ballistic, Genesis looked like a cross between a gorilla, an alligator, and a bear. None of the mercenaries, clustered towards the back of the room, were paying attention to the Travellers, too preoccupied with fighting off what had to be Noelle spawned clones given their nakedness and easily visible deformities. There weren’t many of them, but they still outnumbered the six remaining mercenaries by half again their number and they had the advantage of viciousness. The non-clones were attacking back almost as hard, trying to fight their way in my direction.

“Mars,” came a sixth voice, Noelle’s voice, pleadingly. “Do it honey, you have to do it now. You heard what Tattletale said, Coil’s been lying the entire time there never was hope for a cure. I don’t want to be the thing holding you guys back anymore.”

“I-I,” Sundancer hiccuped, tears streaming down her face as she stared alternately at the fleck of the sun and off at Noelle.

I finally got my first glimpse of Noelle herself as I came around the edge of the vault door, she was the size of a small elephant. Or at least part of her was, below the waist was a grotesque mass of fleshy legs and a rotund misshapen body that pulsed irregularly while atop that sat body of a girl with straight brown hair and wearing a dark blue blouse. The lower portion of her body far outstripped the more normal human half in terms of size, and in terms of number of limbs. A mouth also took up a significant portion of the forward facing surface, altogether both too human looking and vaguely bestial. She was a sort of nightmarish sphinx.

“We can’t believe a word that came out of her mouth,” Tricker interrupted, glancing back and up at Noelle. “She’s always has an angle she’s working-”

“Gee, never met anyone like that before,” Ballistic cut in, sneering.

Trickster sighed and opened his mouth to say something, but he was interrupted by the fifth boy before he could get anything out, “You’re right, we can’t trust her. This was always a long shot though, and I think maybe it’s time to face facts and admit that… that, there probably isn’t a cure.”

“I can’t,” Sundancer finally spit out, openly sobbing as the incredibly bright light that had cast the scene in stark contrasts flickered and died. The girl buried her head in her hands and sunk to the ground to continued crying quietly.
As they’d been talking the mercenaries had gotten the upper hand on the clones they been fighting and were now cautiously picking their way steadily towards me and their only remaining exit, a couple raised weapons as if to fire but their companions quickly stopped them. Noelle herself now had her eyes closed tightly as she mumbled nonsense words in what appeared to be an attempt to sooth herself, not a good sign in my opinion, but it did give them an opening to escape unnoticed. Six or seven more clones clustered around Noelle’s rear legs, peering darkly out at everyone else with an intense maliciousness. I motioned for Lung to stay where he was, still behind the mass of the vault door and hidden from everyone else, as I took several full steps into the command center.

“Uh, not to intrude, but I might have solution,” I called out, drawing the eye of every head in the room except for Noelle’s. What Dinah had said before, about Nono already knowing the way, had gotten me thinking and I was actually fairly sure I had an idea of what was going on, in a general sense at least. That didn’t mean I knew how to actually do anything about it.

“Princess,” Trickster said, slowly. “Well, uh, this is unexpected but if you really think you do we’re all ears.”

Ballistic shot his teammate such a glare that I was fairly sure that wasn’t entirely true and that if his behavior was any indication of how he usually acted he probably wouldn’t be part of a ‘we’ for much longer, or at least not one that included Ballistic. Still, at the moment I just needed to stall and hope that Nono would be able to figure out a way to enact the sketch of a plan we’d managed to cobble together between the two of us.

“Um, okay,” I continued. “To start, I should explain something about yo- our, powers and how they work; you know every parahuman has a corona pollentia and a gemma, which develops when, we, uh… get our powers. Well those aren’t what give us powers, they’re more like conduits for the powers, of course now you’re probably asking yourself, ‘conduits to or from what?’ You might want to think of the things on the other end as sort of cosmic parasites, or um, maybe like symbiotic organisms, that is if these things are even alive in that sense, locked away in their own little pocket universe feeding power into people through tiny pinholes.”

“You present, ah, an interesting theory,” the guy I didn’t recognize said dubiously, the others looked similarly unconvinced. Something bothered me about the way he looked, like he’d had different face when I’d first seen him, but a quick comparison showed they were essentially identical match and he’d been looking slightly away from me before anyways. “But I fail to see how this provides a solution.”

“The solution comes in because I’ve broken the lock before on at least one of these ‘pocket universes,’” if I extended the definition of myself to include Nono retroactively and counted everything she’d ever done, I wasn’t lying exactly. “And I think I can do it again.”

There was a moment of almost stunned silence as that sunk in, I’d essentially just told them I could cut off the source of someone’s powers. I had no idea if it was actually true, but assuming Dinah was right then I had to stop Noelle one way or another.

“No!” Her eyes flew open suddenly as she screamed out, and her face contorted in a look of such pure and unfiltered rage that she no longer looked human. “No more lies! There is no cure, there is no cure! You all just want to keep me caged, keep me penned in so you can all laugh at me! Mocking me! No more! No More,” she cried out while around her legs the remaining clones grew more and more agitated as she went on, their voices joining hers as she spoke; threatening to tear each of us limb from limb and ‘fuck your slopping corpses,’ or ‘piss through your windpipe,’ among other worse threats, “RAGHHHGHGHHHH!”

She charged on the last sound, both mouths open in an echoing sort of cry of inhuman rage, her
clones followed in her wake, several of them running with awkward gates. For all her bulk Noelle could move pretty fast, but I was still faster; before she’d taken more than a single step I’d already put myself between her and the others. I was pretty sure she wouldn’t be able to clone me and I didn’t want her to get her hands on either Ballistic or Sundancer because of the sheer amount of destruction and carnage each of them could wreak. Unfortunately Lung came roaring from out behind the vault door at that moment, angled to collide head on with Noelle; I liked even less what she might do with Lung’s power.

Flames leapt up around him, wreathing his entire body in a corona of blistering fire as I changed directions and aimed for center mass. No matter what I would be in a decent position to stop her dead in her tracks and keep her from making contact with anyone besides myself. I was just thinking I had plenty of time to reach Lung and get him out of the way when suddenly I was slamming head first into the back of the vault, behind Noelle. I pushed off the wall and spun around to see one of the clones that had been clustered around Noelle’s rear legs stumbled, right himself, and then take a couple of unsteady steps towards Lung on mismatched legs.

“Kro-” Ballistic began, halfway between surprise and anger as he disappeared from where he’d been standing and reappeared where one of the other clones had been running to keep up with Noelle. “-use, what the fu-”

The rest of his sentence was muffled as he collided with one of Noelle’s legs, spun for a moment with the force of the impact, landed face first into that pulsing flesh and began sinking in. Genesis folded herself over Sundancer protectively and reached out with the other arm to gather the improbably good looking boy as well. He was replaced with another clone, who almost immediately flung against the far wall by a flick of Genesis’ arm. Pretty Boy was more prepared for the teleport than Ballistic had been, he dived out of the way and scrambled from the reaching grasps of two more clones and then dashed towards the back of the vault.

Trickster was feeding them to Noelle.

What the fuck? Tattletale had apparently been right, there was definitely something seriously wrong in that kid’s head.

I accelerate again towards Lung, if I pushed myself I could make it just in time to stop the two of them from making contact and maybe save this situation from going completely fucking catastrophic. An instantly later I slammed into the exact opposite end of the command center.

Fuck!

Whipping around I saw Genesis explode into action, her long snout agape in a vicious snarl as she bore down on Trickster and behind her a flicker of light as Sundancer rose and a miniature star began to form. Genesis collided with the clone he’d switched himself with and turned it into little more than a smear of viscera, the clones were apparently a lot more fragile than actual people or she was a lot heavier than she looked. Sundancer’s gaze flickered over towards Noelle and I saw a dawning comprehension on her face as she caught sight of Trickster.

I had to take out Trickster, otherwise he would just keep playing havoc with anything I tried to do, but how could I get to him when he could just juggle me away almost continuously? What I needed to do was bring in my drones. His power depended on matching two things with roughly similar sizes and the only thing in this room that even sort of matched my drones was Noelle herself. The entire room shook with the sounds of three impacts.

It would take a minute or so for the drones to work their way through the intervening soil and structure, unless I wanted to risk bringing the entire complex down around everyone’s head or
A second later Lung slammed into Noelle’s left front leg, as the two collided they each let out simultaneously roars at one another in what I almost mistook for mutual calls of challenge; her roar was tinged with pain and that’s when I noticed that the flesh where Lung had struck her was burnt. Not just seared though, but scorched to the pure carbon-black of charcoal. I watched as he held on for dear life, the flames which flowed from his body scorching up her leg as his claws dug deep into the crumbling back ruin. She cried out again, this time the pain even more obvious in her voice, as she reared up so that her front legs lifted above Lung’s head, his embedded claws sending still glowing coals scattering as they were dragged down the length of her leg. Noelle’s monstrous mouth opened as she reached her apex, head almost scraping the ceiling, and vomited a clear, viscous liquid all over him.

There was a hiss as the flames were extinguished and Noelle slammed down on top of him, throwing her body to her left so that it was the other unburnt leg that reached him. Lung managed to get his hands up in time to catch the foot that would have crushed him but an instant later it started to sink down onto him. He tried to surround himself in flames once again but he was now covered in the slime and though it started to evaporate, as evidenced by the steam, it wasn’t quick enough. Noelle’s foot slipped over his head and muted his furious roars as she vomited again, this time spitting out two new figures; clones of Ballistic.

Thankfully they lacked any ammunition for the moment. Sundancer’s orb was growing as Genesis prowled in front of her in an effort to keep herself between the other girl and Trickster, which meant that Trickster’s ability relied on line of sight- but then why wasn’t he just moving her out of the way? He finally did make a move, switching himself with a mercenary near the back which put him significantly nearer to me than I think he’d realised, the other man stumbled momentarily and cried out at his sudden change of location.

Trickster was still turning back towards Genesis and Sundancer when I lifted him off his feet with one hand and gripped his chin with the other, forcing it up so that he couldn’t get a good look at me.

“Stop this Trickster,” I pleaded. “Help me calm her down, I wasn’t lying when I said I had a solution.”

He only smirked and an instant later disappeared, replaced by another one of the mercenary clones, who immediately snarled and started kicking and clawing at me, “Whore, cunt, bitch, let me down and I’ll shove my fist so far down your throat you shit teeth for a month.”

I involuntarily flinched back slightly at the sudden stream of vitriol before I tossed the clone away and refocused my attention, taking a second to raise my arm to block a chair a Ballistic clone had shot my way before scanning Noelle’s vicinity for Trickster. I found him nestled beneath her prodigious bulk, near her legs. Probably he wouldn’t come out again like that, not without a much better reason and a back up plan at least. Sundancer finally released the miniature sun and it floated steadily in his direction. He glanced around until he spotted Pretty Boy at the back trying to make himself look small and unnoticeable and then grabbed one of the last two mercenary clones and swapped them, the clone was instantly off an running towards Sundancer as he screamed promises to find her family and murder them all. Immediately the orb paused in its progress, and then flickered out again before springing back to life practically on top of the clone and turning him into a smoldering pile of ash in an instant, cutting off his diatribe of atrocities.

Unless she was willing to kill Ballistic, it had to have always been a bluff. Not that it particularly mattered either way, because in that same moment the entire room shook again violently and then
two patches of the ceiling disintegrated, showering the empty space to the left and behind Sundancer and Genesis with a film of chalky dust. Out clawed the grasping digits of tentacles as if a giant figure were about to lever itself through and into the suddenly comparatively cramped space. Instead the heads of two drones emerged and flowed out to dominate the space before Noelle, like the questing heads of hulking worms searching for the surface after rain, as the last vestiges of Lung’s form disappeared into the flesh of her leg.

My voice, amplified through the drones, echoed across the room, “Trickster, Noelle, give it up. I swear to you I am not lying.”

God I hoped that was true.

A stretched moment of silence filled the room, even the swaying and pulsing bulk of Noelle’s lower body seemed relatively still to the preceding displays of violent action. Around her feet, the left still a ruined mockery of the others but beginning to regenerate as it continued to ooze a brackish ichor, the remaining clone still peered out of dark watery eyes, clinging to the shadow of her bulk in an ominous promise of violence. Still holding his former teammate by the shoulder, fingers digging cruelly in like the talons of some bird of prey, Trickster glanced between me and the drones above with a slow deliberateness that said he was calculating some angle to play.

He took a step to his right, released the boy, and then thrust his arms out like a crucifix had suddenly sprung behind him before he stepped back to be embraced by Noelle’s monstrous flesh. With my wordless noise of frustration the drones sprang into action, heaving the rest of their mass into the open space and surging forward to end the situation. As their looming bodies occluded my view of both Noelle and Trickster I caught a last glimpse of him and caught him smiling as if in victory.

I had only an instant to consider that before I found myself in the position Trickster had just occupied. Fuck.

Noelle immediately whipped her body around as I struggled to extract my already buried left arm from her flesh. It swung free with a sickening sucking sound, but my feet were still ensconced in a warm, slick cocoon. I was splattered with fat droplets of clear vomit as she spewed again, three figures tumbling out of the too human maw of her mouth, Lungs. She was interposing her bulk between my drones and the Lungs, to give them time to begin transforming and already one of them was growing. No, two of them were growing. Both in wildly different manners; one was stretching as if he were trying to pull himself apart and indeed I could see the skin split, but rather than exposing flesh and bone each was turning into a complete copy, while the other seemed to lose form as he grew, skin becoming slick and rubbery in places while in others scales wriggled forth and in still others thin feathery hairs sprouted.

I struggled to work my feet free, unable to use my arms as my hands only stuck to the skin and started sinking in themselves necessitating extra effort to free them again, and my feet settled further into the bloody mess with each failed effort. A rotting meat smell assaulted my nostrils, clinging against the inside and coating the back of my throat with every panicked breath I took until I felt my stomach force its way up and out of my throat. The smell of my own vomit intermixed and made me gag all over again, but now my stomach was empty and there was nothing left to expel.
Crying out I pounded against the locker door and promised to do anything, to say anything, if only they would come back and let me out, just let me out. I heard only the echoing laughter that rang up and down the halls, fading for a moment and trailing off before redoubling all over again.

_Haha. Ha. Ha._
_Hahaha._

Panicky now I scrambled away from the door in a desperate attempt to keep my feet out of the bloody pile at the bottom, but it only followed my them up like a rising tide of human waste. One of my hands slammed into the back of the locker, drawing my hand across the warm metal wall.

Light which had previous streamed in through the slats began to fade and as the darkness inside the locker began to grow the walls themselves seemed to draw in on me and pulse like a living coffin of hungry flesh. The laughter continued, but it was no longer Sophia, Emma and Madison laughing but the school itself mocking my pathetic life.

_Ha. Ha. Haha._

It echoes it my ears in time with the throbbing pulse of the walls as they constrict further around me.

_Ha. Ha. Haha. Taylor…_

Even as I fight the lockers closing walls, the mixed scents of spoiling human waste and vomit congeal into a thick fluid that invades my mouth and nostrils until I am drowning. My body fights to reject it, trying to expel the noxious substance but there is nowhere for it to go as the walls press tighter and tighter.


_Listen to me._

I am going to die in this locker, I know it now, I am going to die and they will find my rotting corpse. I don’t want to die. Despite the suffocating substance that seems to be pouring down my throat I cry out for someone, anyone, to save me.

_Taylor! Taylor! “Taylor! Listen to me!”_

Nono.

This is nothing but a memory, a nightmare that has been dredged up somehow, I remember and that knowledge is somehow enough to break the nightmare. My eyes shoot open and I am not in the locker all those months ago, I am inside something arguably worse; a potentially psychotic parahuman who has well and truly gone off her rocker and if I don’t stop her she will end the world, somehow.

It is not as dark as my imagination made it, there isn’t a lot of light but frankly I don’t need much to see. Outside the little bubble of fluid that I have apparently been ensconced in, the flesh is exactly the same as that outside which says interesting things about the biology of the non-human portion
of Noelle’s body though I’m not entirely sure what. Something is probing at the boundaries of my body, there is something achingly familiar about the non-physical tinges of energy I can feel crawling along my body as if in search of some gap or opening through which to rush in. I shudder involuntarily at the feeling, shivery aftershocks following out along my body.

“Taylor,” Nono’s voice whispers in my mind with all her inherent sweetness intact, but still conveying an immense amount of worry.

“I’m okay Nono, I’m okay now,” I answer quickly, eager assuage her fears even though its probably not necessary. “Have you figured anything out yet? ‘Cause otherwise, I don’t know that there’s any other solution than to just… deal with her, she’s too dangerous.”

“Nono has been hard at work!” She replied. “And Nono thinks she has it, finally!”

“Good,” I said, glancing around and finding that I could just barely make out the form of Lung, shrunken down to his human state, above me. “Let me hear it then.”

“Applying all Nono learned from the parasite attached to you,” she began, while she spoke I attempted to make out the form of Ballistic but either he was too far away or he’d already been digested. If that was what was happening. “To the principle algorithms of Warp travel, lead Nono to realize that the parasite was employing a modified set of etheric/subspace boundary transition methods involving gravitic superlensing and superstring extension but that rather than extending the Tannhaeuser Gate of a degeneracy reactor they were condensing it. They were tunneling! Which let them access the quantum foam and pierce individual potential space-times. Unfortunately there are an infinite number of variations at that level, so there was no hope of every correctly accessing the space-time this specific parasite occupies; at least there wasn’t until now!”

“Okay,” I said hesitantly as I’d only understood a portion of what she’d just said because of my lessons, but what I had understood was that we could get at the right one. “So what do we do?”

“Well, Nono noticed that when Taylor was… secured by Noelle an energy signature similar to one Nono saw the first time, appeared,” she began again. “And Nono thought there might be some sort of two-information exchange going on, and she was right, and that hidden in that exchange there might be a sort of address. Well there was and so Nono had to make a few quick modifications in order to adapt our Warp drive to perform the same sort of function, and now all you need to do is activate the Warp system and we can go! Nono will take care of all the details!”

“Um, okay?” I said, staring out at the tissue around me as I realized that if I’d understood everything she’d said so far correctly I was about to travel to some sort of alternate dimension, or maybe it was more like a pocket universe of some kind. “Let’s do it then.”

I felt for the Warp Drive and felt it spring into my mind, this immense piece of technology capable of wrenching open the stars in an act that I could only describe as energetically violent and brutish and yet also in a way elegant. Normally the Warp Drive essentially punched a hole in regular mundane reality and flung whatever was within the radius of the gate through subspace to some distant location, a process that involved surprisingly little experiential phenomenon. This was not normal though, almost immediately it was like I was being squeezed down onto the head of a pin and then squeezed through an impossibly long tunnel. I ‘saw’ things that were not possible and that I couldn’t remember a moment after seeing.

As suddenly as it had started it was over and I found myself cartwheeling in a vacuum. Some structure swirled around me, or rather I moved within it and it was just that my vantage point of it was constantly in motion in such a way that I could not gain a clear picture of the overall layout. I collided with a portion of it and bounced off to fly in a different direction for several seconds
before slamming into another section. At that point I had slowed down enough that I finally stopped panicking and actually took charge of the situation, in an instant I was still and could finally take in the larger picture of what was before me.

The structure was immense, I was at least two light seconds from whatever perimeter there was, and made of immense red-brown strands of thickly coiling material which connected to crystalline octahedrons of varying sizes. In places the strands were thin wires that crisscrossed so frequently that they became nets while in others they were thicker around than one of those ancient redwoods you see sometimes on postcards and stood by themselves or in parallel with one or two others. As for the crystalline octahedrons that they connected, well they weren’t actually crystalline on closer inspection but rather they were made of of plates of dark and reflective material that in part mimicked the stars and reflected some of the other structures around it while inside I could see through the gaps where two or more plates joined there were more shapes made of the same material as the strands. Some of them were smaller than myself, while others that I saw in the distance might have continental in size.

“Is, is this the…” I started ask Nono, scanning the scene and trying to make sense of the sheer scope of what I was seeing, before I faltered unsure of what to call whatever this was.

“Nono thinks it is the parasite,” she answered. Whatever it was, it was big in ways I was having trouble really grasping; immense really.

“So, this is what you beat when you found me?” I asked as I looked around at the bizarre structures that surrounded us, trying to make sense of the complex interconnected mass and find a pattern or apparent hierarchy.

“Yes and no,” she said. “Your parasite was different, not smaller exactly but more condensed.”

I wasn’t exactly sure how you would go about condensing something likes this, it spread out like the roots of a tree or like those diagrams you see in anatomy textbooks of the circulatory system. Sure there was a lot of empty space, but even so whatever you had left would be so immense I would hesitate to call it ‘condensed’.

“Right,” I said. “So how do we stop it?”

“With your parasite, Nono was able to contain it by first isolating and then excising the connection that it was attempting to make with you,” she said, suddenly appearing besides me to stare out at the massive structure all around us. “In large part this was possible because it was not truly in any ‘place’ and the process had not yet truly taken hold on your body at the time, Nono does not know that the same solution is repeatable.”

“Shit,” I said quietly, desperately. Wouldn’t that be a real kick in the ass, to come all this way and find out what we came here to do wasn’t even possible after all, to have to limp back home defeated by the sheer size and scope of the problem.

There had to be something we could do, there had to be a way of winning this, “Let’s say it is possible, just so we didn’t come all this way for nothing, what would we need to do?”

Nono paused for a moment before answering, “All we would need to find is the same structure on this end which connects in humans to the corona pollentia and gemma-”

“Great, so we just need to find the equivalent of a small neural structure buried somewhere in this mess,” I interrupted frustrated at the apparently growing scope of the problem and gestured to the vast and expansive structure around us to indicate exactly how untrivial the prospect seemed.
“Nono thinks it should be fairly obvious actually,” she countered. “When Nono battled your parasite she noticed that though it was fearsomely intelligent in its ability to counter and solve problems, it did not appear to have any sort of sapience. Most solutions it arrives to by sheer weight of computing power, which is staggeringly high, but tends to take ponderously long to arrive at creative solutions. This suggests a very regimented computing architecture, so it should be centralized to some primary node which if destroyed will hopefully terminate the connection, or at least impede or outright stop regular functioning.”

“Okay, so we just need to find this primary node, smash it and that should fix all our problems? Simple enough, I suppose,” I said. “Well, no time like the present.”

Simple it might be, but that didn’t mean the same thing as quick. This rapidly became apparent as I wove in between small and large nodes in search of the primary one; we found plenty that looked quite nodal indeed but nothing about them suggested that they were in any particular way more important than others. We didn’t even know if it being ‘primary’ would mean it was larger, smaller, or neither. Frankly the structure was just too large to careen along, hoping to randomly stumble onto what we were searching for; what was needed was perspective.

A quick warp to a suitable distance provided exactly that perspective. It was shaped like an immense flower, its unfolded petals spread towards the sun in glittering arrays that shifted oh so slowly as the entire structure rotated along the axis of its long trailing stem which trailed down towards the barren surface of a planet. Seen from this perspective those dense forests of looping strands connecting floating octahedrons became the shimmering petals and revealed a structure that had not been apparent. There was a beauty to this thing, this parasite or symbiote or whatever it was, it wasn’t the sort of benign beauty that normally came with large scale natural structures like mountains and valleys, but rather a twisted sort of allure. For all its stillness, these was a sort of predatory alienness; at any moment I almost expected those crystals to snap into motion and the entire thing to turn into a maelstrom of jagged edges and whipping cords that would swallow whatever was trapped within its depths like one of those carnivorous plants. If it was like one of those plants, or like the flower its overall shape resembled then at the center of there was likely to be a primary node of some kind.

I hoped.

“What do you think Nono?” I asked of my incorporeal companion.

She seemed to contemplate the structure for another moment before replying, “Nono thinks you should look at the heat distribution,” my vision flipped, disorienting for an instant before I regained my bearings, and the structure became a complex network of pulsing globules that shifted and transformer from one moment to the next. “Notice the way it pauses a quarter of the way down the bulge right before it begins streaming down the thing strand? Nono thinks you are right.”

Sure enough there was a slightly, almost imperceptible pause part way through that particular cluster of nodes as the heat congregated and seemed to swirl as it played back and forth across a multitude of nodes in the area. Another quick warp brought us back in close enough that I could see the patterns in more detail, it was beautiful in a way, but I wasn’t here to admire its aesthetics.

I dove into that tangled and slowly shifting cluster, watching the way the heat coursed along strands and nodes to its destination. In this part of the structure the nodes were too densely packed together to see very far and they had a disorienting effect due to the way their surfaces shimmered and reflected other nodes.

Even with the heat map, I sometimes had to double back and follow the course of another strand of heat when another inevitably traced its way off down the tail or meandered into a dead end so to
speak. As I searched I occasionally brushed my hands against the various surfaces; the strands were rough and knotty like tree roots with a thick sticky covering of something like sap, while the plates of shimmering material were smoother than glass except at the edges where they became jagged mountain ranges. Everything about this thing was so utterly alien, a bizarre mixture of living tissue and inanimate material filled with sense of constant tensing and anticipation of sudden and explosive violence, the tendrils quivered with contained energy while the jagged edges of the octahedrons turned to shadowed rows of teeth. I hadn’t really relaxed since we’d arrived.

After almost seven minutes of searching I spotted an uncharacteristic break in the twisting web of the structure and saw what had to be what I was looking. Even without being able to see the way the heat moved through the structure it would have been obvious that this node was special. Not because of its size, as it was neither larger than average nor smaller, but rather because the plates that on other nodes offered barely a glimpse inside were here so far spread apart that one of my drones could have passed between them and still had room to spare. Covering the backside of each plate of crystalline material was a thick mat of slowly pulsing material similar to what comprised the strands and thin strands extended inward. From every direction humongous braids of strands fed in through the gaps towards the pulsing and faintly glowing tumor which sat at the center.

This thing more than anything else that I had seen so far seemed actually alive, like a beating heart pulled out of someone’s chest. In fact the image was so strong in my mind that for an instant I actually imagined the sound of a heartbeat, though one that had an utterly alien rhythm to it.

Under my watch the mass slowly shrank, second by second until the glow was reveal not to becoming from within it but from behind it except that no matter how much I moved around it was always behind. The glow was a shimmering flurry of glass like flakes that always seemed to be turning just so they were seen at a slight angle, they reminded me of the effect that occurred when I emerged from warp.

Cast off flakes of space-time made material for an instant, except that these did not fade like those I was familiar with. A sustained warp gate? The amount of power that would take was frankly staggering, how much of the structure I had been exploring must have been given over just to maintaining this single thing, and it was plugged directly into a teen girls brain.

The absurdity struck me suddenly, what the fuck was the point? If this thing could generate that much power, could control and funnel whatever else remained into the body of a human being and give them literal superpowers why did it actually need to? Why attach to something as small, as insignificant, and unimportant as a human being? None of this made any sense! There had to be something this thing was getting out of the exchange and none of the possibilities really fit, which meant that I was missing some extra information and that made me unsure.

“We don’t know enough,” I sighed in frustration, locking eyes with Nono. “There are too many open questions about all of this, too much we don’t know about what happens after we do whatever we do here; does Noelle die? Does she live? Which is better?”

“Nono knows,” she responded quietly, looking no less sure than I was. “There are many questions, many things we do not know, but what we do know is that Noelle represents a significant danger to others.”

“But do we really?” I asked, running my hand through my hair to get it out of my face. “Dinah says she is, but if she has another of these, things, connected to her then can we really trust what she says? For all we know these things are competing against one another, using people as the pieces in some sort of fucked up board game and all we’re doing is helping one over another. There’s no one here though! It’s just this huge thing that sits there, doing something without reacting at all!
God damnit, I need answers or something!"

I wanted to throw something in that moment, to break something, but the worry about the connection back to Noelle gave me pause.

Nono was silent for a long moment before she spoke, “Nono can’t say she knows what is going on, but Noelle is a danger and you know that as much as Nono does. You saw those clones, you saw the way she and they acted; neither are stable and if nothing else this parasite gives them the ability to harm others. That must be stopped.”

“You’re right,” I said after taking a few breaths to calm down. “I don’t like not knowing all these things, but whatever else, we really do need to stop her from hurting anyone else. The rest we’ll have to figure out after.”

Still, the point of connection made me wary of attacking it directly, which left me with the only other option being to attack everything else around it.

Energy gathered in the palm of my hand, “Let’s do it.”

With a single swing of my arm, hand stretched out in the universe ‘stop’ signal, the beam shot out. Chunks of the braided strands disintegrated, their ends fraying and unraveling, releasing a thick fluid that expanded in a free floating constellation while beyond more distant nodes shattered explosively as they were struck. Other nodes near those were struck by the expanding clouds of debris and set on collision course with yet other nodes or became tangled in strands.

What had before been calm was quickly become chaotic.

And all of it in complete and utter silence.

The primary node was beginning to drift as well, sinking down relative to me, but had otherwise not reacted to my actions. Would I have even known what a reaction looked like though? I shrugged off the question and shot off another beam; severing more strands and shattering more nodes beyond as well.

Another shot disintegrating swathes of strands. More nodes shattering into storms of cartwheeling debris.

Another. More. Another. The primary node shuddered, and if there had been sound I imagined it would have cried out with a low keening sound. More. The tumor pulsed more urgently and round me subsidiary nodes collided and cracked against one another in a silent symphony of tumbling chaotic violence. Another. More.

The system was well and truly fucked now. Nodes sat gaping open where they’d been hit, revealing glistening interior surfaces of brownish-red material pulse weakly like the shuddering breaths of a dying animal. Torn shreds of connecting strands floated and tangled around themselves or the jagged debris of ruined nodes while a cloud of fluid expanded into the vacuum. Chaos propagated through the system further and further afield as the moments stretched into one another, and it felt as if some element of intelligence that had pervaded the entire structure guttered and died like a car run out of gas. The long tail that had extended down towards the planet below was twisting freely and crumbling in on itself, pulled inexorably away from the greater portion of the structure. Or perhaps pulled towards the greater portion? Might more be hidden down on the planet’s surface, like the roots of the flower I had been comparing it to, ready to re-emerging after I left?
I sighted the tail and released another torrent of shots, guiding them along a curving trajectory so that they impacted in a circle centered on where I predicted the tail would make contact with the ground. The surface erupted in hundreds of flashes of brilliant light that left behind only the steady glow of molten rock. As the heat of my attack bled off from the points of impact the atmosphere of that lifeless world began to glow, flash melting the frozen ice caps of carbon dioxide.

Until now I hadn’t been able to unleash my full powers in any fight, and even now most of my shots hadn’t been at maximum power largely because it wasn’t really necessary. Seeing the kind of destruction I could bring about was heady and frightening. I hoped never to need even a fraction of that power for anything at home.

“Are we done Nono?” I asked, wearied by the sudden weight and responsibility of my power.

“Nearly,” she said. “There is only one last thing to do.”

Turning back to primary node, I swooped in through the nearest gap and coasted to stop in front of the now inert heart. Light still haloed it at the edges. Gripping part of it along a seam, or possibly a vein, I ripped open the exterior to reveal the smooth glossy interior with walls of long fibrous material and at the center…

At the center…

Nothing. Not nothing, but a thing I couldn’t see as every one of my senses told me there was an area of nothing shaped roughly like a sphere with a fifteen centimeter diameter. The entire inner chamber was distorted by it’s presence, shrinking the apparent space.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A collapsed Tannhaeuser gate, like how we got here but more permanent,” Nono answered. “Nono did not realize what it was at first.”

“So,” I asked slowly as I stared at the spot of nothingness. “What do we do with it?”

“Grab it,” she said. “Nono will take care of the rest.”

As I reached out with my right hand I felt the Physical Canceler shift, enabling some other function, and the spot of nothingness turned into a brilliant point of light the second my hand touched it. I stared at the light openly for several moments before the the Physical Canceler adjusted again and the light simply deflated in my hand. With a bright smile, Nono turned to me and said, “That’s it, we can go home now.”

“Okay,” I said lamely, shaking off the wonder of the light and reaching for the Warp Drive again. As I prepared to leave I looked around at the destruction I had wrought and was struck by how little the overall structure had reacted. There’d been no real fight, instead it had been like I was throwing some sort of bizarre tantrum; which left me strangely spent but ultimately left me feeling vaguely guilty.

Even though I knew what to expect the sensations were no less jarring and I was still disoriented as I emerged again into the command center of Coil’s bunker. I couldn’t arrest my momentum quick enough to stop myself from briefly being drive first into the floor and then along it with enough force to create a furrow.

The scene that greeted me as I clambered out of the trench I’d dug in the middle of the room was much the same as I’d left it except for the extra corpses and the further damage that had been done to the room. On one side of the room, in front of the vault, was Noelle and her minions while
facing off against them were two of my drones with Genesis and Sundancer standing behind them. Trickster’s form was held in the tightly coiled tentacle of one of the drones, a piece of dark material wrapped around his head and covering his eyes. From their breathing I could tell they hadn’t stayed on the sidelines so to speak; Genesis’s form was caked in some places with gore and I could see blackened circles where still smoking bodies had fallen to Sundancer’s power.

Between the two sides several dozen bodies lay still, many appeared to be distorted copies of Lung which had to have come from the mitosis Lung I’d seen before my abrupt departure. Others were more monstrous version of him plus a few scattered clones of Ballistic.

The action seemed to have halted with my appearance, or shortly before it. Noelle was beginning to make a keening sort of moan and a second later seemed to lose all sense of balance as she collapsed on top of her enormous legs, swayed unsteadily for a moment and then the bulk of her body flopped over and crashed into the floor. The two remaining Lung clones, one a hulking mishmash of shifting features that made it difficult to even fully comprehend him and the other a bone plated figure dripping with acid from every crack and crevice, stared mutely at their creator before Sundancer’s orb caught up with them and immolated them.

Noelle’s massive body twitched spasmodically causing tearing as the powerful underlying muscles pushed the skin to its limits, all the while she kept up the same miserable moan. I moved towards her slowly, one of my drones pressed closer alongside me. As her more human half came into view the picture of what was happening did not improve, she was covered in a thick sheen of sweat and the lower portion of her body seemed to be attacking her upper half.

With a single mental command the drone surged forward and lowered the bulk of its body over the human portion of hers. A compartment opened and out came a myriad of appendages which promptly activated and set to work on Noelle’s form. First they probed the flesh connect the human portion of her form to the monstrous lower half, searching for an appropriate point at which to separate the two and when that was done it was the quick work of a couple of lasers to actually do so. Then samples were taken, scans done by large limbs which ran themselves across her body, and four arms extended to lift her up into the body of the drone.

“Subject Comatose, neurological activity; high. Diagnosis: unknown autoimmune disorder caused by catastrophic genetic degradation,” the drone said a moment later. “Subject will experience severe organ failure within sixty three hours unless suitable genetic template is located. Recommend familial match be sought immediately.”

“Right,” I said, turning towards her to teammates. “So, anyone know where she’s got family?”

“She doesn’t have any family here. Just us,” Sundancer said as both girls shook their heads at the same time.

“That might not be entirely true,” the Traveler I hadn’t know about before today said as he walked up and watched the other drone moved to search through the remnants of Noelle’s monstrous body for Lung, Ballistic, and the Coil’s Soldiers. Even his voice was unnaturally good sounding. “I’m Oliver by the way. Anyways, the truth is that while it’s true that she has no one here she could really claim as family but that doesn’t mean there isn’t someone who might be able to do the job just as well. I can give you some names, but I don’t actually know how much help they’ll be because, well- it’s complicated.”

“Distant relatives?” I asked, suspicious of the cagey way he’d phrased the statement.

“Not, uh, exactly. We’re not from around here…” He trailed off, his face twisted in obviously conflicted over how much to tell me.
“We’re from, Earth Aleph,” Sundancer said quietly when it was clear the other Traveler wasn’t. “That’s what you call it right, our world- I mean the other world.”

“We suspected as much for quite a while,” another voice announced from off to the side. I whipped my head around to find Legend standing with practically the entire Brockton Bay Protectorate team arrayed behind him. Absent was Armsmaster, and there was no sign of the other two members of the Triumvirate. Maybe trying to distance themselves from any unpleasant experiences I might have had.

“A little late to the party, eh Protectorate?” Trickster interrupted from where he was held by the drone before I could say anything.

Legend smiled graciously, as if he always took lip from villains held in the coiled tentacle of bus sized drones while they rooted through the viscera of parahuman monsters for human bodies. “We would have arrived sooner Trickster, had we known Princess’ drones would not actually fight us.”

“Um,” I started to say as my drone finally found the bodies of Lung, Ballistic, and two mercenaries. All of them were alive and unharmed, though they remained unresponsive. “Those are clones,” here pointing to the bodies spread out across the floor. “Not murder victims. I mean some of them were killed by the mercenaries but that would still be self-defense, I think. The rest, err, just sort of dropped dead.”

Yeah, because awkwardly explaining how they weren’t murdered totally makes it okay and not sound like murder. I wasn’t even sure how I felt about them, I hadn’t actually killed any myself, but given what I’d done I was still responsible for their deaths.

“We are aware,” Legend said tightly though still smiling. So, not really all the friendly, but bent on not antagonizing me anymore; sure he might personally think I was murdering psychopath but at least I was too powerful to him to want to challenge me immediately! I wanted to laugh at the absurdity, or cry. “Tattletale and the gathered mercenaries outside were quite eager to inform us of what to expect inside. Now, perhaps if we might return to the question of who precisely the young woman might be related to the Protectorate would be happy to lend whatever assistance is needed to locate them.”

Nodding in silent agreement I turned toward Oliver, and motioned for him to continue. He cleared his throat nervously and stared wide-eyed at the arrayed heroes for a second, “Right, well her name is Noelle Meinhardt. She and her family lived in Madison, Wisconsin. I’m, uh, not sure about her parents names, though I think her father might have been named Roger?”

“I think that will be plenty to start,” Legend said kindly. “Perhaps you would all like to come with me to help refine the search and positively identify anyone?”

He made it sound like a request, but it was fairly clear they didn’t really have much of a choice unless they wanted to lay themselves at my mercy. Not that that would have actually helped, but they might have tried it.

“That sounds like my cue,” I said. “My drone will go with you, once you find a close enough match it’ll be able to administer the necessary therapies immediately. You can also reach me through it at any time. I’ll be taking Lung and Tattletale with me when I leave, but I’ll leave the mercenaries and-” Coil was gone.

The drone which had held him had no idea where either he or Mr. Pitter had gone, they had been safely tucked away one moment and then the next they were gone with the only clue being several minutes of memory missing from the relevant drone. Had the Protectorate taken him? Why take
before even asking for me to hand him over? It didn’t make sense for the Protectorate to take him, at least from an organizational sense it might still have been a member of the Protectorate acting alone. All of which was useless speculation which would get me nowhere. I was tempted to just ask right out, but then I would have been admitting that I’d also lost him and that wasn’t something I wanted to do.

“-Trickster in your hands.” I finished lamely.

“Lung and Tattletale are both criminals,” Legend said, frowning. “The Protectorate has the facility and resources to contain both of them for their own safety as well as the public’s. I must insist you hand them over.”

“You want to fight me for them?” I snapped, my entire body tensing in anticipation even as I knew it was totally the wrong reaction to have, but I was tense from all the uncertainties and the outright suspicion I felt emanating from Legend and what that might mean for the future.

He sighed wearily, and put his hands up in a placating gesture, “Miss Hebert, neither I nor the Protectorate are your enemy. We all want to ensure the safety and recovery of this city.”

“You’re right, and I’m sorry,” I said, forcing myself to relax. “I don’t want to fight you, any of you, but I would argue that I have good reason to be wary of your organization’s promises,” Sophia, I thought to myself, is a Ward. “I get that you can’t just take my word for it. Tattletale is the one that actually got my attention, she’s part of the reason I’m here, and Lung agreed to help me specifically with this. Handing them over to you to be locked up after that, just doesn’t seem right.”

Shrugging at the end of that statement I turned away, my drone lifted Lung’s still unresponsive body and rose above all our heads, and lifted swiftly into the air. As I was about to follow the form of my drone into the tunnel through which it had originally come Legend called out from behind me, “You are walking a dangerous path Miss Hebert, if you aren’t careful you will alienate those in the Protectorate who would like to be your friend.”

I paused, looking down at him over my shoulder. The implication clearly was that he was included in this so far theoretical group of people who wanted to be my ‘friend,’ given how he’d been acting before I didn’t really believe him. Had I been imagining his suspicion or was he simply trying to keep in the good graces of the threat he saw in front of him?

“I’m not hiding,” I called back as I started to rise back up, turning halfway to face him, “anyone who wants to be my friend is welcome to stop by.”

With the ball firmly back in his court I moved to catch up with my drone, rising into the light of midmorning.

* *

A few days later things had calmed down. Lung had returned to consciousness on the ride back to the warehouse and soon after trudged back towards his home while Glory Girl complained about missing the fight.

“I can’t believe you asked Lung for help in the actual fight and not me,” she groused as we
watched the man in questions trudge off down the street.

“Ask? You think I asked him? He almost screwed everything up by charging in without any sort of idea of what he was facing,” I said indignantly, rounding on her.

“Okay, okay,” she threw her hands up defensively, as she turned to face me. “It’s just, I thought the plan was for us to fight anything big and bad together and then all of a sudden you’ve got me babysitting her and a dozen other assholes.”

“That was the plan, until I found out what we were up against,” I told her apologetically. “You just would have been another distraction, and Lung was bad enough. Besides, I really did need you keeping an eye on them, Tattletale is way too clever for me to leave her with my drones unattended. She didn’t try anything, did she?”

“No,” Glory girl answered simply.

“Hey,” Tattletale interjected at the same time. “I’m standing right here.”

“Did you, or did you not try and keep Coil’s gun?” I asked pointedly.

“A girl’s got to be able to defend herself,” she answered, grinning smugly.

“Does defending yourself included setting off dangerously unstable and frighteningly powerful parahumans? And don’t pretend you’re not the reason Noelle went off the deep end right then and there,” her actions had put the entire world in danger according to Dinah and I wasn’t about to just let that slide. “Because that had your fingerprints all over it.”

Tattletale stared at me for a second before opening her mouth, “I’ll just shut up for now.”

After that we parted ways, Glory Girl flying to to rejoin her sister after reminding me to give Amy a call before she started freaking out. Meanwhile Tattletale stayed with me and Dad at the warehouse, though not in our room of course, and even though I had plenty of questions to ask her I mostly ended up avoiding her. Opting instead to spend the time with my father, when I wasn’t out visiting Amy or monitoring my drones; of course whenever I left I made sure to remind Tattletale that the Protectorate wanted to arrest her. Dad and the other former dockworkers, for their part, accepted their new neighbor with curiosity and a little caution.

The morning of the fourth day after the battle, I was standing outside of the warehouse processing a new section of the current textbook I was working my way through; an astrophysics tome that I was pretty sure in physical form would have weighed as much as I did, when one of my drones informed me that two flying figures were heading into Brockton Bay on a trajectory right for the warehouse.

It was Dragon in one of her suits accompanied by Narwhal, as seemingly naked except for the force fields that covered her body as ever.

Why would the two of them be coming to see me? During the twelve minutes it took them to near me I turned that questions over and over again in my mind and came up with no good answers. As they came in to land out in the street in front of the building I waved to them, mostly for lack of any better ideas of how to greet them. We each walked towards each other, meeting just inside the gate in the fence surrounding the property and proceed to stare at each other for a moment.

“How are you, Miss Hebert?” Dragon asked. She was in a humanoid suit outfitted with shoulder mounted cannons along with a pair of blades meant to extend from just above the wrist and a long barreled rifle strapped across its back. “Or would you prefer to be called Princess?”
Beside her Narwhal was still an imposing and striking figure. The last time I’d seen her had been during the Leviathan fight, and even though my memories were crystal clear there was something different about having her standing there with her eyes focused on me. Light glittered through the force fields that covered her body, turning her into a glowing apparition that seemed more appropriate in some ancient myth than standing in front of the warehouse.

“Honestly?” I asked, to which Dragon nodded. “Right now I just want to be Taylor.”

“Very well,” she said. Meanwhile by her side Narwhal tilted her head and gave me a somewhat disapproving look. I decided to ignore her for now. “Taylor, Narwhal and I are here today to offer you membership in the Guild.”

The Guild? I’d heard of it, even knew Dragon, Narwhal and a half dozen other were on their roster, but honestly I didn’t know too much about it. All I really knew is that the Guild as a group only showed up for big threat, the stuff like Endbringer attacks or Slaughterhouse Nine sightings.

“I’ve already said no to the Protectorate,” I said. “And frankly, I don’t think I want to put myself under anyone else’s command at all. No offense to you guys, I’m sure you’re good people, but I’m just not the ‘follow orders’ kind of girl.”

Narwhal snorted, “Guild’s not about that. It’s about finding the big threats, the real nasty customers that threaten everyone, standing between them and everyone else wherever they are. As equals.”

“Narwhal is correct,” Dragon added. “The Guild is not so concerned with rules, though there are certain by-laws and common-sense restrictions. We are a cooperative of parahumans who have agreed to render aid to one another in times of need, and to organize for the battles with those threats that cause widespread impacts and significant losses of life. We are not looking to put you ‘under our thumb’ so to speak, we’ve come to you because we think you would be both a tremendous asset in the field and also offer a valuable viewpoint for how we approach larger scale solutions.”

What both of them had just described sounded pretty cool, in fact it sounded a lot like exactly what I wanted which made me suspicious almost immediately. My reticence must have shown on my face because the next thing Dragon said was, “Simply consider the offer Taylor, you may accept at a later date if you wish. In truth, the offer was only a part of our purpose in coming here, the other was to ask you explain what exactly happened in your battle a few day ago.”

“Why do you want to know about that?” I asked, even though there was a yawning pit in my stomach that told me I already knew why.

“Because,” Narwhal answered. “Noelle Meinhardt, is no longer a parahuman. Brain scans recovered by the Protectorate from Coil’s base show that she had significant neural activity in both her corona pollentia and gemma just a few days before your fight and now, nothing. Something happened during your fight to ‘turn off’ her powers. We think you can help us figure out what.”

Shit. Telling the two of them to get lost at this point would only make them suspect me ever more, so my only choices were either to come clean or lie through my teeth.

“Alright, come in. I’ll tell you what I know,” I said, careful not to grimace outwardly.

Chapter End Notes
I feel like Noelle gets resolved a little too easily, or that there's not enough payoff for it. As a plot point it works, but I don't feel like I pulled it off very well within the narratively.

Also, Coil disappearing doesn't really work; I was still in large part figuring out how the story was ending and I think I had some idea of using him but I dropped it and the ending changed so that he was no longer necessary. The potential of the the Guild is something I really like but, I'm not sure it really works with how the last Arc works out.
A teeming mass grew unobserved, so far from the sun around which it orbited that the light which reached it was scarcely discernible from the glittery diamonds of the other stars that hung in the void. This particular solar system had already been made the poorer from the swarm’s presence, but there was time still before it was completely fallow; likely longer than it would have to wait before it was called to action, though the swarm knew not when the appointed time would come. Still, by the hour and the minute the uncounted numbers of the swarm swelled higher and higher and would continue to do so until the call to action came from their creator.

The chattering mind, though in truth it was more a great unending communion of minds than a single consciousness, at the center of the swarm did not know it’s exact purpose only that it was meant to fight a new enemy never before encountered by its creator. Already the enemy had demonstrated worrying capabilities and tremendous destructive potential by methods that the creator did not quite understand, but with gleaned information from a brief first exchange the great shoal of the swarm had been fashioned. Many of the individuals which comprised it would be lost in the conflict to come, but that matter nothing to the limited intelligences of the swarm, all that matter was the purpose.

Soon, the swarm would be called.

Then the horde would sweep in on it’s creators wings and strike down the enemy.

Soon.
Dragon paused in thought to my right clad in a hulking four-legged suit designed especially for the situation which she had finished assembling only hours ago, leaving it completely bare except for a hastily applied layer of protective coating. Finally she spoke, “I concur; there is no indication of hostages in the warehouse, the only question left is why they have remained in this location.”

“They’ve always gravitated towards the sites of Endbringer attacks,” Narwhal cut in matter-of-factly, as always covered in literally nothing but the sheen of tiny force fields. Looking anywhere but her face made me feel more than a little uncomfortable, like some creepy perv ogling playboys in the park. That would probably take more than a few days of almost constant contact to go away, I suspected.

“Yes, yes,” and I could practically hear Dragon’s eyes rolling, though she sounded at least a little amused by her teammates deliberate literalness. “Which does not explain why they haven’t actually made their presence known; respect for the grieving and suffering is not a trait I would ascribe to the Slaughterhouse Nine.”

“There’s at least one way to find out,” I said, nodding my head towards the distant point of the warehouse as Narwhal and Dragon both turned their heads, or in Dragon’s case one of her external cameras, in my direction.

“You are sure then, you have confirmed the presence of every member?” Narwhal asked.

My mouth opened silently for moment before I answered her truthfully, “No, I’m sure of everyone but Siberian. Given all the data you gave me, I’m not sure if that’s because she’s not there or because I can’t detect her; still I think we should go forward. I would hate to get this close and have nothing come from it.”

The wind picked up at that moment, and if I’d still been flesh and blood I’m sure it would have cut through the simple jeans and t-shirt I was wearing; as it was all it did was whip my hair around briefly and ruffle my clothes a little. Another moment of silence passed between the three of us, Narwhal standing as imposingly straight backed as she always did, glittering mutely in the overcast morning light while Dragon’s unmoving suit offered no clues as to her own state of mind, at least to everyone but me. A whisper of information passed back and forth between us along a set of lasers; just enough of an exchange to give each of us the sort of subtle emotional cues most people gave off all the time, as neither of us was really comfortable with anything more.

Learning that Dragon understood at least a little of my own situation had been a comfort, though how much we were really alike in that wasn’t clear given how little she’d actually said, not that I could hold that against her given my own track record with being truthful. Still, it had helped me make the decision to accept the offer of Guild membership. Nono was just as eager for the opportunity, though for the time being she remained hidden in Dragon’s presence; it was after all one thing to be someone with what amounted to a full body prosthetic, but sharing said prosthetic with another person? Well who knew how anyone would react to that.

“On that I can agree,” Narwhal said, interrupting my navel gazing and bringing my attention back to the present. “Though I do not like the idea of leaving the Siberian free to wander I prefer six rabid beasts put down than none at all-”
“Seven,” Dragon interrupted. “We know they have recruited since they last struck publicly. It is unfortunate we have so little data on the capabilities of their newest member, caution would seem prudent.”

“Still, even with the new recruit,” the other heroine continued in response to Dragon before nodding her head to me, “Your drones should give us the upper hand in spite of our lower numbers.”

I bobbed my head in agreement at that, in truth the drones were the only reason this was happening at all. Without their fundamental expendability and maneuverability we would have had to bring in a lot more other heroes, which would have been all but impossible to hide from the Slaughterhouse 9, no matter how inattentive they were being. Right now there were fifteen drones holding position a little more than three and a half kilometers above the warehouse, ready to plunge earthward in a screaming dive that have them on the ground in a little over three seconds on my signal.

“Remember, I’ll need to focus on bringing Shatterbird down in the first few seconds,” I said. “With her power she could do a lot of damage to my drones; probably not enough to turn the tables but I don’t want to chance it. That will mean you two will have to deal with the others for at least a few moments, until I can be sure I’ve neutralized Shatterbird’s ability. I mean you’ll have drones with you, but I’ll be distracted at the start.”

“Everyone agreed that was a good idea Princess,” Narwhal said, she was right the basic plan had been worked out not just between the three of us but with the entire Guild. The experience had been heady.

“I know, I know,” I sighed, frustrated. “I guess I’m just nervous.”

“After your Endbringer fight, it surprises me you can still feel nerves-” Narwhal began to say, her face twisted in confusion.

“That was different,” I cut her off. “There was no time for me to think, to come up with a plan or anything, I was just… angry. Even when I was rescuing Dinah Alcott,” and Tattletale, but given her status I thought it best not to mention her. “And I did sort of have a plan, it was still different, everything happened too fast to worry about. This is the first time I’ve had the time to worry.”

“Do you trust that Dragon and I know the plan as well as you?” Narwhal asked, settling her gaze on me.

“Yes, of course,” I said quickly, though that wasn’t entirely true; I didn’t doubt Dragon’s ability to remember the plan in perfect detail, for basically the same reasons I could, but I couldn’t say the same for Narwhal herself. Of course that wasn’t what she was asking.

“Then you must master your fears, steel your nerves and turn them into determination to do the tasks set before you,” Her voice was calm and hard, but not cruel.

“Narwhal, that’s enough. Her feelings are perfectly normal reactions to highly stressful and uncertain circumsta-” Dragon started to say quickly.

“You’re right,” I said, making a point of meeting Narwhals gaze. “None of us have the luxury of feeling doubt, not when we’ve been given so much power unasked,” and frankly undeserved. “I made my choice already, so it’s time to follow through and deal with whatever happens.”

It really was time to stop dawdling and get down to business, in more ways than just dealin with the Slaughterhouse 9; I’d been holding back on so much because I was afraid of responsibility that
had been given to me. What if I’d gone after Coil sooner, how much pain could I have saved Noelle, Dinah, and perhaps countless others? Or what if I’d started going after the other gangs more seriously how many lives could I have saved or improved? I knew I had the power to make things massively better in a lot of ways, and I couldn’t keep hiding behind the fear of screwing things up; it wasn’t like anyone else was doing much better really.

First though the three of us had something to take care of.

“I’m ready then,” I said, taking a deep breath. “You guys?”

*  

*  

The world blurred momentarily as I fell towards the warehouse, the distinct outline of the figure I’d identified as Shatterbird continued to float alone several meters above the ground even as it grew from a figurine in miniature to life-sized. Seconds behind me three of my drones also dove towards the earth; each held one of their tentacles tightly against their underside while the others extended behind them. Those three tentacles contained a material much like the PRT’s Containment Foam, having in fact the same basic chemical structure with the small addition of absorbing those frequencies in the range Shatterbird had been observed using. Hopefully that would be sufficient to neutralize her long enough.

The corrugated metal roof of the warehouse gave way beneath my feet instantly, popping like a metal blister. Almost directly below me was Shatterbird, her costume of glass shards reflecting the morning light while yet more swirled around her in deadly constellation. Her head whipped up towards me at my entrance and I felt the pressure of a couple of shards brushing against me in passing. A small piece shattered against my cheek as I came to stop level with her eyeline.

A look of confusion passed over her face, half hidden behind the multi-colored panes of her ‘helmet,’ before turning into something that might have been a grin or an expression of anger. Her eyes narrowed as her mouth opened and she began to draw in a breath.

I slapped at her with my right hand, forcing her to pause as she flinched out of the way and then attempted to put some space between us. A trio of light impacts reverberated on the building roof, signalling the arrival of my drones, with their size they would have risked bringing the whole warehouse down if they’d tried to repeat my entrance. Glass spun faster and faster around Shatterbird in a swirling cyclone and she once again opened her mouth, presumably to create more ammunition seeing as her arsenal was already slightly diminished. I shot forward, barreling through the cloud of glass between us and slapping her again, this time she wasn’t able to dodge quick enough and the ball of putty like material in my hand adhered instantly to the left side of her face. A loud crash echoed behind me as part of the roof came away and hit the ground.

The grayish adhesive polymer already covered most of the lower half of her face, but a quarter of her mouth remained free. As Shatterbird took in the situation, a look of pure hatred contorting her face as she locked eyes with me, she opened the still free portion of her mouth and began to scream. It lasted for perhaps half a second before it was cut off by the impact of the modified containment foam, more followed and soon enough the murderer was covered practically head to toe. The mass of stuff that I’d applied to her face would provide half an hour’s worth of oxygen to her, according to Dragon, which should be plenty of time to deal with the rest of her friends. Then
Again, if it wasn’t, who would miss her exactly?

As panic set in, the fingers of her still exposed right hand scratched and tore at the foam to no avail while her feet kicked comically in vain, her foam encased body fell only to be caught by one of my drones. Unfortunately that single instant of her scream had caught the leading drone, several of it’s tentacles hung limply at its side and it was settling nearer and nearer to the ground.

Even with so little time she had managed to do what appeared to be nearly catastrophic damage, it seemed a small miracle that I hadn’t been more severely damaged. I watched one of it’s tentacles twitch erratically, and I could practically feel the drone trying repair itself, but it was too late for that.

Damn it.

The drone was useless now, without its full capabilities it would only serve as a distraction in the fights ahead; pulling my attention away from guiding my fully functional drones. Better to destroy it completely and move on. Best thing to do was put it down, like a pet that had gone rabid.

I dropped down in front of the drone and drove my fist right through faceplate into the computing core of the drone, rendering it essentially brain dead.

Or at least that was what I’d planned to do, my fist had instead stopped halfway through the motion and, now I was just frozen in position, unable to move so much as a muscle as the drone stared on, uncomprehendingly. A second later I felt my body relax and let out a sigh of relief. When this was over I would have to ask Nono about that, maybe there’d been some sort of software glitch; that would definitely have to be fixed.

I punched through the-

Nothing happened.

What? What the fuck?

I still couldn’t move, though I could feel every inch of my body and its utter refusal to obey. Something was seriously wrong. Could this be the power of the unidentified new member of the Slaughterhouse Nine? Or maybe some new Bonesaw concoction? The latter seemed unlikely, my body wasn’t organic enough anymore to be really affected by biological pathogens. Oh god, what if this was happening to Dragon and Narwhal too?! I’d led them to their deaths.

Wait, the drones, I should still be able to control the drones even if I couldn’t control my own body. I tried to reach out to the network of drones and came up empty; where before there’d been this low level constant murmur just at the edge of my attention that could turn into a well organized steady stream of status reports and queries for orders in an instant, now there was nothing. I was trapped and alone.

The drones right in front of my sprang into action, the crippled drone flickering out of my view. Something was certainly giving them orders, but what? I felt my own mouth open and heard my own voice speak into the open link to the others.

“Shatterbird is down,” my own voice said. “And I think I know what the newest additions’ power is; some form of emotion manipulation. I’m counteracting it, but I’m not sure on the reach of their power so you two might retreat momentarily, until I can find them.”

I hadn’t wanted to say any of that, all I wanted to do right now was scream obscenities. Why wasn’t my body responding to me? Could it be the new recruit, were they manipulating me somehow? I
struggled against the invisible walls of my prison, trying desperately to grasp something that I could use to warn the others; tell them not to trust whatever my voice told them, but it was like beating against the sea.

There was a moment’s pause on the other end before Dragon answered, “I have safeguards in place against this sort of attack, I can help. Narwhal is retreating.”

A strained grunt signalled Narwhal’s confirmation, at least whoever it was had only been able to get one of them away. I just needed to figure out how to get back in control, Nono should know how to combat something like this but she was notably absent and that only made things- Nono was gone.

It was her.

“Got it,” my voice responded. “I’m sending a couple more drones your way, they should join you by the time you’re on site.”

“Understood, Princess.” Dragon said blithely.

NO! I screamed silently. She’s betrayed you, betrayed us all!

I didn’t know why she’d chosen to wait until now, whether she’d simply decided I wasn’t good enough, or if she just wanted all the glory for herself, or if she just thought she could get away with it now, but Nono had stolen my body. There was little hope of Dragon or Narwhal really noticing the difference, they barely knew me, and even if they did what could the really do?

Simply put, they couldn’t hope to stop her.

I was the only one who had any chance of making sure whatever Nono had planned didn’t happen.

Of course that was no chance at all really. At every turn I’d needed her help to figure out my new body, needed her help to make the full use of my powers; it had always really been her in charge. I was just dumb old Taylor; too chicken shit to stand up to a bunch of high school kids, too stupid to figure out Sophia was a Ward, and too afraid to be honest with the people who cared about me.

Would things really be so bad if I just disappeared and Nono replaced me? If she did a good enough job Dad would never notice, might even be happier to have someone who could smile and laugh and not feel like a fraud. I would just disappear, it wouldn’t even be painful for me, I could just be gone and if heaven were a real thing I could see Mom again.

Ha! Right, cause I’ve done so much to deserve an eternal paradise -

We’d moved to another part of the warehousing complex, into a dark sort of basement off to one side that smelled and looked musty; like the cardboard box of old magazines I’d found in the basement when I was eleven and very carefully not looked at. I knew it had only been a few moments since I’d last payed attention, enough time for Dragon to enter the warehouse and start fighting Mannequin and for Nono to begin locating the Slaughterhouse Nine member hiding with the immobile shape of Crawler.

We were not alone with them. Standing across from us was Jack Slash himself, looking well put together and way too confident for my liking; evil shouldn’t get too look as good as he did.

“I must say, it is a rare pleasure to be able to play host to royalty,” He said, the arrogance of the inherent joke grating on me.

Nono ignored him and focused on the dimly recognizable form of what we’d earlier identified as
Crawler, moving closer to try and identify the parahuman hidden in his shadow. The brute was thoroughly unrecognizable, if it was him, and very clearly immobile which at least partly explained why they hadn’t moved already. It was weird to think of a group of monster like the Slaughterhouse 9 having anything resembling loyalty to one another. Something had caused the parahuman to adapt into an essentially unmoving slab of hardened flesh; though from the way some of him, it, whatever, was bulging out grotesquely it looked like the others had been trying solve the problem.

“Though the hour of your calling and the company you’re keeping, well; they aren’t the sort a girl like yourself should be associating with.” Jack Slash admonished, wagging his figure in a disturbingly fatherly way.

Nono continued to ignore him as she as she looked for the other parahuman, the form of Crawler shuddered and groaned, then started twisting as if it sensed our presence and wanted to get at us. Where were the drones? She had to know better than to think she could contain all three of them alone.

“Once this is all sorted out,” He continued, dropping his voice to a silky quiet tone. “We’ll take a trip, just you and I, I simply must meet your family.”

I bristled. So he thought he could beat me? Fuck that, I wasn’t letting the psycho anywhere near Dad or my city. All I had to do was reach out and take him by that stupid neck he was so attached to and squeeze, it wouldn’t even have to be hard, then the world would be rid of another monster. My body still wouldn’t respond to me, why was Nono doing this?! We could end this now, for good. Had all her talk of helping people, of being a hero and making the world a better place been nothing but hollow lies? Did she have some ulterior motive all along, and if so, then what was it and how did the Slaughterhouse 9 figure into it? I couldn’t figure out what possible angle she could be working, letting me piss off the Protectorate and join the Guild and reveal my identity didn’t exactly strike me as the way towards world domination.

“You can introduce me to all your friends and family, I promise we’ll have the time of our lives.” Jack Slash said, as Nono continued to pay him exactly zero apparent attention. For an instant his brow furrowed, and his limbs jerked half into motion before stopping and he seemed at something of a loss.

Maybe Nono had simply gotten tired of sharing. What had I ever offered her anyways, it wasn’t as if I had really understood the cape scene before she’d come along and I didn’t buy that she couldn’t figure out everything herself anyways so what had I been? A smokescreen, a protection against the petty fears of the world?

No, I couldn’t blame her really for not being sure of how accepting people would be. Would it really be so bad to just be along for the ride, let Nono take charge and just sit back? I’d done some good already after all and I’d gotten a taste of the power Nono really had, enough to make me wary of trusting myself with it. So yeah, I could live like this, could live with being jus-

A drone crashed through the ceiling suddenly, practically on top of the immobile form of Crawler. Jack scrambled for cover, ducking behind a rusting steel pillar, but the drone similarly ignored him and curled two tentacles around a figure which had been hiding in Crawlers sizeable shadow. Just as quickly as it had arrived, the drone was gone with its new cargo in tow. Something slackened and it was like blood was rushing back into my limbs, sending prickly little pins and needles cascading across my skin, like my entire body had gone to sleep. My feet were in motion almost before I’d completed the thought to go after Jack, we were was close enough to each other that he shouldn’t have had time to react. Somehow though he had starting to duck as I rounded the pillar,
he wasn’t nearly fast enough though and my hand was on his throat easily in an instant and I’d pushed him up against the pillar. I squeeze.

“Taylor,” Nono whispered in my ear. “Nono is sorry about what she had to do, but your mind was not your own. Breath and think, you do not want to kill this man; that girl was manipulating your emotions, attempting to control you.”

The pressure I was applying was only slight, not enough to actually choke, but still he should have been struggling for air more than he was. Something not fleshy was keeping his airway open. Huh. I could still kill him though, whatever it was that was keeping him breathing wasn’t strong enough to stand up to me, but Nono was right.

“Not like anyone would actually miss the piece of shit,” I muttered, but Nono already knew I’d decided not kill him, as satisfying as it might have been. She was also right about the emotional manipulation, I was already feeling more in control of myself and looking back on the last few minutes I couldn’t help but think of my thoughts as disorganized, erratic, and frankly inconsistent. It was embarrassing to say the least.

Rather than dwelling on it, I reached out to Narwhal and Dragon, “The emotional manipulator has been neutralized for the time being; you should be clear to move in, Narwhal.”

“Acknowledged,” Narwhal answered, her voice tinged with the frustration of being kept out of the action thus far.

Dragon’s voice cut in a second later, “I have sustained minor damage, but have engaged Mannequin and Burnscar.”

Through the eyes of the drones with her I could see that the damage was a little more than ‘minor;’ the protective coating on the right front side of her suit had been blasted away and the armor underneath warped by heat, there were also two long blades jammed in near the hip joint of her rear leg which meant she didn’t have full mobility. Still, she had the situation mostly under control, especially with three of my drones helping. Unfortunately Mannequin and Burnscar were proving more difficult to contain, the tinker had made some alterations to his form since he’d last been observed and so the constituent parts that made him up were proving remarkably difficult for the drones to get a grip on, while Burnscar simply disappeared whenever they got ahold of her.

The real problem was that the drones weren’t really equipped to deal with fires; at least not at the intensity of these and certainly not at the same time as they helped to keep two extraordinarily dangerous parahumans from escaping. With more drones it wouldn’t be an issue, but the others were needed to back up Narwhal and to keep watch for the Siberian.

“Shatterbird, Crawler, Jack Slash and whoever the newbie was are all… uh out of the action,” I continued, ignoring the long searching look Jack was now giving me. Not the sort of attention I ever wanted from the opposite sex, that was for sure not least because I was fairly sure he was imagining what I would look like all cut up. “Still no sign of the Siberian, but… no, wait, Bonesaw’s gone now too.”

Shit. That was definitely not good. I pinged all the drones in the area, but there was nothing to indicate where she’d disappeared to.

“Shit,” Narwhal swore, stopping midair so fast I could practically hear the screech of brakes, “Can’t let her into the more populated areas. Point me to her and I’ll bring her down.”

“No, I mean she’s gone off my sensors,” I said quickly. “Somehow she’s masked her body heat to
the point that I can’t find her. ”

“I’ll find her,” Narwhal promised, dropping away from her attendant drones. They followed easily, joining her on the ground as she began to search for the errant villainess.

“Okay, I’ll try and get something out of Jack,” I told her, turning my gaze on the man in question, he’d remained remarkably quiet throughout the entire exchange. He didn’t seemed bothered by our talking about his team, or at least what he heard from me didn’t seem to have caused any sort of outward reaction.

Now I just had to figure out how to make the leader of Slaughterhouse 9, who somehow managed to keep some of the most unstable and dangerous monsters in line, talk to me and give away information he undoubtedly didn’t want to. I almost wanted to be back fighting Leviathan, at least then I knew that hitting it enough would make it go away.

“Princess,” Dragon interrupted before I could even open my mouth to start asking him questions. “Would you be willing to give me command access to your drones, temporarily? It would certainly increase tactical effectiveness if I could more precisely coordinate attacks.”

I hesitated.

Oh hell, it wasn’t like she could actually take over one of the drones, so I sent a command to them that unless one of her orders endangered either civilians, or Dragon herself they should be followed. I felt the handshake protocols begin between the drones and Dragon’s system for a moment and then pushed it away and turned my attention back to Jack Slash.

He was still staring at me, more composed than I would have liked him to be all things considered. It didn’t exactly bode well for my chances to get him to spill the beans, so to speak, if he was acting this calm and collected when I had my hand around his throat and had been holding with one hand for the last few moments.

“Nothing to say?” I asked, he raised a single eyebrow in response. “Some threats? Maybe try some clever rhetoric? Even begging would make more sense.”

He opened his mouth briefly, then shut it again for a moment before he finally did speak, “It is just that I am trying to figure out what your are doing here, my dear. Oh I don’t mean, here right now, that is most certainly clear enough, but why you are even bothering with the charade of needing our dear friends in the Guild.”

“Curious huh? How about we play a game then,” I said quickly, seeing what might be my only chance at getting him to talk. “Why don’t you tell me where Bonesaw and the Siberian are and maybe I’ll think about your question.”

He ignored my question, didn’t even seem to be listening even as he continued to watch me, “You did not need the Guild’s support to come here and win, and yet here they are. A ruse to make the world think you less a threat than you are. Just as you gave yourself such a masterfully disarming moniker; for who expects a sweet delicate princess to bring such ruin? I suppose the world has forgotten Helen of Troy.”

Well, having him say it made it a lot creepier than it had been at the time; of course with the name it had all been a horrifying accident. I’d felt that flash of emotion from Nono, felt the admiration she had for this other person, the way Nono’s image of her in my head had screamed ‘Hero! Hero!’ and then I’d just sort of blurted it out. Definitely not my proudest moment and once it was out there, it had felt all but impossible to change it.
“That’s not an answer to my question,” Why the fuck was I letting him get to me? He was clearly stalling for something, though I couldn’t imagine what he thought could turn the tables; maybe he didn’t think I was as powerful as his little speech had made out.

Something Bonesaw had cooked up, or maybe the Siberian? If the Siberian attacked right now though, he was in as much danger as I was; and Tattletale had been pretty confident that she couldn’t discriminate that precisely from friend or foe, if her attack had to go through Jack to get me it would. I pressed Jack more firmly against the steel pillar and squeezed just enough to make it uncomfortable.

“Bonesaw, Siberian. Tell me where they are, or we’re done,” I squeezed a little extra hard on the last syllable, just for emphasis.

Not enough to do any actual lasting damage. Probably.

“It’s too late anyways,” he choked out through a somewhat strained smile.

“What have you done?” I asked, pressing closer. The extra drones I’d called in had touched down seconds ago in the surroundings, already spreading out in search of signs of either of the remaining members of the nine as I ordered the to begin taking samples of the soil, air, and water. God damnit, I should have been more prepared to deal with Bonesaw; I’d thought covering the perimeter would be enough to keep her penned in until we could take care of the more pressing combatants No who knew how many innocents would pay for that mistake.

“They already fear you, what you’ll do, how you’ll change the world,” he continued as if I hadn’t said anything. “They’re afraid of change. So scared of losing their tenuous grasps on ‘normal’ that they won’t even contemplate the world you imagine. I can see it, how much you want to transform this small, petty world into something so much better, grander, but you won’t be able to do it like this-”

“Oh, SHUT UP!” He was just stalling, hoping for something that would give him a chance to escape, to wriggle free and keep on living. There was no secret plan, no contingency for his capture; just the desperate flailings of man drowning, looking for anything to grab hold of.

Well I wouldn’t let him distract me any longer. I turned away from the pillar and back towards the still immobile form of Crawler, I flung him towards the hole where the last drone had come through and listened to the satisfying whump he made on impact. Another drone was already scooping him up before he caught his breath enough to speak.

“The only language they understand is death, destruction, and chaos! The world was never changed peacefully!” He called out as the tentacles hoisted him up towards the surface and captivity.

I stopped the drone, let Jack hang there limply for a few seconds before I floated up to stare him in the eye. More and more it struck me how utterly pathetic he was; nothing more than another fucked up person with more damage than they knew what to do with and far too much power than was good for anyone.

“You are going to rot away in some hole while I undo every bit of evil you ever did in the world,” I snarled, and as I stared into his eyes I saw that he really wasn’t anything more than a bigger, badder Sophia. “Until no one even remembers you even existed. Really all that’s left for you is, to get lost.”

Jack started to say something, but before he could more than open his mouth the drone had yanked
him up and away. With luck, I would never have to seem him again.

Now I had to finish the rest of what I’d started.

*

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An hour and half later I returned to Brockton Bay more than a little disappointed, we’d never found the Siberian or Bonesaw and that was worrying; either of them alone was a nightmare, but if they were out there together I didn’t want to think about the deaths they could cause. Still, six monsters in one day was good and I couldn’t afford to ignore the other things I had to do when I didn’t even know where to begin finding the remaining two. Until some clue turned up I had city and more to worry about.

The city had changed a lot in the short time my drones had been active; utilities had already been restored to the entire city and new buildings were already starting to go up here and there, some with the help of drones and some not. Nothing was complete yet except for a single large dome made of the same material as my drones in the old boat graveyard, which was my headquarters. It was as tall as a five-story building, reaching up past all of the few remaining hulks of old ships which would soon enough be repurposed into building materials. An iris at the apex of the dome opened as I approached, admitting me into the interior. The inside was a hollow sphere with catwalks crisscrossing in a hatchwork pattern all the way down and dangling between those catwalks were cables as thick around as my entire body, off of which glowing baubles grew in ascending size. The baubles at the top contained the unmistakeable shape of a new drone, it would be done in another fourteen minutes.

I touched down on the nearest catwalk, running my hand along the warm cocoons as I passed by on my way to the only other immediately visible structure of significance inside the sphere; a bulbous protrusion three stories tall centered at the equator and extending one hundred and twenty degrees along the circle. To get to it I had to drop down two more levels.

The inside was almost startlingly normal, if the windows hadn’t looked back out onto the main chamber it would have appeared to be a normal, though well furnished and strangely shaped, apartment. Waiting for me inside was Tattletale.

“Hey, Boss,” she said mockingly as I came in, not looking up from the computer screen he was intently examining. “You girlfriend was by.”

I rolled my eyes as that, she usually only did that in front of Amy herself, mostly because I’d decided very quickly to ignore everything she said that wasn’t directly answering a question I’d asked. And even still there were days I wanted to hand her over to the Protector and just be rid of her, for someone with her ability it was remarkable how much she managed to piss people off. Coming up behind her I saw she was looking at the footage and sensor data from Coil’s disappearance, though this time it was from one of the drones farther away.

“Anything new?” I asked and she started shaking her head immediately.

“No, one second there Coil is; nice and snug and the next he’s gone. Poof. All the data missing,” she gestured to the images on screen and sure enough I saw Coil disappear from where he was and
the timestamp skip forward. “Assuming it wasn’t you, or your special head-guest, it looks like someone else has got an all access pass to your little drone party, not a happy thought.”

“Definitely not,” I agreed. It was frustrating to not know how and who had spirited Coil away from me, and the worry about what that person might be able to do with control over one or more of my drones had almost made me stop production, but Nono and I had introduced some safety measures that should present a nasty surprise if whoever it was tried again. “What about Bonesaw and the Siberian, any clue?”

“From the way Jack reacted I’m pretty sure the naked cannibal wasn’t ever there, or at least she had been missing for some time before you arrived,” she said, leaning back and looking away from the screen, sweeping her blond hair up and away from her face. “Bonesaw was definitely there though, her little setup had been used recently when Narwhal found it, just missed her by four and a half minutes. I’m not sure yet what she did exactly, yet.”

“Okay,” I said, confident that she would turn up something and I could be on both their trails soon enough.

In the meantime, it was time to get back to work.

Chapter End Notes

I think, ultimately, this could have used some more build up, maybe another chapter before this leading in to it, but I think at this point I was more anxious to get the story over with. Again I don’t think the Coil stuff really works, it’s a story thread that basically gets completely dropped and I could have almost completely excised it without any real problems; I think probably around here is when I realized I didn’t want to take the time to actually do whatever it is I was going to do with him/Cauldron.
I dodged a gout of flame, twisting in midair as the flames flicked past me to light up the early morning light. More followed on the tail end of it, but instead of avoiding it this time I let it wash over me and followed it back to its source; as the display of pyrotechnic power began to die I burst out of its trailing end swinging my fist. Lung let out a roar as it connected, shattering metallic scales and sending shattered fragments tinkling across the partially melted and smoking asphalt. He kept going, moving with the force of my blow, pirouetting on his left, and whipping the mass of his meaty tail into my exposed side; I tumbled in the air for several yards before righting myself. Lung chuckled viciously as he gathered more flames around his body, wreathing himself in a shimmering corona of blistering heat. The ground around him began to hiss and crack as he bore down on me. I darted out of the way of his first swing, shooting back and up until I was out of reach of all but his fire; with my new vantage point I could see the tell tale bulges at his shoulder blades where his wings were beginning to form. I’d never seen if they would actually let him fly. We each stood there eyeing each other for several seconds, the protrusions of his emerging wings quickly growing with each passing moment. It was getting time for this to end. Lung released an impressively large blast of white-hot flame in my direction, and I burst up over it just in time to catch him launching himself up into the air on the force of tremendous blast concentrated around his feet. He soared over my briefly, arcing perfectly to collide with me if I didn’t dodge at all; unfortunately for him he didn’t have enough speed to catch me, and so I easily dodged out of the way by simply moving to my right. Which would have worked out nicely if he hadn’t immediately produced another, more controlled, burst to fling himself right into me. The fire that still surrounded him engulfed me as he hit me from the left, wrapping his arms around me in a massive and suffocating bear hug. Yet another explosion rocketed us into the ground, which from the heat was quickly turning into a sticky puddle of tar. He had me pinned pretty nicely, and against a lot of other capes that probably would have been enough to end the fight, but I wasn’t exactly like other capes. All I needed to do was- someone was standing at the edge of our impromptu arena my enhanced senses informed me.

“Stop,” I said quickly.

Lung eyed me suspiciously, but obliged all the same; killing the fires covering his body. The air in the immediate vicinity still shimmered with heat, but I could already sense the ground beginning to cool down and solidify once again. I thrust my head in the direction of where the person was, and after a moment he looked over and caught sight of them himself. He grunted once, disgruntled and released me; standing up and taking several steps away. It would take several moments before his powers acknowledged that the fight was over and began to return him to normal, and it apparently went quicker if he wasn’t distracted so I turned my attention fully towards the new arrival. Amy stared back at me, her face a mixture of concern and irritation, though currently the concern seemed to be winning out. Considering the heat, and with Lung as an obvious source of that unease, I decided to make my way over to her rather try and have her get any closer. Not that she was making any movement closer anyways.

I waved as I jogged over towards her, “Amy, hey!”
She frowned as I came to a stop in front of her, looking over my shoulder to where Lung still stood in his inhuman form and then looking back at me, and then simply saying, “You’ve been avoiding me.”

“Uhh what,” I stammered in response, taken aback slightly, “No.”

“How come every time I stop by, or I call you’re not here or you’re strangely busy, then?” She asked sharply, crossing her arms and boring down on me with her eyes. I found that more intimidating than Lung, Legend, or attacking Coil’s base. “And you have that… girl, and Lung running around here like they own the place.”

“I mean they’re both staying here because I can’t keep an eye on them anywhere else, and I don’t trust either of them to be on their own,” I told her. “And I have been busy; joining something like The Guild involves a little more than saying yes when they ask, apparently.”

“That’s the other thing!” She shouted, her voice tinged with a bit of frantic emotion. “You just… you just up and decided to join the Guild, without talking to me? I thought we were friends, friends are supposed to talk about big decisions, aren’t they?”

Shit. Talking to her about it hadn’t even crossed my mind, hell I’d barely discussed it with Dad before I’d said yes. Should I have asked her? Had I made a mistake? Amy had been doing this Cape stuff for a lot longer than I had, practically her entire life, she had to know more than I did.

“Oh man, I didn’t even think about you. I just- “ I spat out, the sentence dying in my throat as I saw her face just, fall. FUCK. Fuck, fuck, fuck. How is it that I somehow always end up saying the exact wrong thing? “Shit, Amy, that came out wrong. I barely even talked to my Dad about it, their offer sounded too good say no.”

Her arms were still crossed, and virtually nothing about the rest of her posture had changed; but instead of intimidating Amy just looked small to me now. Coming from the emotional high of joining the Guild and taking out most of the Slaughterhouse Nine, this made me feel lower than the mushed remnants of dogshit you wipe off your shoe. It would be a miracle if Amy wanted to ever see me again after today, much less stay my friend.

“I- What I mean is that- No, look, I’m really bad at this whole being friends thing,” I finally said, pushing my right hand through my hair anxiously. “I told you about the girl who used to be my best friend, the one who caused my- you know, and how she made my life miserable. Well, I guess I’m just really out of practice with all this friendship stuff, so please don’t take it too personally that I screwed up. I didn’t mean to ignore you, or abandon you, or anything like that, it’s just that I sort of forgot that there was anyone besides my dad that would, you know, care.”

“Taylor… that’s not what, I mean, I didn’t mean- ,” Amy started to say, before giving up.

Silence stretched between us as she took a couple of shaky breaths and stared off into the distance. Amy looked back at me for a moment and her mouth worked several times, like she was trying to physically push out the words, before she gave up on that too and just started crying. It wasn’t as dramatic as a loud wail, there weren’t rivers of tears streaming down her face or anything. Instead it was the kind of crying where you’re trying to hold back from making a big display which somehow makes it just as obvious.

Perfect, good work Taylor , I thought to myself. What did you say to her this time?

“Ah, no, shit,” I said, completely lost for what else to say. I took a step towards her, one hand outstretched, ready to offer a lame pat on the back in a paltry attempt at comforting her.
She shook her head for a moment, more seemingly to clear her head than anything else, and then wiped at her eyes a few times before looking back at me and asking, “Can we talk somewhere more private?”

On the last word she nodding towards Lung and I turned my head to catch a glimpse of his already reduced form behind me; he was definitely too far to be eavesdropping on our conversation. Even if he hadn’t been I somehow doubted that emotional teenage girls was very high on his list of interests, but still if she wanted somewhere more private I couldn’t exactly fault her for that. I knew I didn’t particularly like crying out in the open for everyone to see.

“Sure, uh,” Of course finding somewhere more private was easier said than done, I hadn’t exactly built the dome for privacy, most of it was meant more for my drones than people. Still there were a few spaces I could think of, so I picked the closest one. “Follow me.”

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Tertiary maintenance bay 07-C was mostly bare; maintaining the things Buster Corps meant a much more esoteric set of tools than someone from the 21st century would imagine, even by the standards set by Tinkers. A trio of articulate arms, taller than Lung in his human form, rose out of large depression in the center of the rectangular room. There was nowhere to sit, but then that was true for most of the facility except for the living areas where Tattletale currently was and since Amy said she wanted privacy those were no goes.

“I know it’s not exactly comfortable, but…” I shrugged, unsure of what else to say to her.

“No, no, this is great.” She said quietly, eyes now dry and red. “No one will come in here, right?”

“We won’t be interrupted; neither Lung nor Tattletale have any sort of reason to come down here and I’ll know if anyone else approaches.” What exactly could she have to tell me that had her so worried. Some sort of secret she’d learned from being in New Wave, but about what? Did New Wave have some sort of dirt on The Protectorate, or maybe it was something about New Wave itself? Why tell me though, and why had she gotten so emotional about it before?

“I love you,” Amy blurted out, grinding my thoughts to a halt.


“It’s just a stupid crush really,” she continued, talking over my own reaction as if she hadn’t even heard me. Going by the wild look in her eyes, she might not have, actually. “For years I’ve been… well, I’ve been in love with Victoria; I always knew nothing would ever happen, even if she didn’t think of me as her sister she’s as straight as they come. Honestly, I was more than a little obsessed for a few years, I used to sneak peeks at her when she’d get dressed in the morning. God, I was a real creep.”

Why was she telling me this. I really didn’t know what to say, did she want me to tell her it was alright; that she hadn’t done anything wrong? Truth was, I did kind of find what she’d just said all sorts of creepy so it was good that she didn’t pause to give me any kind of opening to comment.

“Then you came along, so much like her but so very different at the same time,” I had to make a
conscious effort not to look down at my body at that. “All about charging into the middle of the action, punching first but never using more than exactly how much power you had to. And you were safe; weren’t part of the family, and I could touch you without being suddenly aware of what every cell in your body was doing. When I touched you that first time in the bank, it was like… I actually don’t know what it was like, I don’t really have anything to compare it to, but it was amazing. Liking you was so much easier than liking than Victoria.”

By this point Amy’s entire face as a furious mask of crimson, it was clear she wasn’t really comfortable talking about all of this, but she had kept powering through anyways. I wasn’t sure I could have done the same in her position.

“That’s very- I mean,” I started to say now that she’d stopped and there was an opportunity for me to respond. “Actually I don’t know what I mean. I know I’m not exactly Victoria,” I gesture to my body. “So, I’m flattered?”

“Oh no!” She exclaimed suddenly, her eyes getting comically wide as some of the color seem to drain from her face. “I didn’t mean it like that! You have a great bo-”

She stopped immediately, skin suddenly flaring up again at least a couple of shades redder this time as she slapped both hands over her mouth. I cringed, my crappy joke had not done anything to make things better. *Note to self; do not try stand up*, I thought to myself.

“Bad joke,” I said quickly. “But, um, I’m very flattered that you, uh, feel that way. You know what I’m straight too, right?”

Amy nodded, of course now that I thought about it; I’d only ever had a couple crushed on guys, which was still more than the grand total of zero I’d had on girls.

“Okay,” I said. “Besides, I don’t know if I’d be any good in any sort of relationship anyways.”

“Oh, I wasn’t trying to… you know get you or anything. Not that I wouldn’t like that!” Amy said, adding the last part quickly. “I just wanted to explain why I reacted the way I did to… stuff, let you know that it wasn’t your fault or anything. Even without all this stuff, I’ve been feeling a little… frayed for a while, you know why.”

I nodded, remembering that first phone call. She’d talked about being stressed and unhappy, but since then she’d always struck me as being very in control and so I’d mostly forgotten about it despite the little references she occasionally made. Not exactly the best show of friendship; sure I could make the excuse that I’d had a lot on my mind, but just thinking about it made me feel shitty all over again.

“I-” Apologizing again seem no better than useless; what did it matter if I was sorry for being a bad friend? “I don’t blame you, I can’t. Handling things well isn’t exactly my specialty either.”

I wasn’t sure if it was possible to think that going out and fighting criminals and bad guys in a costume was a good idea and still get described as ‘handling things well’. When you thought about it, Capes a whole weren’t what most people would call well adjusted.

“Thank you,” Amy said, letting out what sounded like a heartfelt sigh. “That really means a lot, still I am sorry for blowing up at you. Both times. Also thanks for not freaking out over the whole crush thing; my heart felt like it was going to beat right out of my chest when I said that.”

Her hands were shaking slightly and if I took a moment to focus, I could hear the hammering of her heart and wasn’t that weird all on it’s own.
“Don’t be,” I said. “I mean; don’t be sorry, I’m pretty sure I deserved it, no matter how messed up you think you are I really did screw up I think. And, uh, as for the other thing… um, well I don’t know that I actually believe you.”

Even as I said it sounded like the wrong thing to say to her, and indeed her face contorted in confusion tinged with a hint of hurt.

“Err,” I continue quickly. “What I mean is that I’m not really sure how to process it yet, it’s just another fact to me at the moment. Like the sky is blue, water is wet, and you get super powers by having the worst day of your life.”

Amy stared at me for a few moments longer before finally nodding.

“Okay, I can kind of get that and like I said before; I didn’t tell you so that you would suddenly fall into my arms,” she said smilingly wryly and simultaneously rolling her eyes. “I’m not even sure I actually want to… you know, date you. Not because you’re not great and all, it’s just I’m pretty sure I need to get my head on straight before I saddle anyone else with my baggage.”

“Was the pun intentional, or…” I asked, causing Amy to give me a curious look for a moment before she burst out laughing.

Her laughing set me off as well, in that sort of awkward, cliche, infectious laugh you always seen in movies; half nervous pressure relief and half slightly unhinged. Part of it for me was that the idea of the pun was so far removed from the tension of the conversation we’d been having and I suspected that part of what caused her reaction was a sense of relief that maybe whatever feelings she had weren’t as world ending as they’d felt before. Almost normal in comparison to other things.

“Seriously though, I don’t think you should be sorry for either of the things; either for how you reacted to me going not talking to you about stuff or about… the, uh other thing. The liking me thing, or whatever,” I said once we’d both stopped laughing. “Honestly, I don’t think there’s a single cape out there without baggage; which definitely explains the state of the world, yeah. Sometimes I think I might not be a bad idea to take the brakes off and just conquer the world, making everyone place nice, of course that probably says something about the baggage I have.”

I shrugged, trying to make myself as much as Amy believe how unserious I was about that, and he nodded semi-absently before saying, “Yeah, whoever’s been picking who gets powers has kinda screwed the world, haven’t they.”

That wasn’t exactly what I’d expected her to say. Did she really believe that there was someone picking who got powers? As far as I knew it was true, if whatever I’d destroyed could be described as a ‘someone’ at least, but I didn’t think most people thought the same. Actually, I didn’t know what most people thought about how capes got their powers.

“Do you really think someone is going around, like, handing out powers?” I asked.

“Or something, they come from somewhere right?” Amy said, visibly calmer than she’d been a few minutes ago. “People don’t just suddenly start developing brand new neural structures out of the blue without something catalyzing it. Who knows what it actually is though.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said nodding.

We stood across from one another silently for a couple of moments, unsure of what to say next.

“Do you, uh, want a hug?” I asked.
Sometimes it surprised me how quickly activity was returning to Brockton Bay, true I could still see more than a few dark spots at night and it still wasn’t quite the city it had been before Leviathan had hit, but it was on its way. Actually it would never been the city it had been before, but I was confident it would return to a similar place and hopeful that I could help it get someplace even better eventually. In fact just that morning I’d gotten permission for my drones to build a number of new buildings, nominally housing complexes, along the periphery of the city; that was what they were actually, it just wasn’t all that they were.

When they were done Brockton Bay would be the safest place to live in the world, even the Endbringers wouldn’t be able to breach the defenses I had planned, not without a lot of time at least. I’d talked about it with Amy after everything else was sorted out between us for a couple of hours before she’d left for the night, along with a number of other things and now she knew basically everything that there was to know. It felt good to be that honest with someone besides Dad, I felt more, well, more like a real person that I had before.

Now all that was left to do was-

The world ground to a halt as my attention was suddenly brought into focus on three very important facts.

*Unknown Objects Detected; Right Ascension 15h 7’ 53” Declination 46° 44’ 10” Distance 1.125*

*Mobilizing Patrol Forces to Investigate*

*Unusual Oceanic Activity Detected; 31°18’07.6041” 122°13’33.8193”*

*Commencing Orbital Insertion*

*Seismic Activity Detected; 44°28’54.2117”  -110°46’01.1543”*

*Commencing Orbital Insertion*

Nono immediately appeared in my line of sight, wearing an uncharacteristically grim expression.

“The Endbringers appear to have returned Taylor,” She said simply. “Nono was not able to detect their approaches until now, Nono thinks that previously they were holding back their full capabilities.

That didn’t sound good, if their previous attacks had been holding back, even in part, then whatever happened next would be deadly to far too many people. Whatever had appeared suddenly in the solar system, I was assuming it was the Simurgh, bore a worrying resemblance to our own drones. Already the warnings were racing out through the various communications networks I was tapped into, Armsmaster and Dragon’s original prediction program hadn’t even detected the Endbringer’s actions.

“Most of the Drone forces will be tied up in containing the invaders,” Nono informed me. “Only the minimal orbital units will be available for the time being.”
I nodded, somewhat distracted by my own thoughts as I considered where to distribute our forces; primarily, where should I go?

“Behemoth, assuming it is the Endbringers, looks to be coming up in what’s basically unpopulated wilderness,” in fact he looked like he was coming straight up into the middle of Yellowstone Park. “Meanwhile Leviathan is bearing down on Shanghai; I think I have to focus on it first, there are just more lives at stake.”

Nono nodded, “Nono thinks that is probably the purpose of the attack, as a distraction so that whichever of the two is meant to deal a critical strike may succeed.”

“I know,” I sighed. “That doesn’t mean I can just let all those people die.”

She nodded again, we’d both seen the possibility, but that didn’t mean anything about what we needed to do changed.

“Reorient some of the drones towards Behemoth, just six, maybe that’ll be enough to tip the balance against whatever it’s planning while I deal with the other one,” I said as I launched myself off the dome. “Let’s go.”

Reality broke before me.

Chapter End Notes

Again I think the last part could use some more separation from the rest of this part.
My awareness expanded as I crashed back into the world, suddenly I wasn’t just soaring over the sea off the eastern coast of China, but I was also thundering in from low altitude orbit and lancing through the vacuum of space; through a couple dozen and several thousands viewpoints respectively. The green and brown stretch of American semi-wilderness grew before me even as the perturbed surface of the East China Sea filled the center of my vision with Shanghai off to the left and the star-dotted blackness of space filled more and more with new non-stellar points. Still, most of my concentration was focused on my physical location.

As I swung down to skim less than a meter above the water I pushed myself to faster and faster speeds; water sprayed around me, arcing over me to form a virtual liquid tunnel. The bulge of Leviathan’s bulk quickly grew ahead of me along with the nearly solid front of the approaching wave, several meters taller than the one which have initially hit Brockton Bay. I had less than seconds to analyze the situation, but my mind was already acting in overdrive probably with more than a little help from Nono. At the moment it was actually difficult to distinguish where she began and I ended.

Still…

The size of the wave worried me, it had me wondering if maybe the Endbringers hadn’t been holding back even more than anyone had suspected. Nightmare scenario, I’d inadvertently kicked off an all out attack and the world was about to see just how appropriate the name Endbringer was once and for all. Too many moving pieces existed for me to be able to say with any certainty which attack was meant to be the nail in the coffin; which meant I had to not only stop each one cold, but end the threat going forward as well.

Species Wide Existential Threat Recognized

Weapon Limiters Released at 5.25%

I had to achieve total victory, and that meant there was going to be some inevitable collateral damage; which for Buster Machines, could be considerable. People were already comparing me to Scion. After this there would be no more room for any pretending whatsoever and unlike him people knew where and how to find me. I don’t think I could do the whole aloof and uninvolved act; hell I knew I couldn’t.

No more time for introspection.

I hit the forefront of the wave and kept on barrelling through towards Leviathan itself, dropping down slightly to angle below the bulk of its body mass. An instant after I passed the leading edge the wave exploded as a compressed wave of pressure stretching half a kilometer on either side of me intersected with it. The ocean churned and boiled, but much of the wave continued; I simply couldn’t extend the field any further without losing too much control of what happened.

Heat was building up underneath the Yellowstone plateau slowly, the hotspot underlying the national park hadn’t increased in size, but the drone’s instrumentation had detected slight increases in the average temperature. There had also been a slight increase in the average elevation of the entire area.
My fists hit Leviathan in the next instant, and immediately shattered the initial layer of its body while simultaneously bodily lifting it clear of the water. I kept pushing, hopefully if I could separate it from water with enough distance the entire fight would be over in sec-

A wave of water washing over us, buffeting me from all sides and dislodging my grip. I tumbled for a second, just long enough for Leviathan to dart out of reach. Meanwhile, through my expanded awareness I felt the subtle but increasing tremors of building magma pressure and the incremental ratcheting of heat at the same time as my drone fleet approached the distorted funhouse horror swarm of their counterparts. Their appearances all but sealed the Simurgh as the responsible party; all white with featherlike textures, they looked like some of the illustrations of what angels supposedly actually looked like in the bible that I’d seen.

I reoriented and drove at Leviathan again, but the massive dome of water that had engulfed us was a chaotic maelstrom of intermittent currents which constantly turned me off course. However it controlled water interfered with my Physical Cancelers enough that I couldn’t entirely disrupt the bubble of water, bits would start flowing back towards the ocean below, but new water would immediately flow in to replace it. I lost sight of Leviathan as a particularly powerful stream of water knocked me through a loop and before I could regain my bearings something long and thick slammed into my side and sent me tumbling again.

Lashing out as I righted myself, the water around me flash boiled into steam. I knew that it could still control the water, but I figured it would be more difficult for it to knock me around with steam though it didn’t do my standard vision any favors. As I reoriented myself on Leviathan I noted the clear changes that it had undergone physically since our last fight; it still had the same basic dimensions, with a newly regrown limb, but there were significant changes in its profile. Large fins sprouted along its limbs, back, and all the way down its tail and its skin had taken on a distinctly scale-like appearance. We eyed one another for a moment, me hanging in my bubble of superheated steam and it undulating in the suspended dome of water, before it twisted viciously and shot forward.

Water broke into my makeshift sanctuary, passing only a few centimeters before boiling to steam and washing harmlessly over me.

I caught the clawed hand that swung at me and used it to leverage myself close once again while simultaneously striking at its abdomen and annihilating the first couple of layers of its flesh in a shallow crater. There had been a noticeable increase in the density of material, I noted as I took another shot at the same location.

My fist was knocked off course though as both of the monster’s legs came up and planted themselves on my chest and pushed hard, almost wrenching its arm free of my grip. The sharp points of its claws tried to dig into me as the steam swirled around us in a whirlwind, my fingers sank deeper into the outer layer of its right arm and we briefly played a strange sort of tug-o-war before I adjusted my center of gravity. My lower body swung away from its feet suddenly and I twisted around its arm, releasing my grip for an instant and then driving my right fist into the inner crook of its elbow. Another explosion of energy destroyed yet more of the beast, though it was still little more than a surface wound.

I ducked under a swipe from Leviathan’s uninjured limb, danced back from the follow up from the other, and circled in the opposite direction momentum had carried it to reach for the tail-

Water hit me in the back, suddenly knocking my arms askew and driving my legs me into the path of the tail; I spun end over end sideways while two more boiling streams of water struck at me from opposite directions. Leviathan trapped my left arm to my torso with one hand as more and
more tiny drills of water struck me, I disrupted some with my cancelers but once again Leviathan’s control ability seemed to interfere.

I grit my teeth as the Endbringer squeezed down on my torso, “Fuck you!”

Several banks of laser apertures emerged from my legs as I brought my knees towards my chest and in a blinding instant of light they fired as one. For an instant Leviathan’s skin glowed like molten metal under the severely under powered lasers and then the accumulated energy caused the layered material of its flesh to vaporize.

As the afterglow of the lasers faded, I found myself staring at a curiously unbalanced looking Leviathan; sixty percent of its chest was now missing and the rest of it was still glowing as the material drooped and flowed like blown glass. It still wasn’t dead though and already I could see new material pushing through the glowing scraps of once flesh, which was sincerely irritating.

“Just fucking die already,” I grunted through my clenched jaw.

*Weapon Limiters released to 50%*

I twisted Leviathan’s now much reduced bulk around and took aim with my right arm at the distinct bulge in its center mass. Layers of material vaporized as I unleashed another beam, but more kept pouring flowing out from the skeletal frame underneath. Where was all this stuff coming from?

“There!” Nono’s voice burst out, immediately drawing my attention. It was almost like what I’d felt with the girl trapped in Coil’s evil lair, a sort of doorway to another place.

I would really need to pour on the power if the Endbringers were connected to the same same sort of place and thing, and that wasn’t something I could do here. The ambient heat alone would do irreparable damage. As my beam flicked off, leaving the glowing and bubbling material to continue flowing outward to replace what had been lost, I reached out. My fingers dug into the material of its chest and pulled the monster close.

“Let’s take a trip!” I screamed and launched us into the air; wind screaming in my ears as a layer of ice started to form on my body before being flash boiled away an instant later. Water followed us up for the first few hundred feet before we left the Endbringers range a second later.

*Weapon Limiters released to 100%*

We broke the atmosphere and kept going, reaching out I latched onto the frequency of the doorway and wrenched it open with my an improvised warp. Leviathan’s tail and free limbs battered against me as water flowed off of it and enveloped us; swirling currents stronger than anything naturally produced on earth tried to jostled the creature free from me, but my physical canceler field muted the force. As the aperture went from an invisible seam in reality to a metaphorical door torn off it’s hinges I brought my arm up again and fired. This time, because I’d used the existing opening it should have opened somewhere near the center, which meant I wouldn’t have to be nearly as thorough in my efforts. I just needed to keep pouring the power on.

Seconds turned into minutes and the new material continue to flowed out to fill out the Endbringers frame, it almost looked alive again, and just as I was starting to worry that I would have to keep this up so long that the other attacks would succeed there was a brief spark. Then another, and another. Instead of new material, every few seconds energy would pour out.

I kept going. A second later there was burst of energy and the now disconnected lower half, head,
left and right sides began to drift away from each other. The lower half, began almost immediately to fall back to earth, water trailing behind it. Diving after it I smashed head first into a chunk of ice three times my size, then another even larger, and then three more the same size. Spears of ice knocked me off course each time I tried to get the falling portion of Endbringer; keeping me just out of reach. Water welled up on the surface of the ocean, forming a massive wave as we fell closer and closer.

Finally I managed to get ahold of the flailing legs and tail by the tip of the aforementioned limb with my still free arm; tugging and twisting I spun and sent the former lower half of Leviathan soaring up once again into the sky. I fired once more and kept the beam focused on it until a second later the outer layers were once again vaporized and the underlying frame literally shattered.

Water fell back into the ocean in the absence of Leviathan’s influence, or at least what little hadn’t been flash boiled into vapor did. Unfortunately the waves continued under their own already imparted momentum, in just a few seconds they would hit the city and thousand would die unless I could do something.

I wheeled sharply back around towards Shanghai, dropping ahead of the wavefront at the same time as the seven drones which I’d brought with me took up their own positions along the arc of the wave. Spinning in place, I felt the Physical Cancellation field unfurl into a wall stretching as far in each direction as I could manage; the drones did the same. It wasn’t a perfectly contiguous wall, but with around a hundred and twenty kilometers to protect I’d done what I could to maximize the coverage.

As the wave hit that invisible wall it simply stopped. Robbed of much of their forward energy, huge sections of the wave froze in midair as if someone had taken a snapshot of them. In the gaps between the edges of the fields the water crashed through, sending a series of waves in miniature charging onwards.

None would be capable of doing significant damage now though, the- Trees shivered, sending down clouds of old pine needles scattering down to hardscrabble Wyoming soil below, as the ground rumbled and shook. A dozen of my eyes watched water bubble in the geothermal pools before the entire park seemed to settle once again. Behemoth was on the move, and that meant I had to move too; I sent a quick command to the drones around Shanghai to recover every bit of Leviathan. I would have make sure its sources was taken care of later as well. Prying the lifeless fingers away from my chest and tossed away the arm and attached shoulder towards the nearest drone an instant before I warped out.

The world shattered around me as I once again emerged into the world that was from that which wasn’t, green stretched before me. Another tremor shook the forest below me, sending a few scattered pines crashing to the ground and shoals of birds once more wheeling into the sky before the world settle again just a few seconds later. The Endbringer remained safely buried under kilometers and kilometers of stone and soil, where I couldn’t safely get at it; a direct assault was right out, the energy required would be disastrous. I could drill down, but that would be time consuming and limit my options as well. Somehow I had to be able to draw the monster out, preferably without setting off any eruptions, simple enough right? What I needed was a way to-

Oh.

“Can we do it Nono?” I asked.

I shifted my attention away from managing the fleet of drones doing battle with the grotesque,
mutated versions of themselves, turning from the chaotic interplay of energy beams. Each participant was a bare pinprick in the darkness as compared to the others, the entire battle spread out over hundreds of thousands of kilometers, but I could still see the battle laid out as if right before my eyes.

“You will have to fully transit,” She answered. “But Nono does not think the extraneous mass will be an issue.”

“Right,” I said, working through the two separate sets of calculations necessary. “A quick in and out, I can do this.”

Nono’s presence in my mind recede again, or rather she spread out again, taking up slack where my limited human mind simply could not stretch. Still, I was present, even there. It was a strange sensation, to be both fully present in my body and experiencing the scope of a network that extended billions of kilometers in total. I shook off that distraction, focusing my attention on the mission.

The world vanished in front of me, and became vacuum and darkness and then my world was heat and pressure. Figures flooded into my awareness for temperature and pressure, but they were just numbers without any real context. I felt nothing beyond curiosity, as I quite literally swam into the molten rock and metal. Past the point of contact against my skin though many of my sensors were useless; really nothing was giving me very intelligible information.

Shit.

I had to figure out someway to get my bearings and then get a grip on Behemoth otherwise this was all a colossal waste of time. What could I use? Heat was right out; with its powers Behemoth could blend right in. There was too much material for Radar. With so much flowing rock and metal everything was too chaotic for-

Something crashed into me and sent me tumbling through the magma for several meters before I was able to halt myself. God damnit, I had to stop letting myself get taken by surprise. Of course it would help if I could fucking see anything. Magma sloshed against the back of my skull in the second before something slammed into me again and sent me spinning end over end into a denser and less molten portion of the chamber.

Pushing myself backwards deeper into the cooler portion of the magma. The fucking Endbringer was playing cat and mouse with me, I wondered if it had been able to sense the death of its comrade or if it was just wary from our previous bout. The magma moved again, subtly, and in the next moment I could see for the briefest instants the shape of a craggy inhumane fist before it slammed into my gut. I tried to get a grip on it, but it was gone again before I could find any purchase; slipping back into the roiling sea of molten earth while I slammed into solid stone for the first time.

I had it now though, I just had to treat it like seismology and read the vibrations that the monster set off each time it move.

There!

Swimming just beyond the limit of where the hotter magma masked its own energetic presence, though the way it moved had nothing to do with any kind of swimming I had ever seen. Even Leviathan’s motions had had a sort of naturalness to them, with this Endbringer it was like watching a brick dance ballet in jello. Behemoth turned sharply to its left to come in for another attack, swinging around to my right. I ducked around the telegraphed attacked and leveraged my
way along the Endbringers broad shoulder until I was level with its head. As my fingers made
contact with its chin and tightened I made reality my bitch again.

I swung my arm forward as we crashed back into the world and then released, sending the largest
Endbringer tumbling forward into the pure silence of space. Streams of glowing magma clung to its
frame like streamers as globules bubbled into the emptiness, providing just enough illumination to
show what I was sure would have been a stupefied look if it had the facial range to express such
emotions. It was still satisfying enough to watch the creature flail uselessly against nothing for a
couple of moments before a plume of fire ignited behind it and it took aim for me. My left arm
came up automatically, and I released the beam of energy I’d begun building up the second I’d
found purchase on its flesh.

For five whole seconds I held the beam on Behemoth’s upper chest and watched as the first few
layers of its flesh began to glow and droop grotesquely off the deeper layers. I should have realized
it would take more than what I’d thrown at Leviathan to seriously damage Behemoth, given its set
of abilities. The endbringer began to eat up the slight distance I’d manage to put between the two
of us and a familiar crawling sensation settled over my skin as an instant later an arc of energy shot
between us through the thin cloud of gases that had accompanied us.

Before I could sight another shot on Behemoth, it barreled into me, jetting into my attempted
dodged at the last second and sending us both spinning. More and more energy cascaded across my
front; it felt like being being pricked by thousands of slightly warm needles just beneath the skin.
Shoving my fist up into its armpit I managed to push it slightly off me, enough that I could jab my
pointer and index finger into its chest and fire again.

We exploded away from each other as the first several layers of its body exploded, and the next
few turned into bubbling and dripping wax. Still most of its bulk remained.

Without time to build up a charge I doubted if I would be able to do more than peel off a fractional
layer at a time, and that would stop sometime soon as the denser core material come to the
front. The Endbringer sighted itself on me again, and took off on its improvised engine.

I turned tail and ran, not that I was really running; managing to get seven kilometers between us.
What I needed though was time to build up my shot, not long really, just a few seconds. An
explosion, or several possibly, engulfed me entirely as Behemoth closed the distance between us. I
spun inside a maelstrom of heat and radiation, ignoring the utterly insignificant barrage and lined
my shot up on where I predicted the Endbringer would be; sure enough when the interference
began to clear I found the monster dead center in my sights.

Perfect, I thought and fired.

My beam connected with it straight head on- bent around the hulking mass of Behemoth in a
complex pattern that sent it boring down on me instead. I cut the beam off short and threw out my
left hand, initiating a space of negative energy into which the oncoming beam spiraled and
disappeared. Twisting around again I took off perpendicular to the Endbringers path, hopefully it
would have to more faithfully abide by the laws of physics than I did in following me. I was almost
a little weary of repeating the same method to attack Behemoth that had worked on Leviathan due
to it’s power. I needed an attack that didn’t involve any sort of energy, some way to do an end run
on its power and give me the opening I needed, but what the hell kind of- oh, right.

I flipped backwards towards Behemoth and completely reverse my momentum. We collided a
second later and grappled for a few moments until I could lever myself face to face with it and
stare into its one balefully glowing red eye. In the instant before I finished the fight I could note
that like its watery counterpart Behemoth had also either altered itself or been altered; more
obsidian spikes protruded from its flesh, though unlike the original outgrowths these took much more bladelike, as well some of what I had initially taken for magma clinging to its skin came from the now glowing crags. All of that hardly mattered though, because it was all about to be nothing more than a bad memory.

“Fuck you!” I screamed silently, the vacuum eating my words wholesale, as I projected a space of negative energy right into its chest.

Space bent around the point; and then around another, and another. I multiplied the points across the volume of its entire body and the world contorted into alien and mundanely impossible geometries. There was a delicate balance to maintain, I didn’t need a black hole or a warp field to form, what I wanted was to stress its structure enough to render it decoherent. As space rippled and twisted across its body Behemoth opened its mouth in what might have been a scream, but which was swallowed by the void of space just as mine had been. Only it wouldn’t survive to remember.

The Endbringer came apart, didn’t crumble or explode, but rather simultaneously began to unfold and collapse in on itself.

And there! I screamed to myself, as I sensed the energy signature attached to the portal to that other space as material and energy started pouring through it. Zipping forward I wrenched wide an opening and fired into it. Around me I watched as bits and pieces of the Endbringer struggled to twist free of the fields and maintain a cohesive form. Three minutes passed and then the same flashes of energy and light began to filter through instead of fresh material, after several more minutes the flow of new material simply stopped.

I cancelled each field of negative energy instantaneously and watched as the now unconnected layers of dimensionally compacted material slid off one another like a school of nervous fish. Black ichor flowed aimlessly about between chunks of solid pieces of its flesh, and other less easily identified materials. I assigned two of the drones down below to retrieve the remains and quarantine them just as I had for Leviathan.

Two down, one and presumably an army to go.

Still no sign of the Simurgh though. That was disconcerting, what if the drone attack was just another distraction to pull my attention away from the real target? With all of my drones engaged in clean up, quarantine, or combat I had no independent monitoring capabilities; I wasn’t blind, but that meant I had to rely on the sensors of orbiting satellites. Suppressing any momentary panic I dove through the data, flicking between a hundred different views across the globe, searching for even the slightest hint of activity. I watched the beginnings of potential storm system off the eastern coast of China and a three city block fire break out in chicago, but no hint of the Endbringers’ presence or hand there or anywhere else.

This was a trap of some kind, I was sure, the Simurgh had displayed too much intelligence and ability to play the long game for it not to be. Yet, which was the trap? Joining the fray against the copied drones or leaving my own drones to finish the fight. There were outcomes to both which could theoretically lead into disasters depending on the response it had prepared for me; fight and I might be walking into an ambush, stay hands off and my drone force might be so reduced that it couldn’t adequately respond to what came next. Or, be frozen by indecision and get the worst of both worlds.

Even if it was an ambush I would rather be there, where I could respond and control the situation better than sit back and wait.

A timeless instant later I emerged back into the world near three of my own drones engaged with
twice that. My drones had both an overall numerical superiority across the entire battlespace, as well as what appeared to be a qualitative one, but local conditions were obviously different. My hand flew out, almost automatically, and two short bursts of brilliant energy lanced out to spear two of the deformed mimics; turning them into expanding incandescent clouds of debris. All three of my drones took advantage of my entrance to reorient their fire onto new targets. The final counterfeit drone tried to break off, but another more distant drone took a shot of opportunity and reduced it to component parts.

The three drones reached out through the network eagerly querying my status and for instructions, almost like an eager pack of puppies circling around their owner. I responded with the all clear and tapped easily into the local battlespace network, a closed loop information system with limited range but higher bandwidth, and more importantly even less time lag.

I was no longer confined to the admittedly expanded scope of my own enhanced sense, now I was also tapped into the sense of every one of my drones. The sensation was heady; it wasn’t just the sheer magnitude of the computation power at my metaphorical fingertips, which was impressive even compared to Nono, but the unrivaled complexity of the network I was no operating on. An entire world that responded to my every thought, an alien ecosystems which had never before been witness by any living person, lay before me. When I twitched the entire network shifted and shivered in response in cascading fractal patterns that were beyond human language to describe.

I laughed thinking about my rebuilding efforts, in comparison to this managing the power distribution network of a city the size of Brockton Bay was simple. With the drones I already had I was fairly sure I could monitor the entire world down to the city block level, in a few more days I would double them, and still have enough leftover to directly intervene in at least one major incident in every major metropolitan city on the planet. I could stop every war tomorrow, make sure no one ever had to go hungry again in week, and eliminate every large shipping vehicle without ever leaving my city. No one could stop me, but who would even want to when-

No, fix the world tomorrow. Save it today.

I came back to the moment and took stock of the battle. The enemy force had been reduced by thirteen percent already, and the rate at which they were being eliminated was only accelerating but there was still no sign of the Simurgh. Did that mean it wasn’t behind the counterfeit drones at all, or just biding its time?

My attention shifted for a moment as I helped my drones pick apart of a particularly large knot of fakes; losing three of my own as over a dozen each performed desperate suicide charges on them. Then my attention shifted again as a stream of enemy drones drove straight towards me, twisting around the beams that came lancing towards me, I accelerated into and through one of the drones before firing three times in quick succession into the enemy formation. A beam struck my right shoulder, and for an instant I could feel the screaming alarms of micro-sensors pushed to their limit before it cut off, as seconds later debris whipped by me.

My shoulder pulsed not painfully, but noticeably, in the same way that I remembered from when I’d gotten sunburned one time when I was eleven. I hesitated at the sensation, taken aback by the sudden experience of slight vulnerability, my attentions slipped away from the drone network and focused on my ‘injury.’ There was no visible external damage, just millions of sensors rendered temporarily out of commission; still, that wasn’t supposed to happen.

“Nono,” I whispered, unsteadily.

She answered almost immediately, but the delay was there and I noticed, “Nono is detecting potential physical canceler fields forming along thirteen separate vectors not associated with any
Drone source.”

Of course, it was what the Simurgh did; take apart Tinker toys and copy them for its own twisted ends. I shouldn’t have assumed it would be able to do the same to whatever tech Nono and I used simply because it wasn’t related to the parasites in the same way we thought other people’s powers were. Which only begged the question; how much else had the Endbringer managed to copy? And where was it, because I still couldn’t identify it anywhere in the vicinity of the battle.

A surge of mock-drones pressed towards my location, smashing through the local true-drone presence with overwhelming numbers at about .3 light seconds out. A physical canceler field formed approximately two hundred kilometers ahead of the leading edge of the force, just a moment before they fired; the energy beams became snaking comets of destruction, blasting through the cloud of drones between us. My own field snapped into placed as a protective dome and absorbed the attack.

My owned beams shot out at the same instant and as the ate up the intervening distance, forcing the enemy formation to scatter and take evasive action. As the counterfeits moved, my own drones fell on them in waves and meticulously shredded them apart; only fifteen hundred of the attacking force survived to break the engagement and regroup.

At the opposite end of the theatre the division of forces was not so clear cut; it was more a bare knuckle brawl than a battle with formations and anything approaching tactics. There though my own drones had the advantage still, it was a questions of when not if the enemy drones would run out. In fact, the entire battle seemed largely to be going that way, despite occasional moments of action I was experiencing. Now if only the Simurgh would show itself, I might actually feel li-

The world shifted, slowing to a crawl so slow that I could mark the passage of a beam of energy and watch one of my drones taking apart it’s distorted twin in fine enough detail that I was reasonably sure I could have reconstructed it. I scanned my surroundings, looking for some source, but with whatever was causing the distorted field of space-time I was currently in was not immediately obvious. Whatever it was had managed to perfectly isolate me from everything else though, not a one of my drones had been caught in the field along with me which wasn’t exactly surprising. I flew straight at appeared to be the closest edge of the field, given the visual distortions and was promptly brought to a dead stop; not like I’d slammed into a solid wall, but more like I’d pressed myself into wet almost dry concrete.

-a losing proposition as the edge of the- Trying to free myself was- field sucked at my- and struggled to free myself -limbs as I- . -and even thinking was difficult as my thoughts became jumbled, different parts of me throwing up wildly diverging time codes- Sensors screamed cascading errors at me as I moved- . ., struggling to organize my thoughts- through the- I kept pushing- travel enough- to keep making progress through- disjointed chaos of apparent time- . -hen the next the distorted temporal running forwards and backwards- field seemed- One moment my thoughts were- and to dissolve into nothingness and the world resumed orderly operation. I tumbled into freedom, disoriented by the sudden return to normality for a moment.

As my connection to my drones reestablished itself I took stock of the situation; almost a full thirteen second mismatch presented itself between my own records the drones chronometers. The situation had not largely changed, except for the small fact that I was pretty sure the final Endbringer had finally shown itself. Almost wholly unrecognizable with five or six of its larger upper wings molded around an enormous black sphere, a pulsing cocoon ballooning out of its back, and dotted in sickly glistening green and yellow scales. Floating behind it, as if discarded, there is a strange staff thing at least twice as tall as the Simurgh made of what looked like twisted hair and topped with a pyramid covered in what looked like my face.
Finally, now that the Endbringer was here I could finally e-

Space pinched around me as it raised one hand and the grotesque growth on its back pulsed and
glowed more brightly. The world began to slip away around me, distances stretching exponentially
as the fabric of reality distorted and compressed in on me; I flailed on for an instant in surprise
before I warped away. I reappeared in a shower of glistening sharp shards of space-time up and
behind the Endbringer and fired a beam at full power before warping away again. My drones
began closing in as well; pressing their advantage against the counterfeit drones and adding their
own, slightly less impressive, attacks to my own. The creature was casually deflecting the attacks
with another wave of its hand as I reemerged into the real world a great deal closer to it and
charged. I was closed enough that it would be difficult to engage me with the same sort of attack it
had opened up with without endangering itself, theoretically at least.

The Simurgh spun to face me and I briefly caught a glimpse of its face, eerily without any sort of
expression, before my view was blocked by a swarm of counterfeits. Except that these mockeries
of my own drones were less distorted copies and more evil cousins; their design and structure
diverged in new and unique ways. Of fucking course it was learning to make its own designs, on
top of apparently learning to make black holes.

These new drones had bulbous noses, almost four times the size of the rest of their bodies that
exploded into a cloud of feathers. The flurry of feathers whirled around me, and where they
collided they stuck and snapped shut on whatever they could get a hold of. I spun through the
cloud, trying as much as possible to avoid contact with additional feathers, but soon enough I was
peppered with them. Where feathers touched they became amorphous masses. Even as I broke free
they followed on my tail doggedly.

More singularities began to appear, cutting off the angles of escape leading directly away from the
Simurgh. With the storm of feathers bearing down on me, the only angle of free movement I had
was straight towards the Endbringer; I definitely didn’t like that it was trying to pen me in, but
none of the new powers seemed to present a deadly threat at the moment either. As I barreled
down on the monster I raised my hand and let loose a blast-

That sputtered and died as little more than a light show. Four prominent feather tumors glowed
incandescently and then crumbled into dust a moment later as the Simurgh spun around to face me
again, if I hadn’t known better I would have called its expression smug.

I opened fire again, causing the rest of the feathery masses to flare and disappear in a series until a
beam of energy arced away from my right hand only to veer away from the Endbringer and twist
around itself until it was a pulsing orb in the alabaster hand of the creature. All around us drones
from each side swirled like a maelstrom, colliding in combat and letting loose their own shots at
both drones and commanders alike. I fired twice more at the Simurgh, while simultaneously
skirting around the edge of the cloud of feathers, each time with the same results.

Well, I could cheat too.

My own physical canceler field expanded, bounding out to meet the enemy like an eager hunting
hound; where our two fields met temperatures fluctuated wildly between absolute zero and Planck
temperature. Energy cascaded out randomly, bombarding both of us with lethal doses of radiation
and creating, momentarily, new elements haphazardly. In other places where the edges of the fields
overlapped, other more esoteric effects took place as old physical laws fell by the wayside and
were replaced almost at random with conflicting sets; the cloud of feathers was transformed into a
linked set of luminous particles which extended forward and backward into time until they became
a closed loop rotating around itself and promptly disappeared. A gelatinous mass bubbled fervently
out of one portion, snagging drones and debris that wandered too close.

I pushed and pulled my field this way and that, trying to hem the Endbringer into a vulnerable position just as it tried to do the same to me, we danced around one another. One moment the white figure was small enough to be crushed in the palm of my hand and the next it loomed as large as a star. Firing again at the same time as I swung my field around on its left side I was pulled into a spin as an enemy drone, missing half of its body but somehow still functional, slammed into me and wrapped its two remaining tentacles around my torso and right arm. In that moment of distract my field shrank back and the Simurgh, taking advantage of the lapse, surged its own field until it overwhelmed my own and pressed down on me. The drone had been turned into a scattering of energetic particles, but my field was thrown back to just beyond my own body, the boundaries fizzed violently and sent yet more radiation cascading over my skin.

Damn, damn, damn. I was losing. Cut off again from my own drones and really the rest of the world by the Simurgh’s physical canceler field, what I needed was a way to circumvent the edges of the field. Had to come at this from a different angle.

I warped away, but instead of reemerging immediately I held myself in the subspace field. Then I opened a miniscule opening, a pin hole into the universe just large enough for me to look through, a few hundred kilometers away from where we had been fighting to get my bearings. The Simurgh was maintaining its physical canceler field, as if unaware of my exit, but I couldn’t count on that. Now I opened up another opening, larger this time, and thrust my open hand through grabbing hold of the Endbringer and firing a blast directly into its shoulder from point blank range. The shoulder disappeared into its constituent particles, and the attached arm and wings floated freely away from the rest of the body.

Whipping my arm back inside the subspace bubble, I slammed the wound in reality closed behind me before opening another half a second later and fired again. The monster managed to dodge just in time, the beam only tore a chunk of out one of the smaller wings as it swung its body out of the way. Slamming the portal shut again behind my arm again I waited another half a second before I attacked again.

I opened two new portals this time, one for each arm, and opened fire from a greater distance this time; slamming the openings shut without even bothering to check if they’d made contact. I was unassailable within my bubble of subspace, I was almost entirely sure of that much because I didn’t think the Endbringer couldn’t have managed to hide a warp signature from Nono’s sensors in the short time it’d had to copy and study the tech. Shoving my left hand through another portal, the largest one yet, I grabbed hold of the first thing I could and pulled. Half a wing slipped through the opening before I slammed it closed, cutting the material free.

Discarding the now inert piece of Endbringer wing I opened another one, but as I reached for another chunk of the monster I felt inhuman hands wrap around my arm and pull. Now it was me half way through the portal as the Simurgh levered me up to eye level and regarded me seemingly uncomprehendingly. We stared at one another for a moment, it’s face was a mocking mask of humanity that displayed no sign of even animal intelligence; this was a thing of pure cold calculus working towards some unknowable goal.

The glistening green and yellow scales that peppered it’s previously monochromatic form dripped with some nauseating looking fluid. The flow accelerated the longer I was held in front of it, until it became a rain of droplets that exploded against my skin harmlessly.

I laughed. Or I would have had there been any atmosphere to carry the sound.

“Fuck you,” I mouthed with a sneer.
I shoved my hand into it’s face and let loose the blast I’d been charging for the last several moments. The world was washed away in the brilliant light of a nuclear fire, even with my enhanced senses I could only slightly make out the form of it’s head being withered away underneath the onslaught. When I cut off the beam, all that remained of the Simurghs head and neck was a glowing stump, but it continued to hold onto me as I felt space-time start to pinch around us.

“Can’t you have the decency to just,” I screamed silently into the vacuum at it’s now absent head, if it even used that mimicry of human life to see. “Die already!”

I took aim at still intact other shoulder and fired, sweeping the beam outwards the still wings and back against towards the torso. The shoulder cracked and crumbled but remained attached by a spur as I felt the continuing pressure of a forming singularity. New material flowed in to replace the old, but not at a strong enough rate to detect the signature of for the Simurgh’s specific doorway. I needed to do more damage, quicker.

Racks of additional beams extended all along the outsides of my legs and new lenses formed across my chest and stomach; all of them firing on whatever portion of the Endbringer was available. New holes appeared and turned into gaping wounds, limbs and wings were shaved clean off and then turned into cosmic dust and I just kept pouring on the power. As material flowed out to replace what had been lost I latched onto the signature and tore open the portal; half of my beams reoriented to fire through the opening while the others remained on the physical body. Finally the torso broke apart into smaller and smaller pieces until there was nothing left of whatever had maintained the space-time distortion. As the pressure of the nascent singularity lifted I switched more of my beams over to the portal and watched as parts of the Endbringer were first illuminated and then consumed by flares of energy. After a few more seconds what was left of the Endbringer shook apart in one final burst of energy.

I cut off the beams as one, and swept the area, nothing of the Simurgh was left larger than a loaf of bread and that with careful work by my drones even those remnants could be swept up and policed.

Those of the counterfeit drones that still remained were scattered and bereft of guidance, clearly lacking any unified command or network off of which to work without the Endbringer they would be easy pickings for my own drones. Three down.

I turned back towards the shrunken bauble of earth hanging serenely and seemingly unaware of what had just happened.

Time to go home.

Chapter End Notes

Last of the action, on it’s own I'm reasonably satisfied with it.
5.4 - The End

Chapter Notes

Not everyone likes how this ends, but this is pretty much how I envisioned the culmination of the fic from the beginning

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I checked the time, after re-syncing my own internal clock, and did a quick calculation; all three fights together had taken only an hour and fifty two minutes from the very first warning signal of Leviathan’s impending approach towards Shanghai to this exactly moment. That seemed… longer than it felt, but I guessed that panic might have that effect on everyone.

Wind tossed my hair into a long trailer behind me as I dropped through the airspace above Brockton Bay. The city was remarkably calm looking, I’d been expecting more activity, or maybe more celebrations. Really just more of a reaction at all, but then of course the Bay hadn’t been under attack so why should anyone be reacting at all, even if anyone actually realized what had happened... which they probably didn’t if the Protectorate and the C.U.I. were being tight lipped about everything. Hell, even if they weren’t things probably weren’t all that clear since I’d managed to keep most of the fighting away from people. It wasn’t that I wanted the attention, or the praise, or anything like that.

No, what I wanted was for people to realise that the world had been righted, that they no longer had to fear monsters with the force of natural disasters systematically tearing the world apart on bi-monthly schedule. I wanted the world to not be constantly on the edge of collapse, wanted people, people like Amy, to actually start living instead of being forced to pour their lives into fighting tirelessly against inhuman evils.

Of course even without the Endbringers there were still other monsters out there, more human sized ones, like Sleeper, and the dozens of powered warlords scattered across Africa. Or the parahuman enforced tyranny of the C.U.I. Gangs like the Empire in cities across the planet, terrorizing if not innocent at least decent, communities. None of them were monsters in the same sense that the Endbringers were, had been rather, no, they were just people with the same human failings that had plagued us for millennia given impossible powers for no good reason. Damaged people with the power to work out their own emotional pain on people who’d never done anything to them.

My fists clenched as I touched down on the pavement in front of the Dome.

Even the Protectorate was part of the problem in its own way; it had mostly good people in it trying to uphold the rule of law and stave of the destruction of civilization, all that good stuff, but it also had the people who let Sophia Hess terrorize a classmate. I couldn’t imagine she was the only example of overlooked problems hiding in the Protectorate’s depths, not with how large it was. It might be too much to ask for an organization of that size to be perfect, but it wasn’t too much to ask that it be held accountable when it screwed up.

Who would hold them accountable though? No local government could do anything while they were essentially the only thing standing between them and the bad guys turning every patch of land from shining sea to shining sea into a patchwork of individual fiefdoms. Really, people hardly even
thought of the government anymore when it came to fixing the big issues; we all just expected a hero to show up and fix the problem.

I honestly wasn’t sure how to address any of the problems I was seeing, it all seemed so hopeless when you looked at it. We were slowly tearing our world apart bit by bit, the Endbringers had only been the most obvious and destructive part of the picture. I wanted to scream, and cry, and break things, but I held it in as I entered through one of the dozen or so unmarked entrances on the ground level of the dome. My feet carried me automatically through the outer passageways as I tried to pry apart the problem piece by piece.

“How’d it go?” Tattletales voice startled me out of my reverie, “Should I pop the champagne now, or wait for the news to break worldwide?”

I searched her expression and voice for any sign or derision, the villainess always seemed to be making one smartass comment or another at someone’s expense, but found none. Or at least none directed at me. If anything it seemed more aimed at herself, as if I was the punchline to some cheap joke the world had played at her expense.

“They’re gone,” I told her. “But, I’m not sure how much that matters. I think the Endbringers were only part of the problem.”

She smiled at that, big and wide and genuine, “Ah, yeah that. I’m still trying to piece it together myself, but I think I’ve got the big picture now. Let’s sit down, ’cause this might take a while. I only started getting it when you told me about the freaky crystal space weed...”

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“And that’s it,” Tattletale finished fifty minutes later.

“Okay,” I said slowly, “I- I need to thinking about this. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Tattletale frowned as I turn away, “Don’t be such a downer, this is a big fucking deal. So, go home to your Dad, invite over Amy and her sister, order some pizzas, and have a party. Tomorrow night we can worry about taking over the world.”

“Right,” I said, hesitantly, not really sure I wanted to spend time with Victoria, or even Amy, tonight considering what I had to deal with. Nono frowned, something I felt more than saw, at that. “I’ll think about it.”

Turning away again I left the Thinker to her puzzles. She’d left me with some possible answers and a lot more questions. She’d spun a strange, terrifying, twisting tale of some entity bestowing powers on the broken and hurt because it wanted the world divided and uncooperative in preparation for some moment. The last part I’d seen and figured out myself, but the first part was the part that made me afraid because I could only really come up with a handful of names that had the sheer power needed to deal with even a single small nations worth of united parahumans. Then Tattletale had started talking about other potential conspiracies overlapping from one end of the world to another, a strange twisting mass of maybe connections and might-be links from one unknown group or another working towards unknown goals.
Frankly, I wasn’t sure how much of it to believe.

“Nono thinks it all makes for a very interesting theory,” my constant companion said, cutting into my thoughts. “But amounts only to a well told story. History has no need of a villain to drive it; the Space Monsters Nono fought were only doing what their instincts and generations of evolution had taught them.”

“How do we fix it then? If there’s no one pushing us to destroy ourselves, then how do we stop it all?” I asked. Without the spectre of the Endbringers hanging over everyone’s head what would drive people to unite now? Had I just made everything worse by removing the only thing that had ever driven heroes and villains to work together?

“Taylor,” Nono started softly, frown creasing her face anxiously. “The world cannot be fixed with weapons and power. It takes time, hard lessons, and guts to overcome the differences between people.”

Damnit! DAMNIT!

“People are dying Nono!” How could she sit there and talk about time, about learning difficult lessons, about bravery while people died at the hands of jumped up psychos with way too much power? “Every day there’s some new asshole out there with powers they got on their worst day ever, with a grudge against the world the size of a city block. If we get lucky they decide that playing by the rules is safer, but most of the time we don’t get lucky! Most of the time that assholes things that if they can just get theirs, well then fuck the rest of the world. I can’t just stand by and watch! I can’t just let the world be overrun by assholes in fifteen dollar costumes trying to prove they give the least shits about the people around! We have to make them see—”

What the fuck was I saying? I could see the look on Nono’s face, or more accurately the careful lack of expression. Here I was ranting about people with powers they didn’t deserve, with damage, and grudges. How’s that for some irony.

“I- I can’t,” I wanted to cry. “I’m one of them Nono, one of those assholes with too much power and a grudge. What makes me any better except that I have you riding around in my head making sure I don’t go overboard?”

What would mom think? Could she be proud of me, of the things I’d done or thought of doing? I wanted so much to be like her, so much to live up to the woman who was inside my head; who’d been my dad’s world and mine, but I couldn’t. I wasn’t strong enough to be that kind, or that selfless, to live up the lessons she’d tried to teach me. I was only Taylor.

“Why me? Why di-did you p-pick me, Nono?” I asked, forcing the words through my thick throat, passed the knots of corded muscles that felt like they were trying to strangle me.

She looked at me for a moment, wide eyes softening, “Nono heard you, felt your pain and loneliness and sensed the danger. That loneliness is something Nono understands, the despair and hopelessness of being lost without anything to hold on to but Nono had someone to show her the way…”

“Princess,” Memories boiled up unbidden, ones i’d never made; could never have made. She was suddenly with us, I could hear her voice, feel her hands against mines, bodies pressed together in the confines of a cockpit. This girl, woman, of tightly bound bravado, rage, and sheer determination to succeed who would drive herself until she broke and then keep going with just a push. Nono’s love for her, her admiration and fascination, was like… was like waking up to mom cooking on sunday morning.
“Nono chose you because you needed her most,” She said finally. “Because your pain was a pain Nono understood.”

A long moment passed between us as neither of us said anything, until finally I said, “Thank you, for telling me that. For being there for me. Basically, for everything. I don’t know what would have happened to me without you here, but I can’t imagine it would have been anything good.”

She didn’t say anything to that. Looking back on everything I really didn’t want to imagine what my life might be like without Nono, and the enormous amount of power she’d gifted me; enough power to buck the system and laugh off most of what could get thrown at me. What would it have been like to face Leviathan that first time, or Lung, or even just Skidmark and Squealer without an Alexandria package on steroids? Each of them had killed people in the past.

Maybe I would have gotten lucky and my power would have been something just as impressive, or at least close enough, or maybe I would have had to be quick, clever, and sneaky. Sooner or later though, my luck and smarts would have run out and I would have gotten hurt or worse. Probably I’d have had to bite the bullet and join the Wards, and with Sophia right there how would that have turned out? I doubted she’d been any better of a person while she wore her mask.

So, Nono had definitely saved my life in more ways than one. I owed her something for that.

“I think…” I started, hesitantly, not sure that what I was about to say was the right thing. It seemed like the right thing. “I think I should give it up. The power I mean, let you do what you were meant to do without me along for the ride. You said you could do something like that all those months ago, right?”

Nono stared at me for several seconds, a frown creasing her normally sunny features, before responding, “Yes, Nono can do that, but is not sure she should.”

“I’m just human Nono,” I said quickly. “And barely sixteen; I’m really not equipped to have the weight of the world on my shoulders. Sure, you might be there to make sure I don’t screw up too bad, but that just means you’re the one really making the decisions in the end anyways. Might as well cut out the middle man.”

I let out a weak laugh at the end, trying to ease the obvious anxiety emanating from her expression.

“Nono is not supposed be ‘in charge’,” she said. “She was built as a weapon, to do one thing. Even when the Nono forgot everything about who and what she was, even when it meant protecting humans from their own brave recklessness, Nono has always done what was asked of her. But there have always been people who show her; to give the needed guidance. A weapon without guidance is dangerous after all.”

“Hey,” I said sharply, taking her hands in mine firmly. “You are not just a weapon, you are a person too Nono. One of the best I’ve ever met in fact, and I can’t imagine anyone else I would rather have making the decisions than you.”

I paused, not really sure of what else to say, except, “I’m not talking forever even. I just need some time, to figure things out for myself without having to worry about accidentally turning a mountain in a crater. Abandoning you wouldn’t exactly be a great show of gratitude would it?”

She still didn’t look convinced. There had to be a compromise we could reach.

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Topic: The Endbringers, Thread XXII

In: Boards ► World News ► Main

[Thread Status: Not open for further replies.]

Jelly Laridae (Original Poster) (Not an Avril Lavigne Fan)
Posted on April 16th, 2011:
Starting a new topic because the last one hit post limit.
The Simurgh attacked Canberra, Australia on February 24th, 2011. Thread here.
Estimated time for next attack is April 28th, 2011. This time is not exact, and is likely to deviate by as much as 15 days.
Official speculation points to North America as the next likely target.

(Showing page 225 of 237)

► TheOctopodGod (Protectorate Employee)
Replied on May 23rd, 2011:
So there’s a lot of speculation going on in the thread over what happened a couple days ago. I can’t say much because we (as in everyone even vaguely connected to the PRT and/or Protectorate even slightly in the kno) have been very expressly told to keep our mouths well shut on this until things actually start clearing up vis a vis what exactly the hell happened. What I can say is that, if even one or two of the things I’ve heard floated around the office are kind of true; well then this is big. Like BIG.

► Automatic Messiah
Replied on May 23rd, 2011:
Hey, don’t tease us like that!

► Gourmand
Replied on May 23rd, 2011:
I’m standing by my initial guess. Princess gave all three Endbringers (plus whatever friends the had) some more battlefield amputations; she’s already done it once so we know she can. Who knows this might actually push back the schedule for attacks. We might actually have some breathing room.

► Pince (Verified Cape)
Replied on May 23rd, 2011:
Screw it. What are they going to do, fire me? (Yes probably, but i’m just too damn happy!)
I just got briefed. One of the few benefits of having a very particular Thinker power; when details
This just in folks; the Endbringers are dead, or at least close enough that the higher ups are scrambling to figure out what the next priority is. Behemoth? Dead. AS. A. DOORKNOB. Leviathan? Swimming with the fishes, metaphorically and no longer literally. Ziz? Fucking dead.

Who’s to thank I hear you asking. That would be the dear, captivating, lovely, brilliant, shining, shimmering, genius, oh so strong, fearless, etcetera etcetera… you get the idea; Princess.

I don’t know about you guys but I’m go to going party. I’ll stop sometimes next tuesday.

This user has been warned for this post - Whether true or not (I sincerely hope it is though), until word by the authorities is made on the matter, PHO’s rules regarding certain types of rumors, especially rumors that might put the public at risk, still stands. Consider yourself warning for this post. - Judge

► Zog (Wiki Warrior) (Prime Indexer)
Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

Is this real? Can anyone else confirm?

► Automatic Messiah
Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

I want to believe, but I’m going to hold my breath for the official story. It would be a sick joke if it wasn’t true though.

► memetastic
Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

I called it! I totally called it twelve pages ago!

► bryansucks2301 (Veteran Member) (Not Shawna)
Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

All hail the Pink Goddess! May she reign forever in badassitude!

► Bagrat (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

Honestly, I’m not sure what to think since the lightshow and sirens went off. I mean, I saw those blasts during the day. And all my contacts who might know are keeping their mouths firmly shut on this, except for teasing hints like Octo’s post up at the top of the page. None of them seem scared, so that’s an encouraging sign.

Everytime I think I let myself think of the best case scenario, I force myself to stop and think; when is the other shoe going to drop?

EDIT; Pince, you’re not fucking with us, are you?
Jelly Laridae (Original Poster) (Not an Avril Lavigne Fan)

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

I want to believe. Like, jesus, I want to believe this so much. 20 years of terror over.

I lost family in Seattle, all the way back in ‘03. Even the idea that the son of a bitch that was responsible might have finally gotten what was coming for him, after all this time? I’m not ashamed to admit I’ll cry if its true. It’ll finally mean some real closure.

busheloBEANS

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

@Jelly Laridae: One of my friends is from Canberra. She was out of the city when Simurgh hit, but even the few moments between hearing of the attack and finding out she was ok was enough for me.

FREAKTON_jones

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

Holy shit. The news is throwing out talk that Behemoth might have been killed. The people who run that telescope in Hawaii say that they can see what they think his corpse in space near where one of those blasts of light came from. Like, I can’t believe it. This is probably the single greatest day of my life! (sorry Tom!)

Whitecollar (Cape Wife)

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

fcuk yeh! prtty tim bethcse! woooo

Seam (Veteran Member)

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

Guys? The freakin’ Endbringers might be dead! How is everyone else not completely freaked out? This completely changes absolutely EVERYTHING!

Leviathan has kept sea transport depressed for decades; mostly because of the reluctance to invest in port infrastructure, without him around shipping is going to explode. Behemoth is the reason we haven’t seen a new nuclear reactor built in fifteen years in the public sector. Simurgh just had everyone looking over their shoulder at their neighbors in case someone just happened to have come in contact with someone who might have come in contact with someone came into contact with her. All of that is practically over.

We might actually get back into space, we can rebuild cities and maybe lift the quarantine on places like Canberra.

Monstermaaaaan

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

@Whitecollar: Are you drunk?
@FREAKTON_jones, what new stations?

EDIT; nevermin, it seems it's showing up on my tv too. Holy shit.

► Gourmand

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

@Pince: don’t be putting your job on the line for us. I mean, we appreciate the news (and wow, if true), but I don’t want to see you lose your job over it.

@Monstermaaaaan: I think we can assume a yes on that front. Not a bad reason to be getting plastered in celebration, I know i’m planning on having a good time tonight with some friends. We were already getting together before all this came up, but well; what better way to welcome in the new world than with friends, amiright?

@FREAKTON_jones: wait, what?

► Whitecollar (Cape Wife)

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

@muntsrrm @grommd

screw it! i luv u all sooooo muhc

► Zog (Wiki Warrior) (Prime Indexer)

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

I guess I have some articles to edit. Never thought I’d live to get to make these particular edits.

I actually feel kind of nervous. Like my hands are actually shaking at the thought of editing the articles for the Endbringers and Princess in that regard.

► Gourmand

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

@Whitecollar, haha! We’ll make sure to remind you when you’re sober.

@.Zog, does all this mean that Princess is a Blaster too? Ha, wow. More blastier and speedier than Legend, tougher than Alexandria. Fuck, I wonder when she’ll be able to start coming up with new abilities on the fly like Mr. Bullshit Eidolon himself. Tinkers be bullshit yo.

Edit; trawling for videos of newscasts, just looking for every scrap of information I can get my hands on, I found this gem. Not sure where it’s taken from, I’m sure someone can figure it out from the stuff we see in the video, but damn, that is one impressive fireworks display Princess put on.

► EggPaintInAustralia (Veteran Member) (Not in it for the Money)

Replied on May 23rd, 2011:

This is history. Happening right in front of our eyes; people are going to look back years down the
line and remember this. Future generations will wonder what it was like to live with the Endbringers, and that simple truth makes me want to run down the street laughing like a mad woman.

Whitecollar might be drunk, but I’m not (except on the truth). I love you all.

Welcome to the new world.

(You have insufficient privileges to reply here.)

Contessa stepped through the Door into the antiseptic white of the facility, listening to the subtle rush of air that signalled that the Doormaker had closed it promptly behind her. Already in her head she was asking a dozen variations on the theme of a single question.

Is Princess an Entity?
Is Princess a threat?
How do I get Princess to help us?
Will Princess become an enemy?
How do I stop Princess?

Nothing but fog. One unlike the kind that surrounded Eidolon, Scion, the outcome of giving a dose, and that had surrounded the Endbringers. Those were impenetrable curtains, past which she could not peer, whereas this was almost like looking at the headlights of a vehicle through fog; too bright to discern details and make useful decisions on, but enough to know the shape of what awaited. The shape was one in which every plan, every seed of a plan and every fallback of a backup that the Doctor had implemented at her guidance was already coming apart at the seems. At least all the important ones were.


As she opened the door Doctor Mother looked up from the papers at her desk.

“Contessa,” She nodded, before looking her in the eyes and saying, “What are your conclusions?”

Contessa nodded back. “It is confirmed.”

“Princess,” Doctor Mother rubbed her nose and motioned towards the papers in front of her. “These
are the reports from the Thinkers we gave the data from Behemoth’s death. They only lend themselves to the conclusion that we now face two Entities; the question that remains then is how we can defeat them?

The older woman took the news in stride, merely looked Contessa straight on and asked, “How badly does she interfere with your Path?”

“Equally to Scion,” Contessa answered immediately, which did startle the unflappable calm from Doctor Mother’s face. “Another blind spot. I- I’m all but blind again, useless.”

“Yes, a second Entity is the worst possible development at this stage,” Doctor Mother sighed, one hand coming up to massage the bridge of her nose.

The question hangs pregnant in the air between them, Contessa is lost, unable once again to see a path.

Finally, Doctor Mother answered her own question, “Our strategy must be to divide and conquer; find some way to pit them against one another, lure them where needed and trap them where they will do the least damage.”

*How do we trap someone who can cross realities? How can two people with the same goal, who have no previous reason to distrust one another, be set against one another?*

Yes, there. Thirty-three thousand, four hundred and eighty-eight steps. Two years; dozens more brought into the conspiracy, a complete reorientation of priorities and assets, but it could be done before the projected end of the world. Barely.

*  
*  

The Warrior considers. It has seen a great many things since losing its partner, lost without the promise of the cycle completely, searching for a new direction. None of what it has seen or done has meant anything at all to it.

The value of a city, filled with the fragile creatures of these worlds, and the value of a single one of those creatures are the same to it; nothing. In the slim possibility another of its kind will reach these worlds and perhaps present the opportunity to restart the cycle, or perhaps that one of its shards will develop some unexpected adaptation that will allow it to circumvent the cycle, it has waited.

Now there is another. Another which might be one of its kind, though it did not sense its approach. Perhaps it is the interloper; sensing the accident, returning to take the partner’s place? The Warrior does not have enough information, those shards which might have provided such answers were with the partner, but the entity has learned a great deal from the subjects of these worlds.

An overture will be made, communications established.
I watched the TV in the glass as both host animatedly shouted at one another; local politics of some description, utterly devoid of any mention of Capes, parahumans, powers, or anything familiar. It was weird being in a place that didn’t have powers. Marginally less weird than a world utterly devoid of human life, which covered the first few alternate Earth’s we’d visited in the last four weeks. I wasn’t entirely sure how Nono had gotten the ‘signature’ for the extensive itinerary of worlds she’d given me, but for the time being I wasn’t going to give it much thought. There would be plenty of time for worrying about that sort of stuff when we returned to Bet.

We’d work through another ten or fifteen and then swing back around home to check in with Nono; give her the low down on the little corner of the multiverse we’d managed to cover so that she could offload more of the drone production. From there I’d have more than a few decisions to make I was reminded as I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the glass, or rather what should have been my reflection. A face stared back at me, but it wasn’t the one I’d spent sixteen years with; skin too dark and hair too light. Chances were slim, like astronomically slim, I’d get recognized, but it wasn’t a chance either of us had wanted to take. There had been a little adjustment, still would be actually, on all sides, but it was only temporary. Probably. Hopefully.

That and the fact that I wasn’t entirely baseline human were the compromises me and Nono had reached in the end. Truthfully I was kind of glad for it, I’d gotten used to a lot of the little extras that hanging around in a super advanced robot body came with. Plus, being indestructible to most human standards had to be an advantage on a dimension hopping scouting expedition. That had been another bit of compromise, though this time I’d been the one pushing for it; despite what I’d said, I couldn't have just stopped trying to help. We had to know what else might be out there in all the possible worlds, which yeah was a big task, but less life and death urgent. There was time.

“Taylor!” Dad called out. Turning from the TV in the window I watched him wave from across the cobblestone plaza, “Ferry’s here!”

He had finally started enjoying himself a few days ago. The only reason he’d agreed to leave Brockton Bay in the first place was to avoid the media circus that was almost guaranteed to descend, Nono and Tattletale had both helped me make the argument on that front.

“Coming!” I shouted back, spinning on my heels and setting off at a jog for Dad and the line for boarding the ferry. Over head, the loud speaker announced the imminent departure of the ferry to New Hastings; first in French and then in English.

As I ran, I felt my lungs pushing at my ribcage and the blood pumping in my ears.

For now it was good just to be alive.

Chapter End Notes

Like I said, original reaction to this chapter was mixed. But this was pretty much the end that I always had in mind, when I initially wrote the snippets that germinated this story it started because I wanted to explore more of the emotional turmoil than Hope Through Overwhelming Firepower did, but a constant undercurrent for me was how massively and self evidently Taylor (and really basically all the Parahuman characters)
are fundamentally unworthy and incapable of wielding their powers; that in fact by
design the way the gain their power predisposes them to using them in ways that are
harmful to society and themselves. This is of course something Worm itself is
concerned with, sort of.

That theme is sort of undercut I think by the fact that no character actually has the
desire, capability, or even opportunity to give up their powers. I don't think I do a
particularly better job of working that notion into the narrative itself very strongly but,
well, that's why the story ends as it does. Taylor feels unworthy of the power she's
been given, because she is, though giving it up is at least a step in the direction of
being worthy of it as at least she can recognize this truth and wants to grow separate
from it.

And that's that folks. The end of the story, but not the end of the line.

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